

Nature Reclaimed in Nineteenth-Century American Women Poetry

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This paper examines the distinct and revisionary concepts of nature articulated by 19th-century American women poets, arguing that their work constitutes a significant departure from dominant anthropocentric paradigms exemplified by Puritan theology, Romantic transcendentalism, and masculinist frontier narratives. Focusing primarily on Celia Thaxter, alongside Frances Sargent Osgood, Lucy Larcom, and Alice Cary, the analysis demonstrates how these poets rejected nature's conventional framing as either a hostile wilderness opposed to civilization or a symbolic resource for Euro-American spiritual transcendence. Instead, they developed visions centered on nature's intrinsic agency and autonomous operation. Thaxter emerges as a pivotal figure, forging a groundbreaking "mechanistic" view of nature as fundamentally indifferent to human concerns—governed by its own laws and manifesting simultaneous beauty and brutality without moral intent. This perspective, anticipating American literary Naturalism, starkly contrasts with the unsentimental yet appreciative depictions of nature's inherent beauty found in Osgood, Larcom, and Cary. Collectively, these poets displaced Western metaphysical binaries (man vs. nature), prioritizing observation over idealization and representing nature on its own terms as an autonomous system or object of aesthetic appreciation, thereby achieving a crucial recasting of nature within 19th-century American literature.

Keywords: 19th-century American women's poetry, nature representation, Celia Thaxter, mechanistic nature, autonomous nature, American romanticism, transcendentalism critique

Introduction

Nineteenth-century American literature witnessed persistent ideological framings of nature as either a hostile wilderness requiring conquest as seen in Puritan discourse or a symbolic conduit for spiritual transcendence as exemplified by transcendentalism. These paradigms consistently positioned nature within anthropocentric frameworks, serving Euro-American theological, political, or existential needs while obscuring its intrinsic autonomy. Against this backdrop, the poetry of 19th-century American women such as Celia Thaxter, Frances Sargent Osgood, Lucy Larcom, and Alice Cary offered a crucial and revisionary intervention.

This paper argues that these poets collectively enacted a significant departure from dominant traditions by rejecting nature's instrumentalization as either adversarial force or divine resource. Instead, their work centered

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nature's intrinsic agency and autonomous operation, displacing Western metaphysical binaries (man vs. nature) to represent it as an independent system or an object of aesthetic value on its own terms. Central to this recalibration is Celia Thaxter, whose groundbreaking "mechanistic" vision portrayed nature as fundamentally indifferent to human concerns—governed by amoral laws and manifesting concurrent beauty and brutality without design or intent. This perspective, anticipating American literary Naturalism, starkly contrasts with the unsentimental yet appreciative depictions of nature's inherent beauty and cyclical autonomy found in Osgood, Larcom, and Cary.

By analyzing representative works—such as Thaxter's "The Tryst", "Wherefore", and "Land-Locked", alongside Osgood's "The Lily's Delusion", Larcom's "Wild Roses of Cape Ann", and Cary's "Summer and Winter", this study demonstrates how these women poets prioritized empirical observation over idealization. Collectively, their contributions facilitated a crucial recasting of nature's conceptualization within 19th-century American literature, reclaiming it from anthropocentric narratives towards representations of its autonomous reality

Historical Conceptions of Nature in American Nature Writing

American nature writing emerged as a discursive negotiation between early settlers' existential imperatives and their colonial ambitions. Confronting an ecosystem both radically unfamiliar and vast beyond European imaginaries, colonists faced dual demands: internally, to reconcile personal spiritual-biographical narratives with empirical environmental realities; externally, to legitimize territorial expansion theologically and politically. This genre crystallized as a unique synthesis of Protestant spiritual autobiography and Baconian natural philosophy, a textual space where transcendental yearnings collided with extractive imperatives.

