Nature and Man in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s Poem “Water” and Carl Sandberg’s Poem "Grass": A Comparative Study

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Abstract: The relatedness between Nature and Man is controversial. It is an arguable subject that rose, from the beginning of creation, a lot of questions which were open to different visionary answers as each researcher gives an answer to his dilemma. This paper deals with the relatedness between nature and man in two poems written by men of ideology; Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) and Carl Sandberg (1878-1967). In each poem there is a release of thoughts, not from the traditional use of the pronoun “I”, but an exchange of ideas managed by both man and nature and how they deal with each other. It is worthy to note that each poet belonged to a different literary period, but both share the same perception about the balance between man and nature reflected in their poetry. Emerson and Sandberg had an intellectual ability which managed their poetry as the paper investigates both poems thematically in the light of “Transcendentalism”; a philosophical movement that Emerson adapted during 19th century, eventually, it affected a number of poets who admired Emerson's approach towards life, nature and humanity in a way that the reader cannot depart from adapting the same perception, or at least, admire it.

Keywords: Transcendentalism, Nature, Man, vision, battlefield, war.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) is an American poet and essayist. He appeared in the time of New England or as sometimes referred to as American Renaissance (1840-1860). Emerson was born in Boston to a poor family whose ancestors were clergymen back to the time of the puritans. He entered Harvard at the age of fourteen, but his real career started when he published his journals at the age of sixteen. He spent many years in a life of questioning, self doubts as he was seeking an inner direction towards a better understanding of the world around him. He entered the ministry, but after three years he resigned his pastorate leading him self to a more mature spiritual life. During this time, an intellectual movement appeared called Transcendentalism advocating that the basic truths of the universe lie beyond the knowledge obtained from the senses (Abbott, 1996: 208).

His first essay “Nature” appeared in 1836 marked his new vision about the relation of the soul to nature that initiated the foundations of the philosophy of Transcendentalism; a realm of knowledge that goes beyond what is seen or learn from books. It is the existence of the soul and its relation to a reality beyond the physical world, simply called intuition or the highest power of the soul, a power that “never reasons, never proves, it simply perceives” (Ibid).

Nature, according to the eighteenth century view, was a machine, but Emerson believed that spiritual existence of man is reflected in the world of nature and there is a higher spiritual law that spread through all forms of life. In his essay “Nature” Emerson says:

“Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchers of the fathers
It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The forgoing generations
Beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should
Not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not
We have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and
A religion by revelation to us not the history of theirs?” (Wyne,2010:185)
This quotation illuminates the core of our study of the poem “Water” which deals with a world limited between the soul and nature in an eloquent analogy between water as a face of nature and man as the core of civilization.

Also, in his lecture “The Transcendentalist” delivered in 1843, he simplified his new movement: "what is popularly called Transcendentalism among us is idealism "." It is a tendency to respect the intuition”.

2. ANALYSIS OF THE POEM “WATER”

The poem is a short seven lines, free verse. The poet personifies nature in one of its forms “water” as a human being and precedes water before the reference to man using the term “civilization”. It is clear that the word civilization means [a society in an advanced state] that is; the higher state of an intellectual man, perhaps for the purpose of stating a developed analogy and tone of conversation between man throughout ages and nature from the beginning of creation. As the poem begins with “the water understands civilization well”; it establishes the base of the analogy that the poet manages skillfully from the beginning showing nature more inclusive than human being.

From the understanding of water to man, the poet defines the scope of this understanding through short lines but wittily expressive; the number of adverbs used are sufficient to give a full detailed picture of this relatedness. Moreover, the poet turns to use the pronoun “it” in his argument where the speaker, now, is "Man" referring to "water" as "It":

\[
\text{It wets my foot, but prettily,} \\
\text{It chills my life, but wittily,}
\]

Here, "prettily" and "wittily" show the sweetness and smartness of the intrusion of nature as it sweetly and mildly, in an admirable way, calls man without his notice to include his whole life to contend with nature silently. More interesting, is the use of “foot” (the first part of the body the touches and senses water on a beach) before “life” as if the poet records the physical connection between man and nature before proceeding to the whole life of man being chilled by nature, especially if we consider the meaning of “chill” as a verb of sensation to cover the all senses of man.

Emerson gives more description of nature “it is not disconcerted, it is not broken-hearted”; nature is not in confusion, it is in tune as one unit, it is not broken hearted like man who is always apt to many misfortunes. Nature is more harmonium and in steadiness than man. Nature beatifies man’s life if it well used “well used, it decketh joy”; more and more, nature doubles its beauty and decorates man’s life if man showed more earnestness and honesty to it “Adorneth, doubileth joy”. Emerson believed that nature is "the vehicle of thought", which is to say that nature provides us with a medium, not only of word but of things, that gives us access to spirit or truth ((Kern,1996: 40).

