



## Seeing Nature and the Cities in Aesthetic Narratives and Literary Forms

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.59045/nalans.2023.10>

### APA Citation:

Lin, T.Y.A. (2022). Seeing nature and the cities in aesthetic narratives and literary forms. *Journal of Narrative and Language Studies*, 10(20), 293-302.

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### Abstract

In this research about the comparative studies of the Natural environment and the cities, the author intends to focus on different kinds of literary genres and texts through which the relation between the concept of Nature and different cities would be studied and examined. The author uses various perspectives of seeing different works - especially visual arts and verbal arts – in terms of culture and humanity. By doing so, the author hopes to bring a better understanding towards the true meaning of these selected literary forms and texts. These literary genres and texts were selected and were aimed to observe the relation between Nature and culture, between Nature and the cities, and most importantly, between the animals and the human beings. It is significant to read the relations among the human beings and the natural environment and the animals, because in a way, the human beings would be able to find balance in which the human beings would even be able to find the true meaning of freedom and the true meaning of life through the inspiration of the things around them. In the similar fashion, when the human beings are aware of the conditions in which they are situated in, somehow, they are also able to express humanity through artistic forms and narratives, particularly visually and verbally. Works of painting and works of photography in literary forms – such as in the novels, the poems, the short stories and the dramatic plays – will be appreciated and will be analysed as aesthetic narratives.

**Keywords:** Aesthetics, City, Humanity, Nature, Narrative

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### Introduction

The way in which the reader sees Nature is very important, especially when it comes to the way of interpretation. Moreover, the way one sees Nature (for instance, a character in a literary text) can help the reader to understand, when it comes to the definition of the relation between Nature and the human beings. The questions may have different answers – for example, do we depend on Nature? Are we using Nature? Is it possible to understand Nature itself as an entity, in a way in which Nature can have a real dialectic fusion with the human beings? Or, is it possible to claim that Nature and the human beings are actually each other's reflections, exactly as the reader can see in some selected literary texts, when it comes to define

the relation between Nature and so-called human nature? In this research, I aim to answer these questions through three parts of analysis, as follows.

## **I. Two kinds of Order: in Nature and in the Cities**

In Anthony Doerr's short story, *The Hunter's Wife*, in *The Shell Collector: Stories*, there is a description which shows Nature under the sharp observation of the hunter himself. Nature does exist, and yet, depending on the delicate balance between Nature itself and the human beings. As the hunter claims, the order of Nature makes the reader see the cities, because

[t]here is no order in that world, [...]. But here [in Nature] there is. Here I can see things I'd never see down there, things most folks are blind to. With no great reach of imagination [the hunter's wife] could see him fifty years hence, still lacing his boots, still gathering his rifle, all the world to see and him dying happy having seen only this valley (Doerr, 2016, p. 55).

According to the hunter's way of seeing Nature and his verbal description to his wife in this quotation, the reader can come to an understanding, which shows that there are two, at least to the hunter himself, very different worlds – 'that world' as referring to the cities of the human beings, and 'here' as referring to the hills and Nature. Both worlds come to represent two separate, and yet, not totally irrelevant senses of order. On the one hand, the order of Nature can be seen, can be heard, and can be felt by the hunter, as 'huge saucers of ice' comes to melt (Doerr, 2016, p. 53). On the other hand, the relation between Nature and the human beings does depend on one's recognition and interpretation, as the 'sound of water running' feels like an urge in the hunter's 'soul' (Doerr, 2016, p. 53).

