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AN OVERVIEW OF NATURE PORTRAYAL IN THE FIRST HALF OF 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE⁷

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ABSTRACT	KEYWORDS
The article explores the evolving portrait of nature in American literature in the first half the 20th century, a period marked by significant advancements in the field of science, economy, warcraft, transportation and oil and gas industry. The analysis identifies numerous representations of nature based on comprehensive review of literary works and theoretical ideologies including Romanticism, Naturalism, and Ecocriticism. The study identifies valid points by examining authors such as John Muir, Robinson Jeffers, Jack London, John Steinbeck and their conceptualization of nature in the middle of societal changes and two World wars. The findings reveal a shift from idealized, spiritual views of nature to emphasized depictions of environmental degradation, vulnerability of human spirituality, and ecological crises. Highly influenced by Darwin's theories and technological advancements, writers illustrated nature as both a force of sustenance and destruction, alongside pessimistic views of the working-class people's day-to-day life. The research underscores the role of the nature portrayal in understanding ecological and psychological dimensions of early 20th century America, highlighting the literature's role in fostering ecological awareness and ethical responsibility.	Ecocriticism, ideologies, portrayal, wilderness, destruction, naturalism, evolution, eco-fiction, realism, working-class, crises, ethics. Received: June 02, 2026 Accepted: June 12, 2026 Available online: September 5, 2026

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XX ASR BIRINCHI YARMIDA AMERIKA ADABIYOTIDA TABIAT OBRAZI TASVIRI

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ANNOTATSIYA	KALIT SO'ZLAR
Mazkur maqola XX asrning birinchi yarmida ya'ni ilm-fan, iqtisodiyot, harbiy soha, transport hamda neft-gaz sanoatidagi ulkan o'zgarishlar bo'lgan davrda Amerika adabiyotida tabiat obrazi tasvirining qanday o'zgarib borganini tahlil qiladi. Tadqiqot romantizm, naturalizm va ekokrititsizm kabi nazariy yo'nalishlar hamda adabiy asarlarning keng qamrovli tahliliga asoslanib, tabiatning turli ko'rinishdagi talqinlarini ochib beradi. Ilmiy ish davomida Jon Myur, Robinson Jeffers, Jek London va Jon Steynbek kabi yozuvchilarning asarlari o'rganilib, ular tomonidan ijtimoiy o'zgarishlar va ikkita jahon urushlari fonida tabiat qanday badiiy ifoda eilganligi tahlil qilinadi. Natijalar shuni ko'rsatadiki, tabiatga nisbatan idealistik va ruhiy yondashuv asta-sekin ekologik tanazzul, inson ruhiyatining zaiflashuvi va ekologik inqirozlarni aks ettiruvchi realizmga o'z o'rnini bo'shatib bergan. Darvin nazariyalari hamda texnologik taraqqiyot ta'sirida yozuvchilar tabiatni bir tomondan hayot manbai, boshqa tomondan esa vayronkor kuch sifatida tasvirlay boshlaydilar. Shu bilan birga, ular ishchi sinf vakillarining og'ir va mashaqqatli kundalik hayotini ham ko'pincha pessimistik ruhda aks ettirganlar. Mazkur tadqiqot tabiat obrazining adabiyotdagi o'rni orqali XX asr boshlaridagi Amerika jamiyatining ekologik va psixologik holatini anglash mumkinligini ta'kidlaydi. Shuningdek, u adabiyotning ekologik ongini shakllantirish va etik mas'uliyatni kuchaytirishdagi muhim rolini yoritib beradi.	Ekokritisizm, ideologiyalar, portret, o'rmonzor, halokat, naturalizm, evolutsiya, eko-romanlar, realism, ishchi qatlam, krizis, etika.

