

The Pedigree of 19th Century American Natural Literature: Origin and Development

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Abstract

To study the characteristics and significance of American natural literature in the 19th century, the American natural literature writers in 19th century can be analysed consistently. In the following three fields: prose, poetry and novels, several representative writers were selected. Their natural literary creation tendencies and the representative works of natural literature were compared in detail, and the features and meanings of 19th century American natural literature were analysed. The results showed that the American natural literature in the 19th century can promote the progress of American literature, and at the same time, it can enlighten the American people's way of getting along with nature in the 19th century. By comparing with Chinese natural literature, it was also concluded that the ecological problem was a universal global problem. Its solution can't be separated from the support of people all over the world. Natural literary writers also hoped that humans can share the earth's ecosystem with nature in a friendly and harmonious manner.

Keywords: 19th century American Literature; Human and Nature; Oriental Philosophy; Natural Poetics

Introduction

The history of American literature is more than two hundred years from the founding of the United States in 1776, and less than four hundred years from the first batch of English settlers in 1607 to the establishment of the first permanent settlement in present-day Virginia. Historians often regard 1607 as the beginning of the history of American literature, which shows that the history of American literature can't be compared with the history of Britain, France, Germany and other European countries. Therefore, the development of natural literature in the United States can be traced back to 1607 when the first European settlers arrived in the new world. Early immigrants migrated for the purpose of gaining wealth, and some were trying to escape domestic political or religious persecution, such as the Puritans in Britain. They immigrated for different purposes, but

with beautiful ideals, all for better survival in the new world and establishing a new country in the uncivilized land. In the face of such fertile and strange land, they wanted to turn nature into wealth and paradise. In 1620, a group of Puritans who took the "Mayflower" set up a strict religious creed in order to establish their ideal "Eden". This harsh religious atmosphere and the resulting morality, laws, and customs had greatly hampered people's nature and emotions. People turned to the spiritual sanctuary of nature. At the same time, the tough living environment in the Americas allowed the Puritans to understand the difficulties and obstacles in front of them. They must face reality and be down-to-earth, not just living in fantasy. Therefore, the immigrants then wrote about their own land in the essays of diaries and epistles, which can be regarded as the

earliest form of natural literature in the history of American literature.

The American naturalistic literary trend occurred and inherited with the industrialization of the United States and the formation of the post-industrial society, which played an important role in the history of American literature. With the continuous deepening of the industrialization process in the United States, the original calm and harmonious agricultural civilization was broken, and the memories of the "distant mountain village" began to transform into the helplessness and lament of the rural life; the idyllic and idealized "rural gold-plated" values were gradually replaced by the indifferent and terrified "natural evil theory", and gradually led to the determinism and pessimism of later naturalistic literature. Especially after the middle of the 19th century, the spiritual crisis of American society was highlighted. The reform movement sweeping the whole country was an attempt to deal with this crisis in the aspects of social production, racial discrimination, gender difference, personal living habits, and the impoverishment and urbanization. In these vigorous reform movements, various kinds of "social reform literature" emerged, which recorded people's hard pursuit in the face of various perplexities of industrialization. The failure of most reforms led to the complete destruction of epistemology and values through reform and improvement of society, and ultimately led to the literary transformation of naturalistic survival and violence theory at the end of the 19th century. Therefore, the natural literature in 19th century American cannot be simplified as the depiction of the natural world, but also should be taken as a manifestation of the whole system of the relationship between human, community, city and the nature. At the same time, the emerge of the American natural writings also contains American writers' will to create a unique American literature and their effort to seek for

the independence of the American from the European literary tradition.