Once again, through the hunter's interpretive words, the reader can see that Nature has an order that cannot be cheated or be fooled by the human beings. In Nature, what one can see is what one can get. It is exactly like the hunter himself has experienced, as the reader can see in the literary text. When the hunter sees that 'trout were rising through the chill brown water to take the first insects' (Doerr, 2016, p. 53), he feels that it is the season of Spring. Moreover, in the hunter's dreams, he can see wolves. And yet, ironically, as no one sees any single wolf in the hills, at least for 'twenty years' (Doerr, 2016, p. 65). The unbalanced ecosystem makes the wolves unseen by the human beings. For the hunter, wolves represent the primary desire of being alive and keep hunting in Nature, because wolves are not domestic animals which can be kept by the human beings in an urban space – such as in a 'zoo', waiting for their 'visitors' (Berger, 1991, p. 23). Wolves also do not need to depend on some kind of owners, as they were originally born to live in the wilderness and to adopt their own living environment. As Sigmund Freud points out in his *The Interpretation of Dreams*, as the reader can see from this point, that the hunter's dreams are revealing his unconscious desire as a 'psychological significance' (Freud, 1973, p. 595), as the unseen wolves are visualised in the hunter's dreams. In this respect, as Freud terms it, a dream can represent one's unconscious desire, just as the reader can see in the case of the hunter. That is the reason why having a dream can be seen as a sort of wish-fulfilment, in a way in which the viewer is having hope.

According to the hunter, the cities, on the other hand, when comparing to the hills, have 'no order' (Doerr, 2016, p. 55). This world of cities, having 'no order', is actually referring to the world of the human beings. In this world of 'no order', in some ways, the rhythm of Nature can be used and can be manipulated by the human beings, for all different kinds of purposes.

For example, as the ‘client’ (Doerr, 2016, p. 54) of the hunter comes to show the reader, the world of the cities is a combination of various human desires. The hunter needs to apply this world of no order to Nature, in order to satisfy his clients, as they ‘wanted to see grizzlies, track a wolverine, even shoot sandhill cranes’ (Doerr, 2016, p. 54).

Those people, as the hunter’s clients, come from the cities - they do want to conquer Nature to satisfy their own needs, and do want to keep it indoor. For example, as the hunter recalls that ‘they wanted the heads of seven-by-seven royal bulls for their dens’ (Doerr, 2016, p. 54), sometimes even just for the sake of a style of decoration. In some ways, the phrase ‘no order’ (Doerr, 2016, p. 55) can refer to a situation of being ‘stupid’ (Doerr, 2016, p. 54), when ‘[a] bloodthirsty New Yorker claimed only to want to photograph black bears, then pulled a pistol from his boot and fired wildly at two cubs and their mother’ (Doerr, 2016, p. 54). The cities have no order – just like the human beings who are behaving in some irrational ways. When those people are in Nature, coming from the cities, their irrationality become something very ‘stupid’, as their behaviours are the key cause of this unbalanced situation of Nature and human habitations.

Nature and the cities are two different orders, as the reader can see from the above examples from Doerr’s short story, *The hunter’s Wife*. Moreover, the reader can also understand Nature and the cities in the way in which these two orders can represent – especially through narratives forms, verbal and visual arts – a sort of metaphor, which is full of ‘semantic codes’ (Grace, 1984, p. 194) of the urban and the rural spaces. For example, in Edith Wharton’s novel, *Summer*, the reader can see that Nature is depicted in a way in which human emotions can be released and be understood. In other words, the ‘pleasure of feeling’ (Wharton, 1993, p. 13) does not come from cultural events in the cities, or houses and rooms, or library and books. Rather, in the ‘wilderness’ (Wharton, 1993, p. 14), the main female character Charity Royall can feel free.

Charity Royall, although works in a library, she does not want to ‘be bothered about books’ (Wharton, 1993, p. 13). Her attitude does set up an opposition between urban and rural codes, as if the cities and all kinds of cultural events make her feel the ‘superiority’ (Wharton, 1993, p. 13) of male domination. As a woman, although without too much proper education, she does have her own feelings and emotions, just like a human being. However, at home, she feels like she is some kind of property of Mr. Royall’s. As a woman, Charity is depending on this well-respected lawyer in the small town – no matter she likes it or not. Comparing to the wilderness, the house she lives in is only a ‘sad house’ (Wharton, 1993, p. 15), as Mr. Royall and Charity sit face to face. With him, ironically, she does feel ‘the depths of isolation’, because she does not have ‘no particular affection for him’ (Wharton, 1993, p. 15).