ОБЗОР ИЗОБРАЖЕНИЯ ПРИРОДЫ В АМЕРИКАНСКОЙ ЛИТЕРАТУРЕ ПЕРВОЙ ПОЛОВИНЫ XX ВЕКА

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АННОТАЦИЯ	КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА
В статье анализируется, как менялось изображение природы в американской литературе первой половины XX века, в период масштабных преобразований в науке, экономике, военной сфере, а также в связи с развитием транспорта и нефтегазовой промышленности. В центре анализа в работе находятся произведения, воплощающих эстетические принципы романтизма, натурализма и экокритицизма, в которых с использованием комплексного анализа выявляются различные подходы к интерпретации мира природы и ее художественного изображения. В исследовании рассматриваются произведения таких писателей, как Джон Мьюр, Робинсон Джефферс, Джек Лондон и Джон Стейнбек, и на этом обширном материале делаются выводы об особенностях художественного осмысления природы на фоне социальных преобразований и двух мировых войн. Результаты исследования показывают, что идеалистическое и одухотворенное восприятие природы постепенно уступает место реализму, отражающему экологическую деградацию, ослабление человеческой духовности и экологические кризисы. Под влиянием дарвиновских теорий и технологического прогресса писатели начинают изображать природу, с одной стороны, как источник жизни, а с другой – как разрушительную силу. Вместе с тем они нередко в пессимистическом ключе изображают тяжёлую повседневную жизнь и изнурительный труд представителей рабочего класса. Исследование подчёркивает, что через осмысление образа природы в литературе можно понять экологическое мышление и психологическое состояние американского общества начала XX века. Кроме того, оно освещает важную роль литературы в формировании экологического сознания и усилении этической ответственности.	Экологическая критика, идеология, портрет, лесопарк, катастрофа, натурализм, эволюция, экологические романы, реализм, рабочий класс, кризис, этика.

INTRODUCTION

In the period of 50 years between 1900 and 1950, American society witnessed major transformations including but not limited to rapid industrial growth, large-scale urbanization, two world wars and the expansion of social media. This economic development coincided with environmental crises such as the Dust Bowl, a series of catastrophic dust storms that resulted in crop loss, displacement of families, and the breakdown of rural stability. Therefore, the nature portrayal of the American literature became increasingly diverse in purpose and style.

The nature in the writings can be seen as:

- a. A site of ecological loss;
- b. A realistic site tied to region and labor;
- c. A symbol for spiritual and moral questions;
- d. An environment that portrays a modern psychological tension.

Relevance of the topic: The study mainly focuses on evolving picture of nature in American literature. However, in the background it also analyzes eco-fiction in detail, a genre of literature which has opened the eyes of not only American people but also English-speaking avid readers worldwide in the past century, as it brings climate change closer to human imagination. Due to globalization and economic activities, global warming has reached its peak. As a result, it is expected to be widespread species extinction, increased food insecurity, more frequent and severe extreme weather events, continued warming and acidification of the oceans, rising sea levels, and longer-lasting heatwaves. The novels created in environmental fiction genre can respond to and help us understand these demands, as well as grasp the scale and complexity of climate change. One of the significant findings of the research is that there actually is a mutual connection between the present ecological phenomenon and transforming nature portrayal in American literature. Interestingly, there was not even a notion of neither eco-fiction nor ecological literature at that period in American literature, the pioneering works discussed in the article used naturalism and speculative fiction to critique environmental exploitation.

Purpose of the research: The article thoroughly discusses the evolvement of nature representation in the literary works written in the first half of the twentieth century with a particular focus on eco-fiction. The nature portrayal is explored from various dimensions as well as deeply researched from the perspective of literary movements existed in the given timeframe.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The writings in early 20th century by Joh Muir and Robinson Jeffers idealized nature as a divine force. In the book “My first Summer in the Sierra” (1911) John Muir portrayed American wilderness as a holy temple and depicted the experience of looking at nature as facing God (Harcourt M., 2001, 25). As to Robinson Jeffers, he wrote poems in stark verse celebrating the sacred power of nature in accordance with his philosophy, namely “Inhumanism” (Monjian M., 2012, 16). However, a broader literary trend in the early twentieth century shifted toward Naturalism, which frames nature as indifferent force to human beings that both sustains and destroys life without moral judgment. The novelists who were deeply influenced by Charles Darwin’s evolutionary theories often wrote pessimistic fiction asserting that human destiny is dictated by the social conditions and environment (Beer G., 2009, 303). One of the famous naturalist writers is Jack London who depicted brutal struggles for survival and the power of instinct, most famously in the books “The Call of Wild” (1903) and “The Sea Wolf” (1904) (London J., 1994, 205). The author of “Octopus” (1901), Frank Norris focused on highlighting the conflict between nature and humanity (Pizer D., 1963, 73). In the 1930s, Vernon Louis Parrington described naturalism as “pessimistic realism,” portraying humans as victims within a mechanical, amoral universe. Originating in France with Flaubert and Zola, naturalism aimed to make novelists into scientists analyzing how individuals interact with their social environments. Naturalist writers prioritized objectivity, often focusing on low or grotesque characters driven by biological or sexual instincts, which led to a form of tragedy where protagonists disintegrate not due to their flaws but because of oppressive urban-industrial settings. Parrington viewed this as “a