The Pedigree of American Natural Writings: From Emerson to Mark Twain

The 19th century American natural literature writers were analysed in individual cases. In the fields of prose and novel, several representative writers were selected, and their natural literary creation tendencies and representative works of natural literature were discussed in detail. "Nature" sets the greatness of Emerson's transcendentalism and marked the beginning of the transcendentalist movement. In his transcendentalism, an important part was his view of nature. Firstly, Emerson's observation of nature was an independent and fresh look at nature. Secondly, in the relationship between man and nature, he emphasized the harmony between man and nature. In Emerson's opinion, nature is respectable and worthy of praise. In the tranquillity of nature, people can discover the true self. Emerson advocated transcendentalism, which was the negation of materialism and money worship in the rising period of American capitalism. Under the influence of his view of nature, praising nature, returning to nature and getting creative inspiration from nature became a fashion in literary creation at that time.

Emerson usually observes the nature world from a subjective view, like what he writes in "Nature": "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 eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the universal being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God." (Emerson, 2004:12) This is the famous saying of Emerson's transcendentalist view, in addition, since it uses the subjective view in order to emphasize the importance of the objective natural world from an individual's

perspective view, so as to emphasize the crucial role played by people when recording the view of nature world. It is also the subject of Emerson's romantic thought and the key to the interpretation of "Nature", because "nature is the symbol of spirit." (Emerson, 2004:30) Here, the phrase "symbol of spirit" is worth discussing not only because Emerson advocates transcendentalism, which is a negation of materialism and money worship in the rising period of American capitalism, and emphasize the importance of people in the society. At the same time, it also has a close link to the natural theology from which "from which Emerson's thinking about nature emerged, finding the roots of his interest in 'natural law' and in 'the union of 'moral science' and physical science.'" (Robinson, 2000:4) Therefore, we cannot neglect Emerson's relationship with the natural theology in 19th century America. Actually, the theology can be divided into several different genres including "natural theology, biblical theology, historical theology, systematic theology, and occasional theology (dealing with a specific topic)," (Anderson, 2014:40) in which the natural theology undoubtedly affects "the traditional proofs for God's existence," (Anderson, 2014:41) when the way the God regulate the world was also changed by it. Because of the fact that early American philosophy was affected by the metaphysical system of John Locke, his "stronger statements about the solidity of natural theology" (Forde, 2001:400) and his choice of making his morality "dependent upon natural theology" (Forde, 2001:400) may also affect Emerson's view of the ternary relationship between human, the natural world and the god, since his epistemology and moral view are largely affected by the natural theology. Therefore, under the influence of Emerson's view of nature along with the affecting of the whole transcendentalism in 19th century America, praising nature, returning to nature and getting creative inspiration from nature became a fashion in literary creation at that time.

The person who truly puts Emerson's theory into practice is Henry David Thoreau, an American empiricist thinker and essayist. Thoreau praised everything in nature with a poet's vision, and the mountains and rivers became the object of his description. This was from a romantic worship of nature. Thoreau advocated that man must return to the true state of life in nature. In the relationship between man and nature, Thoreau believed that nature is life and life is equal. In *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Thoreau described his close contact with freshwater sunfish: "I have thus stood over them half an hour at a time, and stroked them familiarly without frightening them, suffering them to nibble my fingers harmlessly, and seen them erect their dorsal fins in anger when my hand approached their ova, and have even taken them gently out of the water with my hand." (Thoreau, 2003: 20) In Thoreau's view, man is an integral part of nature and inseparable. Therefore, human beings must be intimate and harmonious with nature. Emerson and Thoreau were both 19th century transcendental thinkers and writers in the United States. Both of them expressed their love for nature in their own prose works. They all regarded nature as a symbol of spirit and emphasized the communication between human and nature. Their transcendentalism theory showed the ecological consciousness of American writers in the 19th century. According to Emerson and Thoreau's strive along with the effort of the whole Concord School, the American literary writings began to diverge from the faithfully depiction of the natural world, and began to combine the philosophical rumination with the objective natural world.