The relatedness between nature and man is conditioned by the way man treats nature; if nature ill used, the whole balance will turn upside down “it will destroy”. Destruction means damage out of repair; a state that man is the cause and the initiative. Nature keeps its beauty and elegance till man starts his demolition to it. The destruction will be organized and in a measurable way “in perfect time and measure”, but with a face of golden pleasure. Why the poet insists on keeping the grandeur of nature? The answer lies in the fact that nature resists man’s destruction and its existence is beyond the continuous trails of man through ages.

Emerson repudiated materialism as he advocated that people should live a simple life with harmony with nature. Finally, the poet ends his poem with the manner that nature manages its destruction of man, it elegantly destroy; a highly dignified way that suits masters and kings. Nature is not weak to be the victim easily. The equation is clear, if man treats nature well, nature repays the same. The poet, from the beginning of the poem declares that nature “water” understands man “civilization” well. So, it depends on man to keep the steadiness and the balance between him and nature, to find the "self" in nature, to be part of it if he let his soul to be united with nature. In this respect, Wyne says:

"A right relationship with nature also means an understanding of the relation of the parts to the whole. It is the difference between seeing individual farms owned by individual men and seeing “the landscape.” It is “the poet” who “can integrate all the parts.” ((Wyne, 2010: 186)
3. CARL SANDBURG

Carl Sandburg (1878-1967) is an American poet and a well known biographer of Abraham Lincoln. He was born in Illinois to Swedish immigrant parents in Galesburg. He finished public schooling in 1891 and his family forced him to leave school early. In 1897, he left home abroad a railroad car, moving from town to town and working odd jobs, through these experiences, he developed a keen sense of the people. After his participation in the Spanish-American war (1898) he tried to continue his education at Lombard College, but he left it also to travel and work at various jobs.

From 1902, Sandburg worked for a series of small magazines. He worked also as a journalist from 1909-1912, as a city hall reporter, as a staff writer of Milwaukee Leader and many other jobs. Officially, his poetry was published in 1914 which introduced him to the world of poetry as a voice of the working class and he developed the American poetic tradition in his use of free verse and plain speech.

Little is available about the philosophy of Sandburg in his poetry for his fame rests on being the biographer of Abraham Lincoln. Wilson (1960:6) argues about Sandburg as a poet:

"Was he a great poet? At the peak of his productivity — say
from 1930 to the entry of the United States in World War II -
there seemed little doubt that he was, though even then some
dissenting critical voices could be heard. By the time of his death
in the late 1960*8 his reputation seemed less secure, though as a
biographer of Lincoln he had no contemporary rival, and as a
symbolical "voice of America" he was rivaled only by the New

Wilson asserts that:

"He had a somewhat Emersonian attitude toward nature (Emerson
was always one of Sandburg's favorite authors). His life-style
was stubbornly individualistic, in speech, manners, opinions." (Wilson:8)

Amy Lowell (one of the pioneers of imagism) clarifies that Sandburg was an idealist according to Sandburg's leaflet: "I don’t know where I am going, but I am on my way". Also, he says;” Man does not live by bread alone. He has a soul. Let us feed this soul”. He had a vision, but it was vague, he was a seer in a joyless world (Lowell, 1917: 213).

He was creative in using some imagery to introduce the voice of the working class, such as his poem "fog" which imagines the fog "on little cat feet" appearing "over harbor and city" to develop the American poetic tradition in his plain speech. In other words, he was successful in introducing the voice of man, however it was the voice of the working class due to the many jobs he experienced and his participation in the war (Huff, 2005: 440).

Sandburg wrote poems replete with such rugged, unorthodox free verse and such unconventionally realistic subject matter that he himself could not even be sure they were poetry. He continually experimented with poetic images of the working men (Niven, 2000: 3).

4. ANALYSIS OF THE POEM “GRASS”

“Grass” is one of the 103 poems that form Cornhusker collection (1918) which won him the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1951 (Huff, 2005:440).

It is written in free verse, using simple words through the voice of Nature. The voice of man is absent while nature manages the whole tone of the poem. What is interesting in the style of Sandburg is that he begins the poem with the order of “pile the bodies” followed by the repetition of the same verb using the coordinator (and), suggesting a sense of completion after a work done earlier. This perception is totally adequate to the theme of the poem that is the continuity of war and victimizing
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man through all the references to battles whether Austerlitz[1], Waterloo[2], Gettysburg[3], Ypres[4] or Verdun[5]. It is worthy to mention that the poet did not restricted the time of his poem with a specific war because these wars happened in different times in history; therefore, he wanted to universalize his message that war is war and man remains the fuel of war.