Central to this enterprise was the hermeneutic transference of Biblical typology onto American topography. As Kolodny (1975) seminally demonstrated in *The Lay of the Land*, explorers mapped Judeo-Christian salvation narratives onto the physical landscape through aggressively gendered metaphors. The pervasive imagery of "virgin lands", "unspoiled forests", and "Edenic abundance" (Devine, 1992, pp. 11-12) served dual ideological functions: ontological reassurance, that is, framing wilderness as passively feminized space mitigated European anxieties about ecological otherness, rendering terra incognita comprehensible within familiar theological schemas, and colonial justification: Imagining the continent as nature's nation awaiting cultivation provided ethical cover for displacement of Indigenous populations. William Bradford's lament over the "hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild bests and wild men—and what multitudes there might be of them they knew not" (p. 79), thus becomes not mere description, but a performative utterance conjuring civilizational absence where complex ecological networks thrived.

This discourse birthed a foundational American environmental paradox: Settlers simultaneously perceived wilderness as: threat as being chaotic, native habitat of wild beasts, and Calvinist emblem of spiritual trial, and as redemptive prospect: regenerative tabula rasa, and Puritan refuge from European corruption.

The Puritans' simultaneous terror and veneration of wilderness reflect this ambivalence. While Cotton Mather denounced forests as devil's territories, theologian Jonathan Edwards paradoxically found in thunderstorms "awful sweetness [revealing] the river of God's pleasures" (2003, p. 186). This epistemological tension reached its apogee in the transcendentalist movement, when Emerson reframed nature as "the present expositor of the divine mind" (p. 509), a significant yet incomplete departure from the conquest paradigm that retained Eurocentric exceptionalism.

Critically, these evolving conceptions remained predicated on extractive relationality. Whether demonized as Satanic wasteland or exalted as salvific garden, nature persistently served anthropocentric ends, either as diabolical foil to grace or as mystical resource for Euro-American self-actualization. The land itself remained an ideological canvas, its material realities of soil compaction, species interdependence, and indigenous stewardship systematically obscured.

William Bradford's writing powerfully captures this foundational ambivalence:

Being thus passed the vast ocean, and a sea of troubles... they had no friends to welcome them... no towns to seek for succor... what could they see but a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men? And what multitudes there might be of them they knew not. (2003, p. 79)

This description crystallizes the Puritan settler's dilemma: Their monumental act of faith, such as transferring families across the Atlantic to establish a "New Eden", was met not with a welcoming paradise, but with terrifying and untamed wilderness. While Bradford's account reflects personal observation, it resonated deeply within the colonial worldview. As Devine notes, nature in early American literature was overwhelmingly perceived as "chaos, disorder, dangerous and immoral, as indeed was woman" (p. 13). This association of wilderness with malevolence and monstrosity (rather than pastoral harmony) reinforced a cultural imperative: Nature must be transformed, conquered, and reshaped by civilization and culture.

Puritan ideology largely retained these negative associations, equating "wildness" with inherent sinfulness. However, as Roderick Nash observes, the wilderness paradoxically served as "their salvation from a 'corrupting' European civilization" (1982, p. 35). This complex duality—nature as both threat and refuge—is vividly dramatized in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, where the forest embodies both dangerous lawlessness, and a sanctuary for Hester Prynne, thus becoming a physical manifestation of corruption and potential transcendence.

The Romantic Movement of the early 19th century actively rejected both the colonial conquest narrative and the Puritan duality. Writers like James Fenimore Cooper challenged the prevailing "Garden of Eden to be cultivated"/"virgin land to be conquered" ideologies, critiquing their inherent justification for human domination. In *The Pioneers* and the *Leatherstocking Tales*, Cooper instead depicted wilderness—epitomized by the untouched forests of his novels—as inherently good, pure, perfect, and the sole repository of true freedom, untainted by corrupt social institutions. Against a "civilization" portrayed as inherently corrupting, Cooper positioned his quintessential wilderness figure, Natty Bumppo. Natty embodies virtues like innocence, simplicity, honesty, and generosity, qualities presented not merely as personal attributes but as reflections of nature's own primordial essence. Romanticism thus presented nature as something to be protected, celebrated, and glorified as the essential arena for fulfilling humanity's spirit of freedom and adventure. Wilderness ceased to be a resource for exploitation (exploration for exotic things) or a force of evil to be vanquished (exorcised), becoming instead a sacred avenue toward beauty and personal integrity.