After Emerson and Thoreau, the creation of Melville and Mark Twain should also be taken into the consideration of the pedigree of the 19th century American natural poetic, since they represent two different tracks of the American natural literature: Melville's

description of the conflict between human's secularity and nature's divinity and Mark Twain's depiction of the natural world along with the spatialized world. Though these two different roots should be considered as heterogeneous ways of portraying and forming the natural world, they also have some similarities. Herman Melville's first publication of *Moby Dick* in London was a sign of his artistic creation. This novel inherits the theme of describing the natural world from his early works including *Typee*, *Omoo* and *Mardi*. The novel was named after a white whale because it was the central event of the novel, and the whale and other sea creatures represented by it, along with the setting background of the sea and the relationship between human and natural creatures, compose the natural images in the novel. Melville's cetaceans were endowed with human spirit and thinking, and full of divinity. According to the scrutinize of different images of whales in the history of European literature, Melville intentionally split the cetaceans from the pure natural world, and put it into the neutral space of the fiction and the real natural world. Meanwhile, his works also inherit the trait of the American ocean literature (both from the oral tradition and writing tradition), and largely extended the theme and the aesthetic value of American natural literature. However, Melville did not narrow his view on the description on the scene of the natural world, but also dealt with one of the crucial themes of American natural literature: the image of nature in the main character's subjective vision. Therefore, even Melville experienced the phase of the anti-empiricism, which is represented by the movement of transcendentalism; Melville provided a possibility of reflecting and describing the objective world. Actually, just decades before Melville, the creation of romance novels, the most distinct literary genre, has also been promoted by Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Hawthorne's pursue of the "neutral territory," which should

be taken as "somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other." (Hawthorne, 1983:149) The concept of "neutral territory" provided another realm, the fence-sitter stance between the depiction of the real world and the fantastic world, for natural literature, and extended the tension of it. Therefore, the natural literature of the United States in the 19th century inherited the content and form of European romantic literature, and was endowed with much American character, such as the description of the American colony, and its unique thinking of the relationship between human and nature (it will be discussed in the following part). Under the influence of this trend of thought, American literature in the 19th century portrayed a lot of American natural scenery. Therefore, early American romantic literature was also based on European literature to a large extent.

The tradition of recording the nature during the main character's tour, which was created by Washington Irving's *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent*, along with Melville's early long novels, and then largely affected Mark Twain's creation of the picaresque novel. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is the representative work of Mark Twain. In the novel, the Mississippi River run through the plot, it was the river where Huck and Jim got freedom and experienced adventure, and also the creative carrier of Mark Twain's theme. Mark Twain's Mississippi River was endowed with a unique meaning: an ugly mirror of real life, the place of freedom and ideal spirit. In the Mississippi River, all people are equal and free. Therefore, the river, one of the most typical images of nature which had already been scrutinized by Thoreau and flattered by Hawthorne in his work *Our Old Home*, who was also described negatively by Mark Twain, which means that the empirical reflection of the nature world cannot keep pace with the

forever-changing world anymore, and may not fulfill Mark Twain's intention to eject the spirit of society on the nature world. Since the culmination of Mark Twain's creation was at the end of the 19th century and even entered the 20th century, Mark Twain faced the fierce change of the American society, and even witness the beginning of the modern age, it is reasonable to deduce that his creation based on the natural world contains some new spirit of the time, which makes him look like independent from his literary predecessors. Therefore, the description and the view of the nature world in Mark Twain's work should be accompanied with the variety of the human society. This logic of creation will help us understand the flecked world in *The Esquimaux Maiden's Romance*, in which the pristine world of Eskimos is polluted by the commercial world. Therefore, the nature finally experienced a kind of inter-wind with the human society.