In Edith Wharton’s another rather famous novel, *The Age of Innocence*, there are also signs of this urban / rural dualism. This time, the male main character Newland Archer is thinking about escaping from all kinds of duties in a way in which an urban space such as New York City comes to represent. The place itself is not a real kind of wilderness,

[b]ut Newport represented the escape from duty into an atmosphere of unmitigated holiday-making. Archer had tried to persuade May to spend the summer on a remote island off the coast of Maine (called, appropriately enough, Mount Desert), where a few hardy Bostonians and Philadelphians were camping in ‘native’ cottages, and whence came reports of enchanting

scenery and a wild, almost trapper like existence amid woods and waters (Wharton, 1995, p. 167).

Unlike any other kinds of opposition, Newland's (and also including the upper-middle class New Yorkers') sense of opposition between Nature and the cities is created by the urban dwellers. In other words, Nature is a kind of sense, which is designed and is prepared for those people to escape from the cities and all codes – culture, business, duty, so on and so forth.

The city dwellers – wealthy ones especially – particularly go to the island (the created Nature), to do camping, in order to feel free and not to be stressful. Even they do not go to the island, they can still dress up and go to the park, to have a nice day out. For example, as the viewer can see in two paintings – Maurice Brazil Prendergast's painting, *Mothers and Children in the Park* (Dwight, 1996, p. 26), and William Merritt Chase's painting, *Lilliputian Boat Lake, Central Park* (Dwight, 1996, p. 28) – there are quite a lot of 'social events' going on in those people's leisure time, including 'teas, picnics, dinners, and dances as well as sports like yachting, tennis, golf, and polo' (Dwight, 1996, p. 29). Wealthy New Yorkers, if they do not go abroad to seek inspirations in Paris or in London, staying in some kind of artificial Natural-like environment in the City can also relieve them from a sort of daily routine, at some point.

## II. Some Interactions of the Two Orders

In some other cases, as the reader can see in different literary texts, Nature does help the human beings to see everything in a comparative way, as both orders – Nature's and the human beings', would show an interaction. For example, when a person is feeling confused, he or she may turn to Nature for help through a form of interaction between human labour and the earth. In the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk's recent novel, *The Red-haired Woman*, the reader can see that when the narrator comes to learn and to practice the technique of well-digging, he realises that if one can speak the language of the soil, one may have a better chance to survive. The best way to explain this is to read through the narrator, Mr. Cem's revelation,

[f]or earth was made up of many layers, just like the celestial sphere, which had seven. [...]. Two meters of rich black earth might conceal a loamy, impermeable, bone-dry layer of wretched soil or sand under-neath. To work out where to dig for water as they paced the ground, the old masters had to decipher the language of the soil, of the grass, insects, and birds, and detect the signs of rock or clay underfoot (Pamuk, 2017, p. 17)

The language of soil is symbolic enough to come to the rescue, if the human beings have sufficient 'skills' (Pamuk, 2017, p. 17) to decode the signs which are already in Nature. This process of decoding the message of Nature requires, apart from other 'skills' of well-digging, a sort of listening skill – involving a sort of full concentration – in a way which is very much like the 'doctor putting his ear to' a sick baby's chest' (Pamuk, 2017, p. 17). Nature, in this literary text, does come to help with desperate human conditions, in a way which the human beings look for the order of Nature and try to learn and to master it, for the sake of survival.

Also, the reader can see more other examples in different literary texts, when Nature comes to reveal human emotions. It feels so real and vivid, as if one can almost understand and

can almost identify Nature as a part of human nature. This way does help the reader to see what is going on in a character's mind. For instance, in William Shakespeare's famous tragic play, *King Lear*, the old King, in M. C. Bradbrook's reading, among the scholars, comes to arouse the reader's attention. The reader pays attention to the old King's emotions, because he or she can sympathise the King when reading the literary text, when the King 'kneels to pray for the "poor naked wretches" who are out in the storm' (Bradbrook, 1951, p. 92). In this case, the term Nature (as the storm in which the King is situated in), as Marilyn French points out, 'means *natura* and also *human nature*'; at times it refers to physical, at times to psychological dimensions of a human (French, 1992, p. 244).

