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Voices from the Wilderness: Exploring the Varied  
Natural Narratives of Irving, Bryant, and Thoreau

Nature plays a pivotal role in the writings of Washington Irving, William Cullen Bryant, and Henry David Thoreau, embodying the American Renaissance/Romantic-era spirit while crafting distinct themes. Irving, renowned for his tales of mystery and the supernatural, leverages the eerie facets of the natural world in works such as “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.” Bryant, a leading poet of the Romantic era, imparts tranquility and serenity through his depiction of nature in his poem “Thanatopsis.” In contrast, Thoreau, a key figure in the Transcendentalist movement, explores nature as a pathway to philosophical insight and individualism in his acclaimed “Walden.”

First, this analysis will briefly introduce Irving, Bryant, and Thoreau, dissect nature’s thematic significance in their chosen works, and investigate how each utilizes this theme to craft poignant dialogue. Second, it will examine the distinct characteristics of their respective periods and how these manifest within each writing. Third, it will assess each author's narrative devices to articulate their perspectives. Lastly, the study will prove the writing styles of Irving, Bryant, and Thoreau share a reverence for the natural world, yet, their narrative approaches offer contrasting views that encapsulate the socio-cultural tenor of each era.

The American Renaissance, or the Romantic era in literature, was a time of immense cultural growth, with writers exploring themes of individualism, nature, and the sublime. Three of the most influential authors of this era - Irving, Bryant, and Thoreau - utilized nature in their

writings to embody the spirit of this period while producing unique ideas. Washington Irving, often considered the father of American literature (more accurately, the father of American myth), is best known for his short stories depicting irony and humor – notably through his fabled “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” (Jeffers 1). In Irving's literary creations, nature takes on a character of its own, often contributing to the narrative's magical setting. As Crawford explores, the ambiguity of Irving's supernatural occurrences often ties to environmental descriptions, creating a layer of suspense and mystery (1507). Similarly, Redmond (9-10) shows how Irving utilizes nature to represent the transformation of the American republic in his classic “Rip Van Winkle,” thus showcasing the landscape as “alive” and an active participant in the nation's history.

In his revered poetry, William Cullen Bryant, an Irving contemporary, uses nature as a springboard to explore themes of mortality and the human spirit. As Riddel and Pearce articulate, the author's poetic vision connects the human condition to the natural world, mainly seen in “Thanatopsis” (115). Bryant’s underlying sentiment, captured in the poem's description of death, is profound – one of serene acceptance amid the comforting lap of the natural world and that human existence is all part of nature's circle of life. A central figure of the American Transcendentalist movement, Thoreau celebrates nature in “Walden,” arguably his life’s work, artfully connecting landscapes to the human spirit. For Thoreau, the outdoors was more than a mere setting; it became a platform for contemplation and self-discovery. Cruz and Silva's “ecological” analysis of the piece highlights how Thoreau perceives nature as a sanctuary away from societal constraints, embracing a form of “environmental ethics” that encourages conscious coexistence with nature (57).

These authors skillfully used the natural world in their stories to share their beliefs and reflect the Romantic era's deep respect for nature. Irving uses the earth's landscape to create feelings of awe and fear - Bryant thinks about life and death within the context of nature to deepen his philosophical thoughts, while Thoreau's experiences outside lead to a strong awareness of the environment. This rich tapestry of nature within their writings does not merely echo the Romantic era's spirit. Instead, Redmond explains it is a specific embodiment of the American Renaissance, where character became an expansive canvas for human emotion, philosophical contemplation, and socio-political commentary (21). Therefore, their unique use of nature in writing shows an integral part of the American literary disposition, emphasizing awareness of the country's growing cultural story.

In "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," Washington Irving employs nature as an eerie backdrop and medium for supernatural elements. Redmond posits this unique use of nature echoes the early American fascination with the uncanny and the sublime, creating an atmosphere where the natural and the supernatural intersect (625; 822). Irving's landscape is a mere setting and an active participant in the narrative that amplifies the ethereal theme. Further, the enveloping forests, isolated churchyard, and misty brooks intensify the haunted ambiance that pervades the tale (Crawford 1518). To illustrate, one can examine a pivotal scene where Irving narrates:

Indeed, certain of the most authentic historians of those parts, who have been careful in collecting and collating the floating facts concerning this spectre, allege that the body of the trooper, having been buried in the churchyard the ghost rides forth to the scene of battle in nightly quest of his head, and that the rushing speed with which he sometimes

passes along the Hollow, like a midnight blast, is owing to his being belated and in a hurry to get back to the churchyard before daybreak. (Irving 35)

The depiction of the churchyard and Irving's creative use of imagery as the trooper's resting place forms a haunting association between nature and the supernatural, reinforcing a ghostly characteristic. Jeffers states it is like nature conspires to manifest the ghostly apparitions, contributing significantly to the overall uncanniness of the tale (8).