As can be seen from the scrutiny of the 19th century American natural writings above, there are historical, geographical, political and cultural reasons for the emergence of the individualism tradition in early American literature. In different literary works, individualism presents different forms and contents. Emerson, the representative of transcendentalism, advocated the freedom and independence of thought, and demanded to get rid of the shackles of tradition and authority to understand the truth. His individualism was characterized by individual freedom and emancipation of the mind to realize self, which promoted the development of the Renaissance movement in New England. Emerson's thoughts, especially his article "History", provided a valuable normative framework for the analysis of history teaching objectives in public schools. Emerson declared in "Nature" that "the whole of nature is a metaphor, of the human mind" (Emerson, 2004:15), praising the natural state of human beings. In addition to praising nature, Walt Whitman also wrote

poems emphasizing him. He believed that his destiny was determined by himself and discovering himself and exploring himself was to discover America and understand America. The poet believed that everyone is entitled to something beautiful and radiant. Thoreau's haunting reminder: "The universe is not a room that reflects my mirror. It makes people further think about the significance of this tension between the self and the natural world." (Boyes, 2017:98-99).

The Source and the Significance of the 19th century American Natural Literature as a Pedigree

When it comes to the discussion of the root and the origin of the 19th century American natural literary creation, the literary origin from the European should be treated as an indispensable part. The theme and style of natural literature produced in the 17th and 18th centuries laid the foundation for the creation of natural literature in the 19th century. The 17th and 18th centuries were a period in American history when colonies were established successively and plantation economy developed rapidly. The new world was a wild and hopeful land. This made immigrants realize that to survive and develop in such an environment, it is necessary to recognize the natural environment. At the same time, the literary world in American colony had also experienced a phase turning from the traditional oral literary tradition to the writing literary tradition, which also helped early American writers modify the genre of natural literature.

In the 17th century literature, the natural world of the New World was described from a purely objective perspective. The natural literary writers of the 17th and 18th centuries turned the literary point of view to describe the New World, and more specifically, the natural landscape of the Americas. This played a pioneering role in the creation of later natural

literature, including writers in 19th century. As far as the style was concerned, the natural literature of the 17th and 18th centuries provided a reference for the creation of natural literature in the 19th century, and promoted the maturity of the natural literature in the 19th century. Of course, in the 19th century, in addition to prose, writers also created poetry, fiction and other styles. However, in terms of natural literature, the writers in the 17th and 18th centuries were the first to introduce prose into the creation of natural literature, which laid a foundation for the natural literature in the 19th century, including the later period, and played a pioneering role in the development of the writing style of natural literature.

At the same time, we cannot neglect the influence from the European natural writings. Politically, the United States emerged as a vassal and colony of the European Puritans at the very beginning. Therefore, even though it remained a robust trend of natural writing in literary works before the American Revolution, American writers paid more attentions to the political writings, Gothic novels and realistic novels. However, things changed after the American Revolution, based on the fact that one of the most important features and the literary trend of the development of the United States after the American Revolutionary War, romanticism, originated in the European continent and didn't reach the United States until the early 19th century. Early American romantic literature inherited the content and form of European romantic literature. Writers of American Romanticism such as Washington Irving, Cooper, Emerson, Longfellow, Thoreau, Whitman, Hawthorne, etc., more or less showed the tendency to love nature and praise nature. As can be seen from the discussion above, the main contribution to the American natural writings and the philosophical trends are provided by these writers and thinkers.

The discussion of "human and nature" in American natural literature in the 19th century

actually contains the intention of comparison and reference. It is understood that Whitman, Thoreau and others have been influenced by eastern religion and philosophy. More and more western scholars recognize that the environmental ideas contained in the oriental cultural tradition have very important modern values. In fact, modern western ecological philosophy and ecological ethics have absorbed some of the ecological wisdom in the oriental cultural tradition at the time of theoretical construction. There is no doubt that both Emerson and Thoreau accept the oriental philosophy in the same era, because of the existence of the personal relationship between Emerson and Thoreau, and their contribution to *The Dial*, even though he had already read some Chinese classical works when he was still in university. Emerson and Thoreau accepted the Confucianism nearly in the same era. They first read *The Works of Confucius* by Joshua Marshman and *Phoenix* by an unknown author. Then they both read David Collie's *The Chinese Classical works* (commonly called the *Four Books*) in 1943. Lately, after Thoreau's demise, Emerson also read Philippe Couplet's work, *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus [Confucius, Philosopher of the Chinese]*. Hence, there is no doubt that both Emerson and Thoreau accept the oriental thought which may have a great effect on their creation.