And yet, the relation between Nature and the human society is indeed, the key point for the reader to notice. It is simply because this relation is not necessarily always smooth, or it is not often very easy to understand, as it may seem to be. For example, in Terry Eagleton's book chapter '*Wuthering Heights*', he argues that

Nature, in any case, is no true 'outside' to society, since its conflicts are transposed into the social arena. In one sense the novel [*Wuthering Heights*] sharply contrasts Nature and society; in another sense it grasps civilised life as a higher distillation of ferocious natural appetite. Nature, then, is a thoroughly ambiguous category, inside and outside society simultaneously (Eagleton, 1998, p. 58).

For Eagleton, as the reader can see in the above quotation, Nature in Emily Brontë's novel *Weathering Height* cannot be simply read or be easily reduced as a background. Rather, Nature comes to play a significant role, in a way in which human nature can be seen through the characters and the societies where they are situated in. The society, in this novel, according to Eagleton, reveals critical issues which can be read in several 'symptomatic' (Eagleton, 1998, p. 59) ways, as the characters Heathcliff and his lover Catherine come to show the reader in the literary text.

According to Margaret Homans, the reader can understand that 'Nature, or the literal as it is represented by nature, appears to provoke' a sort of 'attitude' and a 'strategy of writing' (Homans, 1978, 18-19) in Emily Brontë's *Weathering Height*. Homans's claim comes closer to Eagleton's, showing to the reader once again, the ambiguity of the relation between Nature and the human society. For example, Cathy's repression of 'the Heathcliff-nature complex' (Homans, 1978, p. 18) and Cathy's 'madness' (Homans, 1978, p. 19) come to suggest and to indicate this ambiguity. Both Homans and Eagleton suggest that this 'symptomatic' (Eagleton, 1998, p. 59) way of reading can show the reader a contrast between 'the wild energy of the Heights' (McKibben, 1960, p. 162) and the 'true natures' (McKibben, 1960, p. 169) of the characters – especially the young couple – Catherine and Hareton who are into books, reading, culture and education. Nature seems to be mild and welcoming, as the reader can understand, when human nature comes to bring out its best part through education. Carmen Perez Riu also points out that 'the withdrawal of the opportunity to become educated is presented as one of the most cruel forms of oppression for both Heathcliff and Hareton' (Riu, 2000, p. 167). Nature is not rough and untamed, when the human beings are well-educated. Nature can be symbolically referred to some human conditions, especially the profound human nature in this gothic novel.

The textual world of Emily Brontë does have an implication that culture as a sort of ‘refuge from or reflex of material conditions’ (Eagleton, 1998, p. 59). Comparing to Nature, culture itself does bring a different energy in the society. For example, Cathy’s five weeks away from her home totally make a difference – as if she becomes a new well-educated person – not as the old wild Cathy anymore. After coming back from Thrushcross Grange, the ‘reform’ shows that Cathy’s ‘self-respect’ is raised

with fine clothes and flattery, [...], so that, instead of a wild, hatless little savage jumping into the house, [...], there lighted from a handsome black pony a very dignified person, with brown ringlets falling from the cover of a feathered beaver, and a long cloth habit, which she was obliged to hold up with both hands that she might sail in (Brontë, 1995, p. 57).

It is a true dialectical moment between Nature and Culture, when the reader can read Nature in a way in which it comes to represent a character’s inner self in a symbolic way. Cultivated, losing her wild energy, and taking the manner of language (such as ‘flattery’), Cathy seems to be changed, at least through the appearance and the behaviour as the reader can see. Although in the same Nature, she is different now from her friend Heathcliff. Comparing to her, without any culture, he is only a ‘dirty boy’ with ‘his thick, uncombed hair’ (Brontë, 1995, p. 57).

Nature has a power of healing. The reader can see this point much clearer, when the character in the literary text has confusions or troubles with human relations. For example, in Anthony Doerr’s short story, *The Caretaker*, the reader can see that the main character Joseph Saleeby

spends most of his time squatting on the front step watching his mother tend her garden. Her fingers pry weeds from the soil or cull spent vines or harvest snap beans, the beans plunking regularly into a metal bowl, and he listens to her diatribes on the hardships of war, the importance of maintaining a structured lifestyle. “We cannot stop living because of conflict, Joseph,” she says. “We must persevere.” (Doerr, 2016, p. 131).