The prevailing Romantic view of nature in the 19th century, however, was not monolithic. Concurrently, a distinct movement, often termed the "gentility" and characterized by figures like Emerson and Thoreau, sought to elevate nature conceptually, aspiring to "make nature respectable" (Devine, 1992, p. 13). This movement found its most influential expression in New England transcendentalism, spearheaded by Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Emerson's seminal essay "Nature" (2003), considered the movement's central text, articulates a revolutionary thesis: "[T]he universe is composed of Nature and the Soul" (p. 486). For Emerson, nature functions as a vast symbolic system, a "grand metaphor of the human mind" and a material manifestation of the divine

spirit inherent in humanity. He describes this transformative relationship vividly: “Standing on the bare ground...—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all” (p. 488). This moment of transcendence underscores Emerson’s belief that nature possesses the unique alchemical power to transmute human perception, dissolving “meanness” (selfishness/materialism) and revealing divinity. He elevates nature as the purest source of moral and spiritual influence, advocating for direct intuition of an immanent God inherent in the natural world. Nature embodies absolute truth, beauty, and spirit. Crucially, Emerson demanded experiencing nature anew through unmediated, immersive contact. In stark contrast to earlier paradigms, the settlers’ “virgin land to be conquered” ideology or the Puritans’ vision of nature as a mysterious source of evil, Emerson posited nature as inherently good.

To contemporary sensibilities, Emerson’s vision often appears profoundly idealistic. He posits that perceiving nature through a spiritual lens actively generates its beneficent reality: We create nature in perceiving it through this lens. Yet, significant divergence existed even within transcendentalism. Emerson’s close associate, Henry David Thoreau, while sharing foundational beliefs, developed a distinct emphasis. For Thoreau in *Walden*, nature served primarily as a regenerative harbor, space for profound personal recuperation, reflection, and transformation. Nature was the vital “avenue toward” understanding and perfection, a means possessing a genuine restorative quality that offered direct confrontation with life’s meaning, rather than the ultimate end-state itself. Where Emerson saw nature primarily as a direct reflection of universal Spirit, Thoreau focused on its practical, experiential function in human renewal.

Moreover, contemporaries like Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville offered potent critiques of Transcendentalist optimism. While Emerson and Thoreau perceived nature as universally benevolent and truthful, Hawthorne and Melville valued its potential for ambiguity, indifference, or outright hostility. Melville, particularly in *Moby-Dick*, directly contested the notion of nature’s inherent goodness. Nature, for Melville, could be fearsome and destructive. Yet, this hostility became a crucible for testing human spirit, as embodied by Captain Ahab’s defiant, ultimately doomed resistance against the “vicious mood” of the natural world, a struggle that highlights nature’s potential to crush, but not necessarily humble, the defiant human will.

Melville presents a significantly more complex and paradoxical vision of nature than many of his contemporaries. This profound ambiguity finds its most potent expression in his dramatization of the great white whale, Moby Dick, and its obsessive pursuer, Captain Ahab. For Melville, nature embodies deep contradictions: The immense whale can simultaneously symbolize the terrifying, impersonal indifference or even overt hostility of the cosmos, yet also suggest the sublime reflection of a divine, inscrutable power. A similar duality characterizes Nathaniel Hawthorne’s conception of nature. Hawthorne consistently portrays nature as offering no inherent or reliable moral certainty, reflecting the ambiguity inherent in the human condition itself.

Crucially, both Melville and Hawthorne reject a simplistic understanding of nature as either wholly divine sanctuary or inherently malign force. Although Melville explores profound alienation within modernity and Hawthorne probes the pervasive realities of sin and human evil, neither ultimately finds nature—seemingly the sole refuge—to be purely redemptive or purely hostile. Instead, both authors insist on nature’s complex, dual potential: It encompasses both elements simultaneously.