Ancient Chinese cultural traditions, especially Taoist philosophy, contain rich ecological thought and ethics. It is in the interpretation of the relationship between nature and human beings that some ancient Chinese thinkers put forward a series of ideas about respecting life and protecting the environment. Although these ideas have some kind of simple intuitive or epiphany, they are all important components of human ecological ethics. The Taoist philosophy represented by Laozi and Zhuangzi advocates that everything in earth is a whole. Man is a part of everything in heaven and earth. "Tao" is the root and

foundation of all things in earth. Laozi believed that people should conform to nature and oppose the addition of manpower to nature. Zhuangzi believed that nature is originally harmonious and happy, but human behaviour has destroyed the harmony of nature, he advocated that mankind should return to nature. Carl J. Dull once pointed out that "the centrality of nature in the thought of both thinkers, the idea of wandering also plays a central role, and becomes a proscriptive ideal on how to engage a variety of problems," (Dull, 2012:222) which means that Thoreau and Zhuangzi not only focus on similar topics, but also use the analogical rhetoric to represent this problem.

Meanwhile, we still need to notice the difference of the time between the origination of the Confucianism and the Taoism. During the era of "The Pre-Qin period [Xian Qin]", the battle between the different kingdoms made the political and the living of individuals become the major problem of that era. However, when Emerson and Thoreau accept the thought of Confucianism, the spirit of their time was totally different compared with the era of "The Pre-Qin period." After entering the modern society and the independence from United Kingdom, the New-England countries eager to change their cultural current and reinforce their cultural identity. At the same time, with the development of the modern technology, the development of the capitalism and expansion of the city (the latter two are the reasons why Thoreau chooses to live away from the city). New Englanders introduce a large number of European ideological cultures, sciences and technologies into their own land, and then intentionally cut down the intense link between them and their father land, and try to renew their own cultural constructions. Hence, it means that during this phase of cutting down the relationship between themselves and their fatherland, they also face more severe problems of environmental degradation than before, how

to make the precious spiritual wealth left by their ancestors shine with new splendour accompanied with a kind of nostalgia since their living environment and their link to their ancestors had already changed. This social background makes their seeking to the oriental philosophy become more reasonable, since the thought of the coherence between individuals and the natural world will help them to find out a new way

The vary different two origins of the 19th century American natural literary force us to think about the following question: why should we pay so much attention to the pedigree of 19th century American natural literature, especially the four writers mentioned above? The answer is that, if we put these writers into separate statuses and treat them as totally different individuals, we may not find out a coherent system of the importance owned by 19th century American natural writings. However, if we put them into a consistent system in the linear time, we will have chance to check the importance of the whole system. There is no doubt that the 19th century American natural literature played an important role in promoting the establishment of American national literature based on the tension among the breakage of the American from the European literature. The identity of the original colonies and vassals of the United States seems to determine that the American literary pedigree must be derived from British literature to a certain extent, and will always be ruined by the European tradition. It is true that when we check the natural literature of the America in the 19th century, the influence of British literature can be discovered. Under the influence we discussed above, James Fenimore Cooper presented a vast and vivid picture of the American west, even though it may not be the main part he wanted to express in his work, in the form of romance novel. Cooper brilliantly described the primitive natural environment of the western America. Based on the Native

American culture and literary tradition, Cooper endowed the protagonist of the novel with the noble qualities shared by the American people who love freedom, adhere to justice and are industrious and brave. This image became the model and example for Americans, and Cooper thus shaped the first literary image that truly belongs to the American nation.