Joseph’s mother insists that a certain way of living is the key to keep things going. The rhythm of life may be disturbed because of difficulties in all kinds of human relations – personal, national, international, so on and so forth. And yet, this rhythm – this ‘style’ – as Joseph’s mother terms it, has to be maintained and to be managed, so that one will not lose this culture, this way of life, as a human being.

Joseph himself cannot see or cannot understand the meaning of his mother’s words – ‘we must persevere’ – as his mother, ‘each morning’, ‘makes him read a column of the English dictionary, selected at random, before he is allowed to set foot outside’ (Doerr, 2016, p. 130), until later when he is forced to escape from his ‘small collapsing house in the hills outside Monrovia in Liberia’ (Doerr, 2016, p. 130), to go to the United States and try to start a new way of living.

In Astoria, Oregon of the United States, Joseph is hired to tend ‘*Ocean Meadows, a ninety-acre estate, orchard and home*’ (Doerr, 2016, p. 137). And yet, his awakening will be

coming until he tries to build up and to tend his own secret garden. It seems that working with Nature can cure him, step by step. Joseph ‘chooses a plot on a hill, concealed by the forest, overlooking the western edge of the main house and a slice of the lawn’ of Mr. Twyman’s (Doerr, 2016, p. 141 - 142). During the process, he can try to forgive and to forget, in order to keep living his life, as ‘he is remaking an order, a structure to his hours. It feels good, tending the soil, hauling water. It feels healthy’ (Doerr, 2016, p. 152).

On the other hand, a photographic image about Nature can also have the power of healing. Even when a character does not work with Nature directly, as Joseph and his mother do, one can still feel this power of healing through a work of art. In Anthony Doerr’s short story, *Mkondo*, the female main character Naima, the reader can see that she, like an artist, who can create an interactive space through the photographic image between Nature and the human beings.

Naima’s first photo makes her feel alive again, in Ohio. For taking that photo, she was waiting for the clouds, when they ‘parted gently, a thin ray of light nudged through, illuminating the oak, and she made her exposure’ (Doerr, 2016, p. 207). This natural sunlight seems to be a message from God, guiding her way of finding her joy of life again. Seeing the photographic image – ‘oak branches bloomed over with sun, a fracture in the haze beyond’ (Doerr, 2016, p. 207) – Naima finds her own ‘oldest feeling’ (Doerr, 2016, p. 207) of being alive. Taking the photo of a scene in Nature, and looking at that photo, for Naima, it feels like ‘a darkness tear away from her eyes’ (Doerr, 2016, p. 207), so that she can see the world again – ‘for the first time’ (Doerr, 2016, p. 207) in a very long time.

### III. Searching for Hope and Meaning in Works of Art and in Civilization

Is here is a true dialectical moment between the human beings and Nature? How can the reader see this dialectical moment? The answer, in some ways, can be found especially in one of Virginia Woolf’s writings – her novel *To the Lighthouse*. Woolf depicts ‘a central element of the landscape and of the formal design’. This idea comes from her childhood memories of the Summer holidays in Cornwall (Fleishman, 1981, p. 606). I would argue, in Woolf’s novel *To the Lighthouse*, there is a particular moment of ‘intimacy’ (Woolf, 2000, p. 187), in a way in which Lily and Mrs Ramsay are sitting together in Nature – to be precise – ‘on the beach’ (Woolf, 2000, p. 186).

Sitting side by side, in Nature and in silence, these two women are having a moment of communication – with each other and with Nature through observing what they see in Nature. Their observations come to reveal some significant meanings, at first, through looking at a work of art and then asking about it:

‘Is it a boat? Is it a cork?’ [Mrs Ramsay] would say, Lily repeated, turning back, [...], to her canvas. Heaven be praised for it, the problem of space remained, she thought, taking up her brush again. It glared at her. The whole mass of the picture was poised upon that weight. Beautiful and bright it should be on the surface, feathery and evanescent, one colour melting into

another like the colours on a butterfly's wing; but beneath the fabric must be clamped together with bolts of iron (Woolf, 2000, p. 186).

