

Criticism of the Biases Found in Nature Writing

Many of the earliest stories focused on the state of being, of living and enhancing comprehension of the natural world, or the wilderness. By experiencing nature firsthand, it allows for the possibility of discovering meaning in our own lives and our relationship with the world around us. There is a very personal connection between the individual and the experiences he has accumulated. From these experiences, private points of view are formed within the self, and every human being will react and interpret these experiences differently. Whether it is a moment of "outsight", an epiphany, or a heightened sense of awareness, the lessons we learn and the truths we take from experiencing nature are infinitely unique. Following such an encounter with the natural world, humans have a pressing need to express themselves, to share their experiences as best they can, to pass on a part of themselves. This is where nature writing falls short. Such personal experiences are meant to be shared, but cannot be taken for the truth - for we all have our own truths, morals and opinions. What must be understood is that what one person may get out of a sunrise or an avalanche is quite different from the next individual. We all have our own interpretations of nature, and by reading another's viewpoint it not only taints our own experiences of what is but confuses your beliefs.

It may not be possible to truly experience nature any longer, because of this phenomena called 'nature writing'. Too many ambitious author's have described the world as they see it, that today we cannot help but seeing things through their eyes and not our own. We are told how to experience nature, and this takes away from the personal interaction. Nature exists only when "filtered through out optical nerves, our 'senses', our fiercely romantic expectations." (Oates, p.230) We expect what we have been told to expect, and get just that, nothing more. Oates goes on to state that, "a wise man filters his emotions through his brain" (Oates, p.231), and not through his prose. Then why are so many talented writers buying into this? This is exactly what Plumwood explains in "Being Prey", that "we all want to pass on our story" (Plumwood, p,192). The question is how honest and unbiased by personal experiences can the author's voice be? Humans have a reliance, a dependence on language to communicate, "a living voice ... emerging from the sensations of the self" (Ozick, p.xxi). This reliance has grown with our race, such that our very history is tainted by biased notations and individual perceptions. We feel compelled to make others see things as we have seen them and not on their own, pure and untainted.

In early cultures, storytelling was not only for one's entertainment or leisure purposes, but conveyed direction, tradition, morals, ethics and a code of values. Through story, it was impressed onto eager ears the proper way to behave and interact. This influence is overtly apparent in nature writing, as the readers in this case willingly accept the biased opinions of the author's as the cold truth. Simply because a story is eloquently told, or impeccably written, does not necessarily mean that what is being related is the universal truth. What is true to one person, may not be so for another. I, myself have struggled with the many different forms nature writing in the various essays throughout the semester up until now, and with each subsequent essay had a new opinion on what nature writing should be. This

is what is being done, however on the larger level of nature as a whole, to the point where Oates is nearly correct; nature may no longer exist in and of itself, but merely as the conglomerate experiences of others.

Over time, humans have separated themselves from nature (which we can see in its inherent definition, being anything that is not human related). Similar to the need to impress our beliefs onto one another, is mankind's need to obtain control of all things. Humans are obsessed with being superior to all other forms of life, and because of this notion have taken themselves out of the natural world. This removal from our humble beginnings as nothing more than the very animals we dominate, has given us a nature in and of itself, a human nature. Human nature and nature in terms of the natural world around us (of which we are not a part), are two distinct concepts. Because of this, since we can no longer be in nature, we can only experience it. Wilson professes the idea of nature writing being the missing link in this case, and acknowledging the idea of discovery, that nature exists, we just need to find it. Humans in general are often too busy being to marvel at the world and their place in it, to become beings. The concept of 'nature writing' needs to be expanded to include the human community, breaking down the boundary between the two. It is part of our obsession with dominance that makes us feel that we are able to describe nature in such a way that would do it justice. Since we have the intellectual faculties to figure out the story of creation on earth, how life began and evolved to what it is today, we must naturally put ourselves at the pinnacle of that evolution. However, 'Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.'¹ Nature and man are closely interwoven, the only way to make complete sense of either is by examining both closely and together. We once egoistically thought the earth was the center of the universe and this proved wrong. Now we think we are the center of it.

As I explained previously, the major shortcoming in nature writing is the tireless pursuit of conveying one's interpretation of nature to the rest of humanity, despite the fact that we all have working minds and seeing eyes of our own. However, there is in the sub-categories of nature, certain common topics that resonate with all mankind because of their universality. Such is the case with death and the cruel, un-merciless fact that although we are well aware of our separation from nature, nobody told nature this. To the lion and the crocodile, we are no more than a source of food, we are still a part of their world. The idea of being eaten by an animal horrifies the human mind, it is not possible, out of the ordinary, and against the laws of nature. But who wrote these laws? We did, and without asking the approval of creatures that have been here thousands, even millions of years longer than us. Moments where we would be faced with such a prospect, where we would be forced to confront the idea that we are not superior and nature is not a creation of man's intelligence, are the moments that truly open our eyes for the first time. No longer are you seeing through the eyes of a talented wordsmith, but into the eyes of truth and reality. In Plumwood's case, everything is suddenly clarified and she sees that the place man exists in today is not where it was meant to be, but where we put our-self. Such a genuine reflection to nature transcends the nature-as-an experience norm that we interact with it in

today, and thrusts us into nature where we inherently belong.

As you can see, there is a unique relationship between the reader and the story, and with personal narrative, as most of our readings were, the reader must learn to distinguish that what he is reading is the world through the eye of the author, and interpret its meanings with this in mind. Looking through the author's eyes, an illusion of reality is created that the reader not only must be able to recreate in his own mind, but is almost forced to believe. I commend Goodall, and Caputo, and even Thoreau for going out and finding out what nature means to them. But to truly appreciate where their words are coming from, to understand the balance of dominance and dependence we precariously tip-toe through nature, it must be experienced firsthand. Laying on my back and looking up into the air on one of those blue-sky, white puffy cloud days, I may see a dragon in the cloud, protecting a castle from any intruders - but I'm pretty sure you would see something else, if anything at all.

Like Goodall's piece, such successful writings must abide by a clear purpose while maintaining a writer's honest voice, dancing with life such that the reader feels a strong and intimate connection to both the writing and the writer. Once again using Piercy, writing "is an ongoing creative involvement in something outside of yourself" (p.44). The question is how honest and unbiased by personal experiences can the author's voice be? Humans have a reliance, a dependence on language to communicate, "a living voice ... emerging from the sensations of the self" (Ozick, p.xxi). This reliance has grown with our race, such that our very history is tainted by biased notations and individual perceptions.