pessimistic evolution within realism, originally rooted in critiquing America's industrialization under middle-class leadership" (Kendir F., 2013, 46).

However, as industrialization and urbanization accelerated, nature's role shifted towards being a site of ecological loss and human vulnerability, a theme prominently explored in the works of writers like Steinbeck and Faulkner. John Steinbeck is generally linked to Realism and Social Consciousness whilst William Faulkner is closely associated with Modernism, particularly with experimental narrative techniques like stream-of-consciousness and non-linear storytelling. (Singal D., 1997, 65) In the first half of the twentieth century, several American writers depicted nature as a site of ecological loss and human vulnerability. Similarly, writers like Edward Abbey and Wallace Stagner, although more prominent in the mid-twentieth century, began to articulate fears about ecological degradation resulting from development and industrial expansion. One of the influential eco-feminist writer, Mary Austin created nature-centric regional literature, most notably "The Land of Little Rain" (1903) that illustrated the ecological problem in American Southwest. Moreover, "The Octopus: A story of California" (1901) by Frank Norris points out how corporate machines exploited the green areas accompanied by their flora and fauna for profit (Pizer D., 1963, 73). These authors collectively underscored the vulnerability of natural landscapes and warned of the ecological costs of human arrogance, emphasizing the interconnectedness and fragility of the environment.

Gattanoted, "Nature writing, then, can never describe a purely autonomous realm but must perforce say something about humanity's perceived relation to nonhuman creatures or biospheric systems (Gatta J., 2004, 16). Nature in the early twentieth century also served as a mirror for psychological tension and modern anxieties in American literature. In his well-known novel "The portrait of a lady" Henry James, for instance, used natural settings to explore the inner conflicts and moral dilemmas faced by the characters, illustrating how external landscape can mirror internal struggles. Wallace Stevens also contributed to this theme by examining the tension between perception and reality within natural environments, emphasizing the complex psychological experiences of individuals in a rapidly changing world

especially in his works including “Sunday Morning” and “Peter Quince at the Clavier” (Bloom H., 1980, 25). Through these portrayals, abovementioned authors highlighted nature as a symbolic space where the modern psyche’s conflicts are vividly expressed.

In a stark contrast, John Steinbeck in his “The Grapes of Wrath” and “Of Mice and Men”, depicts the natural environment as closely connected to the lives of working-class people, emphasizing the relationship between land, labor, and regional identity.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative approach to analyze the portrayal of nature in early 20th-century American literature. The methodology centers on close textual analysis supported by theoretical frameworks aimed at exploring how different authors conceptualized and depicted nature in relation to spiritual, philosophical, ecological, and psychological themes.

Analytical framework

The analysis is framed by the literary movements that are closely linked to environmental theories. For instance, in Romanticism and Transcendentalism, the writers and poets idealized the nature. Even though these movements emerged long before twentieth century, some writers still continued igniting readers’ heart emphasizing the divinity of nature in the aforementioned period of time. Meanwhile, the literary works that awoke American society to take ethical responsibility to alleviate ecological crises are closely linked to ecocriticism. Therefore, In other words, the chosen framework is built in terms of literary movements and the wide-spread theories of the era.

Data analysis

The data is analyzed through close reading, comparative analyses and contextualization. While contextualizing, the texts were interpreted within their socio-historical backgrounds considering the scientific theories such as Darwinism, technological and economical progress and environmental movements.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The key findings of the study are given in the following table. The authors are listed according to the literary movements in which they wrote, while their selected literary works were primarily published within the first fifty years of the twentieth century.

Table 1.