Giving shapes, lines, and colours, Lily's canvas (which is a work-in-progress painting) comes to show the way in which she understands what she sees in Nature. This understanding comes to show the reader the dialectical moment of the artist and Nature. In Lily's eyes, Nature is firstly internalised, and secondly externalised, through a form of fine arts.

In silence, as the canvas seems to gaze back at Lily, Mrs Ramsay also seems to try to guess what she can see in Lily's canvas (a boat, or a cork). On the surface, everything seems to be 'uncommunicative' (Woolf, 2000, p. 187), as no one says anything verbally, or through any language. These two women are only sitting 'in silence' (Woolf, 2000, p. 187). And yet, there is a delicate sensation of this moment, if not verbally but visually – it is something sacred which can be felt by the two characters in the literary text. They are both women – one gives birth to her children in her family, as another woman gives birth to her works of art.

For Lily, at this very moment of 'squeezing her tube of green paint' (Woolf 2000, p. 187), language or any kinds of verbal expression is somehow not sufficient enough. In order to express this sensation of hers, which comes from the moment sitting with Mrs Ramsay in Nature, Lily chooses to stick to her painting. This emotion and this sensation are, in a way, 'extraordinarily fertile' (Woolf, 2000, p. 187), which makes her unconsciously do 'a little hole in the sand and covered it up' (Woolf, 2000, p. 187). This gesture of Lily's is also having a symbolic meaning. Just like the sea turtles, after laying their eggs, they also cover up the holes, to protect their eggs. This gesture is symbolically meaningful, in order to let the reader know that Lily feels that her great idea for her artistic creation is born.

As a researcher, my concern here, of course, is not to ask how real Lily's canvas can come to represent Nature, as some people may keep asking about how real a viewer can see in her boat or in her lighthouse. Moreover, it is also not my ultimate goal to identify the content of her painting – questions such as who and what – they do not refer to the messages that Virginia Woolf is trying to give to her readers. For example, if one did that, eventually, one would be trapped into the look and the appearance of works of art and Nature. It means that we will always see works of art as a copy of Nature, in a way in which works of art can never be seen as good as Nature. In a comparative manner, both works of art and Nature have meanings – if any – it is all because of a concern of humanity. As the character Polixenes in William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* comes to remind the reader that 'in defense of art' –

Yet Nature is made better by no mean  
But Nature makes that mean; so over that art  
Which you say adds to Nature, is an art  
That Nature makes, [...].  
(IV. iv. 89 – 92, qtd. Shakespeare, 1974, p. 1566).

The point here in this quotation is, as long as Nature comes to inspire the human beings, one shall do as what the artists do, in order to try to express one's thoughts and feels in artistic creations. Works of art can be seen, in this way, as an outcome of the freedom of expression, in a way in which it is creating new artistic forms which inspire by looking at Nature and by recognising its existence, as Nature itself is a very significant element. Nature shows the reader that it is really possible to achieve an artistic vision of one's own. As the reader can see, Lily



achieves her own artistic vision, in the end of *To the Lighthouse*, when her canvas externalises Nature in a form of fine arts.

## Conclusion

The French Surrealist Louis Aragon, in his novel *Paris Peasant*, points out that the human beings cannot appreciate Nature as it is (for example, people always want to understand things in a more scientific way, without any human emotions, as ‘light is a vibration’). Or, one cannot see the importance of Nature in one’s life, because he or she comes to a point that everything has to be rational, instead of emotional, as one’s ‘stupid rationalism contains an unimaginably large element of materialism. This fear of error which everything recalls to me at every moment of the flight of my ideas, this mania for control, makes man prefer reason’s imagination to the imagination of the senses’ (Aragon, 1994, p. 9).

If the reader considers all kinds of literary texts as a form of fine arts in verbal representations, it is not impossible for one to understand that this art of narrative – if it can be any authentic at all – can actually show the human beings the way in which it expresses this exploration of the senses of human. In terms of artistic creations, for an artist, it is important to have ‘the imagination of the senses’, as Aragon terms it. In order to see the profound human nature, an artist does need to have true fusions with Nature, in his or in her vision.

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