Supporting this interpretation, Crawford suggests that Irving's use of the natural environment and the literary device of personification play a critical role in creating a sense of ambiguity around the supernatural elements in the story (1507-33). The author further shows that this uncertainty enthralls the reader, attributing it to Irving's ingenious use of nature. Thus, Irving's narrative strategy, supported by his specific depiction of the outside world, effectively captures and conveys the eerie fascination of the early American period with the uncanny and the sublime.

Diverse portrayals of nature and the human relationship characterized the American Romantic era. While Irving's piece embodies a sense of supernatural ambiguity, in stark contrast, Bryant's "Thanatopsis" paints nature as a comforting force. He emphasized the romantic ideology of emotional consolation and connection through natural elements. Titled in Greek for 'view or contemplation of death,' "Thanatopsis" describes death as natural and not a process to be feared, one that integrates humans back into the soothing embrace of nature (Past (Im)Perfect 248). In the poem, he describes nature as a caring "entity," offering comfort and solace to those distressed by the prospect of death. In Irving's view, Belasco, in the course text, confirms death is not an end but a return to the earth that nurtures us: a form of unity with the natural world (359). Bryant's nature offers a solace that transforms the harsh reality of death into a comforting

natural process.

Irving's ideas through "Walden" further insist that individuals should face death, an inevitable event, with dignity and grace rather than fear. The lines, "So live, that when thy summons comes to join / The innumerable caravan, which moves / To that mysterious realm" (Bryant 14), highlight the inevitability of death and encourage the reader to live life in a way that death becomes a continuation of existence, rather than its termination. Riddel and Pearce confirm that Bryant infuses death with a sense of continuity, echoing the cyclic nature of life (116). His employment of metaphors to illustrate death as a process of reintegration with nature and the use of imagery suggest solace in the reader.

Henry David Thoreau's "Walden" is a seminal work that uses the lens of nature to delve into profound philosophical and existential themes. Sophie Thomas (102) theorizes this work embodies the Transcendentalist movement and its emphasis on individuality, self-reliance, and spiritual connection to the natural world. Thoreau positions nature as a setting for self-discovery and a manifestation of independence, culminating in his famous quote, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life" (Thoreau "Walden"). A philosophical experiment in living minimally and focusing on self-reliance, the course text sets out Thoreau's overall ideology as anecdotal – a common literary device of the time (Belasco 730). For context, Cruz and Silva confirm Thoreau's cabin by Walden Pond provided the author with a symbol of peace and a backdrop to live "deliberately," removing societal distractions and unnecessary commodities (55). His experiences there reflect the Transcendentalist movement's core values, including individuality, spiritual connection with nature, and introspective self-reliance.

Through the narrative of his seasons at Walden Pond, Thoreau illustrates the process of self-discovery through literary symbolism and the affirmation of independence possible when immersed in nature. By isolating himself in the woods, Thoreau creates a life non-reliant on societal structures and directly dependent on the natural environment. This act of voluntary isolation leads to a deeper understanding of self and a reaffirmation of independence (Cruz and Silva 55). Finally, this contrasting portrayal of nature in Romantic literature illustrates the diversity and depth of the period. Thomas highlights the significance of emotional response and individual interpretation in understanding and appreciating the era's literary output (105). Both Bryant and Irving, with their contrasting representations of nature, successfully encapsulate the essence of Romanticism.

The American Renaissance era reveals how passionate poets perceived and conveyed nature differently. While Irving's nature in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" is mysterious and unsettling, Bryant's nature in "Thanatopsis" is a source of consolation and comfort, providing solace in death. It clearly demonstrates the diverse nature of Romanticism, encompassing the entire emotional spectrum – from comfort and relief to mystery and fear.

The representation of nature in Romantic literature, though varied in these authors' works, holds a central position and establishes a significant emotional connection and personal interpretation. Irving's sinister landscapes and supernatural tales tap into the American fascination with the sublime and uncanny, while Bryant's comforting nature resonates with the Romantic emphasis on emotional connectivity and solace. Thoreau, with "Walden," epitomizes the Transcendentalist ideals of individuality, self-reliance, and spiritual communion with nature. These divergent yet connected portrayals exemplify literature's capacity to reflect society, where each author's unique depiction of nature shapes the narrative and mirrors their respective periods'

cultural and philosophical dialogues. Through their works, Irving, Bryant, and Thoreau use nature, symbolism, and imagery to construct visual landscapes. These, in turn, engage existential issues, emotional tones, and supernatural visions, offering timeless insights into the human-nature relationship and demonstrating their enduring relevance and influence.

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