Theoretical approaches to nature

<i>Theoretical Framework</i>	<i>Key Features</i>	<i>Focus / Interpretation of Nature</i>	<i>Authors/Poets</i>
Romanticism and Transcendentalism	Idealization and spiritualization of nature; emphasis on emotional and spiritual connection	Nature as divine, sacred, and a source of inspiration; often portrayed as pure and sublime	Joh Muir Robinson Jeffers
Naturalism	Depiction of nature as indifferent, often harsh and destructive	Nature as amoral, indifferent to human existence; scenes of survival and chaos	Jack London Frank Norris
Ecocriticism	Exploration of human-nature relationships; environmental concerns	Nature as interconnected and vulnerable; focus on ecological crises and ethical responsibility	Upton Sinclair John Steinbeck
Psychological Symbolism	Nature as a mirror of internal emotional and mental states	Nature reflecting internal psychological conditions; symbolic of human consciousness and feelings	Henry James Stephen Crane

One of the key findings from the research is that Darwinism theories those emerged in the middle of nineteenth century did not only affect the religious believes but also sparked and shaped a whole new movement in literature namely Naturalism. According to Bender “as the Darwinian revolution developed, affecting every field of thought, realist narratives began to shift from comic to more tragic presentations of people’s place in nature” (Bender B., 2011, 58). According to Campbell, Naturalism reached its classic phase in the twentieth century, becoming more ideologically complex as it began to encompass space and place, corporeality, mechanisms and technology, and lines and boundaries (Campbell D., 2011, 506). Naturalist literature revealed life’s harsh realities - poverty, racism, disease, corruption - highlighting nature’s indifference to human suffering and depicting constant struggles between man and nature or within himself. Naturalist literature focused heavily on the dirt and squalor of society. It often depicted the struggles and hardships faced by the lower classes. These themes became central to the stories and novels created within this movement. An important feature of Naturalist works is the unexpected twist that usually occurs at the end. There is a powerful feeling in these stories that nature remains unaffected by human conflicts and efforts. Naturalist writers often portrayed characters caught in situations beyond their control. The stories emphasize how individuals are at the mercy of vast, impersonal forces. This perspective highlights the idea that human life is shaped by forces larger than personal will. Overall, Naturalism reveals the harsh realities faced by the underprivileged. It shows that despite their struggles, people are often powerless against the larger forces of nature and society (Bender B., 2011,56).

American literary naturalism is enriched by several authors including Jack London, Theodore Dreiser, and Frank Norris. In the opinion of Charles Child Walcutt (2020), for Drieser, science is not regarded as a sacred figure that neither understands nor serves a gentle and caring Nature, because he has witnessed numerous dangers of industrialization and the destructive power of natural force(Walcutt C., 2020, 209). However, life means constantly searching, exploring, and striving, reminding the only positive force within a universe characterized by

relentless change. The struggles and hardships faced by individuals in this “universe of aimless transformation is the central focus of Dreiser’s novels” (Walcutt C., 2020,266). In other words, Dreiser portrays nature as a gentle force, yet one that involves unpredictable reformation constantly, making people vulnerable. Similarly, Stephen Crane depicted nature as an unpredictable force that embodies anxiety and human vulnerability. As per Jack London, he viewed nature as creative force that shapes value on Earth. It can be clearly summarized from his short story namely “The Strength of the Strong” that he “saw the evolution of civil society out of the state of nature” (Schlosser K., 2009, 470). London’s work often explores how naturalist ideas, especially in class struggle and capitalism, reflect a persistent ideology of nature. While his wilderness stories symbolize historical change, his earlier socialist-themed writings suggest nature’s “good strength” counteracting evil, highlighting his complex view of nature’s role in society.