In the literary history of the America after Cooper, Emerson enjoyed the nicknames of “the father of pragmatism philosophy” and “the prophet of the American spirit”. His thought also marked the independence of American culture and the American spirit. Under the advocacy of naturalism, he attached great importance to the combination of spirit and nature, eulogized nature, the beautiful scenery in nature, and the “noble savage” who lived in harmony with nature, abandoned the urban civilization, and returned to the nature to obtain the inspiration and inspiration of nature, which became one of the fashions of literary creation at that time. Therefore, even though Cooper created the image of the first pure American protagonist in the American literary history, this article still not pays too much attention to his creation, since Emerson integrated the philosophical thought coherently with his depiction of the natural view. Emerson called the American writers who rooted in the American tradition, or to be more precise, the New England tradition, to look at the American landscape with a new angle. After Emerson, American literature in the 19th century developed vigorously and produced many fine works, which was known as the “Renaissance era of America”. While describing a lot of nature, it was gradually establishing its own local literature. In addition to Cooper and Emerson, writers such as Hawthorne, Melville, and Mark Twain were also creating their own literature in the process of creating natural literature, or add different natural factors into their own works. Even though these factors may not play the main role in these works, we

cannot deny the fact that American writers cannot get rid of the natural factors in their works.

With the advance of the industrial revolution in the 19th century and the deepening of environmental pollution, the romantics images once derived from natural views began to reflect on the reality of the humanities. They no longer accepted the mechanical world view advocated by the philosophers in the 18th century. In the 19th century, the creation of natural literature in the America changed the predecessor’s fear of nature, and turned to seek inspiration in nature. As mentioned above, the creation of natural literature in the America in the 19th century showed a double contradiction: the love and fear of nature were intertwined, and the pursuit of material civilization contradicted the longing for maintaining the pure land.

In short, 19th century American natural literature called for humanity to reject the anthropocentric way of thinking and to live in the earth’s ecosystem with nature in a friendly and harmonious manner. In the 19th century, the pace of America’s conquest of nature continued to accelerate. In particular, the rapid development of the western frontier, the marine whaling industry, mechanization, industrialization caused the extreme destruction of nature, and the relationship between man and nature became more and more urgent. The invention and use of steam engines and textile machines brought mankind into the industrial society. At this time, the view of nature dominated by the theory of conquest, anthropocentrism was fully developed, and the relationship between man and nature was in serious conflict. Nature restricted and acted on human activities and social development with the limitation of its resources. Every unreasonable use of human beings in nature led to a retaliatory response from nature. In the 19th century, American natural literature was inherited from the past,

its European literature ancestors, and raised questions for the later creation of natural literature, not only about how to depict the nature, but also about how to observe the nature from individuals' perspective and how treat the relationship between human and nature, which inspired all human beings, including Americans, for a long period.

Conclusion

In this study, American representative nature literature writers in the 19th century were analysed as a coherent system. It was widely believed that the 19th century American natural literature inherited and developed the theme and style of natural literature in the 17th and 18th centuries, and it was deeply influenced by European culture, especially British literature. However, since the 19th century should be taken as the era of American Renaissance and the localization of Native American literature, the difference between the European natural writings and the American natural literature should be checked prudently. We should keep our eyes open to the fact that America and Europe face different historical backgrounds when they are going to write about the nature, and the United States faced more serious problems and more drastic social changes during the origination of its natural literature.

With the advancement of the industrial revolution in the 19th century and the deepening of environmental pollution, the American romance novels began to reflect on the reality of the human condition in the society and began to think about the relationship between human and nature. In the 19th century, American natural literature was inherited from the past, and it raised questions for the later creation of natural literature. At the same time, it also inspired all human beings, including Americans. Therefore, the American natural literature can be seen as a well-rounded metaphysical system of the expression of the unique American condition from the beginning of the 19th century (Emerson and Thoreau) to the beginning of the 20th century (Mark Twain), and every American in this period could find their own sites in this long spectrum. And what should be mentioned at the end of the research is that, the writers of American natural literature chose to incorporate eastern natural philosophy with their literary creation, which left much more aesthetic space to the American natural literary creation. It was hoped that in this tide of construction and development, the cost of destroying the natural environment and the severe environmental situation faced by mankind can cause enough attention and vigilance for all people in the country.

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