Concepts of Nature in Nineteenth-Century Women Poets

While American conceptions of nature evolved significantly throughout the 19th century—transitioning from biblical frameworks to increasingly complex dialectics—the persistent tendency to frame the human-nature

relationship as a binary opposition (“man versus nature”) remained largely unaltered. Though Emerson’s idealistic vision represented a radical departure from prevailing ideologies which asserted nature as immanent divinity rather than adversary or resource, Transcendentalism’s contemporary influence proved marginal.¹ The full significance of Emerson’s *Nature* (2003) was recognized only retrospectively; it initially did little to establish his literary standing. Similarly, Thoreau’s *Walden* sold modestly during his lifetime, reflecting limited contemporary reach.

Despite the delayed reception of these canonical male voices, nuanced perspectives on nature steadily emerged through individual writers, often operating outside dominant trends. Among these, the work of poet Celia Thaxter offers a singular and resonant vision. Thaxter’s distinctive sensibility requires little comparative justification; its uniqueness stands compellingly on its own. This is powerfully illustrated by Perry Westbrook’s account of General A. W. Greely who, immediately after his Arctic rescue in 1884, traveled to Thaxter’s home on the Isles of Shoals to convey his crew’s profound gratitude. During their two-year isolation, Thaxter’s poem “The Tryst” had provided essential solace: “[It] tided over many a weary hour of our solitude... My companions especially like[d] your poem Tryst, which I read to them again and again” (Westbrook, 1951, p. 119).

This episode prompts critical inquiry: What could a “minor” poet offer men abandoned by both human society and a forbidding natural environment? Even more fundamentally, what solace could any poet provide under such extremes? While Shakespearean tragedy or Homeric epic, those that confront cosmic despair and relentless fate, might seem apt, the crew found profound sustenance in Thaxter. Her poetry’s capacity to provide deep comfort despite its thematic distance from existential catastrophe underscores its distinctive power, a voice uniquely attuned to the human need for reconciliation within, rather than dominion over, the natural world.

However, Thaxter’s poem itself powerfully illuminates this resonance. It articulates a vision of nature profoundly meaningful for men facing desperate circumstances and the Arctic Ocean’s implacable power. The poem, quoted fully by Westbrook, vividly portrays nature’s terrifying indifference:

At whose command? Who bade it sail the deep
 With that resistless force?
 Who made the dreadful appointment it must keep?
 Who traced its awful course?
 Was not the weltering waste of water wide,
 Enough for both to sail?
 What drew the two together over the tide,
 Fair ship and iceberg pale?
 ...
 She rushed upon ruin.
 Not a flash Broke up the waiting dark;
 Dully through wind and sea one awful crash
 Sounded, with none to mark. (1951, p. 2)

The poem starkly reveals a fundamental truth: Nature operates solely on its own terms, indifferent to human fate. The iceberg originates in the North and drifts southward, keeping a “dreadful appointment” not by design, but by the inherent laws of physics and ocean currents. The inevitable, tragic convergence of the “Fair ship and iceberg pale” leads to the ship’s destruction. While the poem’s title (“The Tryst”) and its questioning tone (“At whose command?”) evoke the possibility of a mysterious controlling force, Thaxter ultimately steers clear of

¹ According to Westbrook, the poem is included in *The Poems of Celia Thaxter*. He did not give further information about the book.

fatalism. Instead, she reiterates her core understanding: Nature possesses both benign and malign aspects, governed by its own inherent principles rather than human intention. The iceberg's formation and journey south are simple, impersonal natural phenomena, whereas its catastrophic encounter with the ship is an accident of circumstance, devoid of malice or purpose.

This perspective held profound solace for Greely's men. Stranded in brutal isolation, contemplating their own precarious existence amidst vast, incomprehensible forces, Thaxter's recognition of nature's fundamental neutrality resonated powerfully. The poem acknowledged the terrifying reality of capricious disaster (the ship's fate) without attributing it to divine wrath or malignant will. For such men, Thaxter offered two distinct paths: One could passively hope or wait for nature's benign mood to manifest, or far more crucially, one could actively cultivate enduring human virtues: confidence, courage, grace, and compassion, finding resilience within oneself despite the indifference without.