[1] **Austerlitz**: The Battle of Austerlitz (December 2, 1805), also known as the Battle of the Three Emperors, was one of the most important and decisive engagements of the Napoleonic Wars.

[2] **Waterloo**: The Battle of Waterloo was fought on Sunday, 18 June 1815, near Waterloo.

[3] **Gettysburg**: The Battle of Gettysburg was fought July 1863, in and around the town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, by Union and Confederate forces during the American Civil War.

[4] **Ypres**: The Battle of Ypres was during the First World War, in the general area of the Belgian city of Ypres.

[5] **Verdun**: The Battle of Verdun was 1916 during the First World War on the Western Front between the German and French armies, on hills north of Verdun-sur-Meuse in north-eastern France.

Nature is the speaker who orders man and manages the flow of the poem. The sense of order dominates the poem; the order of nature to man (the worker) who is working on a land which witnessed a number of wars regardless of place and time. The setting in this poem is a place where the reader could imagine an area where a conductor works on a plan to beatify the area. The place was once a battlefield. Three types of men are apparent in this poem; the first who is dead now as the whole earth is his home while nature embodies the dead bodies out of time and place, the second is the conductor who works on the land in a modern city to rearrange it, then the third type, the passengers who are ignorant about the history of the place while only Nature is the historian, the collector, and the manager of the issue.

*Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo*

*Shovel them under and let me work-

*I am the grass; I cover all.*

*And pile them high at Gettysburg*

*And pile them high at Ypres and Verdun.*

*Shovel them under and let me work.*

Nature keeps embracing the dead bodies continuously and unchanged. The places change over time as man still going on his progress excavating the remains of man. It is man who destroys the sense of humanity while nature ceaselessly cures the causalities of war as a mother. Now, it is a place where passersby ask about its name, ignorant about the history made by those who are under their feet. Time and place are the same in an ironical tone:

*Two years, ten years, and passengers ask the conductor:*

*What place is this?*

*Where are we now?*

*I am the grass.*

*Let me work.*

Man forgets and asks, man works, man is the victim. An enclosed circle repeated over centuries while nature gives remedy and beauty regardless of man’s destruction. “let me work” is the call of nature and its generosity, however man ruins and kills nature. Nature keeps an authority over man's history of destruction.

5. **The Comparison between the Two Poems**

Both poems study and portray nature as the master of the setting and the developer of the analogy. Materialism is the world of man in its different forms whether through the word "civilization" or the name of battlefields mentioned in "Grass"; it is nature that cures and strengthens over time while man
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is careless, ignorant and unaware of the damages he causes to nature. Both poems are timeless due to the deep continuous communication between nature and man. In the first poem, nature is in harmony whenever man respects nature, while nature in the second poem still acts as a mother embracing its child (the dead) in its womb. Death transfers man after death to be part of nature again achieving "wholeness" “Let me work, I am the Grass”. Meanwhile, nature cooperates with man, again, to decorate the earth continuously.

As Transcendentalists believed in Romanticism, Sandburg treats nature in a romantic way in his representation of nature as a mother who embraces man; the sense of optimism is evident in both poems for the sake of man.

Both poets are idealist; working on intuition and representing their vision about nature and man, and how far this relatedness is inclusive and invites the soul of man to reconsider his connection with nature. In the first poem “elegantly destroy” is the last line which demonstrates the mastery of nature over man( in a negative sense); while in the second poem " let me work" is the last line that also shows the mastery of nature over man( in a positive sense). What is important for both poets is their call to respect nature and have their own vision and insight to recognize the grandeur of nature and the carelessness of man whether through his advancement (materialism) or the wars he causes and being the victim also.

Both poems are poems of insight, and the similarities between the two poems are more than the differences. A spiritual link is waved between nature and man in both; nature is more permanent than the transience of man whose soul could bridge the gap created by him through time and ages. Emerson in his intellectual movement addresses man to find himself amid the forces around him and let his soul regain its relation with nature. From the same perspective one can study Sandburg's "Grass" as he adapts the same claim of Emerson about the power, supremacy, elegance and superiority of nature over man.

6. CONCLUSION

Both poets admit the power of nature. Both poems are timeless and universal although Sandburg belongs to a modern period but he adapted an Emersonian thinking about nature and man featuring the same characteristics of Transcendentalism that Emerson called for in a world of changes during nineteenth century. Both poems are an urgent call to respect, consider, and appreciate nature. It is in the hands of man to preserve nature and keep its beauty and harmony.

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AUTHOR’S BIOGRAPHY

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