In his short story “The Open Boat”, Stephen Crane uses a metaphor describing a small boat in a bathtub to highlight the person’s vulnerability to natural world⁸. The story highlights nature’s indifference, especially when the four men worked tirelessly only to have their boat sink just before they reached safety. They were then compelled to swim in the unexpectedly cold waters of January, which Crane describes as icy, emphasizing the harshness and brutality of nature. The captain advises the others that if no help arrives, they should attempt to run through the surf immediately, reflecting their desperate situation and the relentless power of natural forces. This scenario illustrates a key aspect of naturalist literature, which often focuses on the struggles and filth of society, particularly the hardships faced by the lower classes (Kendir F., 2013, 39). Naturalism frequently depicts individuals at the mercy of larger forces beyond their control, whether societal or natural. The indifference of nature is regarded as a defining characteristic of this literary style, demonstrating how nature remains unaffected by human suffering and efforts. The story exemplifies how humans are powerless against both natural forces and societal struggles, emphasizing that individuals are often subject to forces much greater than

themselves. Overall, it underscores the idea that in the face of nature's indifference, human beings are vulnerable and powerless.

Furthermore, in the selected era, writers started viewing nature controllable, negatively affected, and even degraded due to technological advancements. Between 1900 and 1950, numerous American technological advancements contributed to environmental degradation. The period saw rapid industrialization and the growth of factories, which led to increased pollution, including air and water contamination, and widespread habitat destruction. The expansion of the automobile industry, particularly from the 1920s onward, significantly contributed to air pollution, oil spills, and the depletion of natural resources (Caron R., 2014, 13). A notable example is the construction of the Hoover Dam, completed in 1936, which disrupted river ecosystems, affected fish migration, and altered natural water flows. During this era, the development and early use of chemical pesticides and herbicides, such as DDT first synthesized in the 1930s and used extensively in the 1940s, caused harm to wildlife and ecosystems (Caron R., 2014, 20).

The advent of nuclear technology in the 1940s, exemplified by the Manhattan Project, introduced radioactive contamination and environmental hazards. Additionally, the expansion of urban areas and suburban sprawl contributed to deforestation, habitat loss, and increased pollution, while the widespread adoption of heavy machinery like tractors in agriculture accelerated soil erosion and biodiversity loss. Collectively, these advancements, while pioneering in their respective fields, played a significant role in degrading natural environments across the United States during the first half of the 20th century. As a result of these technological and economic developments, ecocriticism emerged within American literature in the middle of twentieth century. Upton Sinclair, best known for his novel "The Jungle" (1906), highlighted the harsh conditions of the meatpacking industry and drew attention to the exploitation of workers and environmental degradation caused by industrial practices. His investigative approach aimed to expose the systemic problems related to capitalism and environmental neglect. As reported by Madarang, "The book "The Jungle" echoes that Right-to-know programs are

windows to public participation in environmental decision-making, and consumers require clarity on the contents and processing of the food we consume, the water we drink, the air we breathe, the land on which we live, and the work environments to which today's workers are exposed"(Madarang K., 2017,15). Similarly, John Steinbeck, celebrated for works such as "The Grapes of Wrath" (1939) and "Cannery Row" (1945), depicted the struggles of impoverished communities affected by economic and ecological upheavals during the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. In the view of Syeinbrecher "Cohesion in "The Grapes of Wrath's composition" makes a single narrative of both the natural and the human worlds, and that creates a moral universe that guides ethical behavior towards others, both human and non-human" (Syeinbrecher S., 2016, 3).

CONCLUSION

Overall, initially romanticized by writers like Muir and Jeffers as divine and sacred, nature's portrayal evolved to reflect the harsh realities of naturalism, influenced by Darwinism, emphasizing nature's indifference and brutality. As industrialization accelerated, writers highlighted environmental degradation, ecological loss, and human vulnerability, with authors like Steinbeck and Faulkner illustrating these themes (Singal D., 1997, 78). The rise of ecocriticism in this period brought attention to ecological crises and ethical concerns, driven by technological progress and environmental threats such as pollution and habitat destruction. Mahatma Gandhi once said, "What we are doing to the forests of the world is but a mirror reflection of what we are doing to ourselves and to one another." Thus, every step taken for environmental protection is equivalent to guarding the human race as a whole. Literature from this era also served as a psychological mirror, expressing modern anxieties and internal conflicts. Methodologically, the study employs close textual analysis within the frameworks of literary movements and environmental theories. The findings demonstrate a transition from spiritual and idealized views of nature to representations emphasizing ecological crisis and human fragility, reflecting broader societal shifts and environmental concerns. The article

emphasizes the vital role of literature in shaping ecological consciousness during a transformative period in American history.

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