Thaxter's concept of nature as mechanistic and fundamentally indifferent to human fate represented a significant departure from dominant 19th-century views and strikingly anticipates the later philosophical perspective of American naturalists like Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Jack London. In this regard, we might position her as a significant, early forerunner of an American literary naturalism focused on nature's depiction.

This mechanistic and dualistic view is not merely asserted but performed through Thaxter's characteristic rhetorical strategy: the deliberate, often jarring juxtaposition of nature's benign and malign forces. A vivid illustration comes from her letter describing the ordeal of friends during a prairie hailstorm:

One night there was a dreadful storm... merciless storm... big hailstones beating them... Wasn't that cruel? ... But it was beautiful, pleasant days traveling... ground was covered with such lovely flowers... crimson and scarlet portulaca... wonderful kinds of cactus... (Thaxter, 1895, p. 18)

This conflation of descriptors like "dreadful", "merciless", "cruel", "beautiful", "lovely", and "wonderful" within a single, compact passage is a hallmark of her style. Such a collision of extremes prompts critical questions: Is this stylistic inconsistency—a flaw in her prose? Or does it serve a deeper conceptual purpose?

Given the pervasiveness of this tension throughout her work, both poetry and prose, it is highly plausible, indeed, central to her worldview, that Thaxter experienced an unflinching awareness of nature's capacity for ugliness and cruelty, yet this profound recognition fundamentally coexisted with, rather than extinguished, her powerful perception of its beauty and kindness. The mechanistic indifference she perceived operated alongside its potential for both destruction and exuberant life.

The second and third stanzas of Celia Thaxter's famous poem "Land-Locked" powerfully captured her dual fascination with nature: an intense yearning for the sublime power of the sea, tempered by an appreciation for terrestrial beauty:

O happy river, could I follow thee!
 O yearning heart, that never can be still!
 O wistful eyes, that watch the steadfast hill,
 Longing for level line of solemn sea!
 Have patience; here are flowers and songs of birds,
 Beauty and fragrance, wealth of sound and sight,
 All summer's glory thine from morn to night,
 And life too full of joy for uttered words. (Walker, 1992, p. 294)

This passionate oscillation between the grand and the gentle distinguishes Thaxter among her contemporaries. As Bennett observes, while Thaxter “rejoiced in the flora and fauna which the ocean sustained, she was keenly aware of how quickly the sea could turn on those who made their living by it” (Bennett, 1998, p. 206). Her unsentimental acknowledgment of nature’s peril forged a perspective that avoids naiveté in favor of a mature philosophy shaped by lifelong observation (p. 206).

This duality aligns her thematically with Herman Melville’s recognition of nature’s ambivalence. Where Melville often constructs an existential confrontation between humanity and an inscrutable natural world, Thaxter portrays nature’s contradictions as inherent and unmediated, neither hostile nor benevolent, but simply present. Similarly, while New England transcendentalists filtered nature through idealized metaphysics, Thaxter’s work grounds itself in empirical reverence for its actual, often capricious, manifestations.

Her clearest articulation of this outlook emerges in “Wherefore”. After narrating one ship consumed by an iceberg and another narrowly avoiding catastrophe by veering “out of its track”, Thaxter pointedly rejects the notion of divine partiality:

And do not tell me the Almighty master
Would work a miracle to save the one,
And yield the other up to dire disaster,
Be merely human justice thus undone! (Bennett, 1998, p. 209)

In these moments, Thaxter moves beyond mere realistic description to articulate a philosophical stance derived from her extensive observation of nature’s indiscriminate destruction: human lives, birds, flowers, ships—all subject to its indifferent force. Her fundamental point is this: Nature embodies neither the Transcendentalists’ pervasive benevolence (“overblessed”) nor the Puritans’ inherent malevolence (“lessblessed”). Nature operates solely by its own immutable, amoral laws. For Thaxter, the disasters visited upon humans—storm-wrecked ships, crushing ice, destructive hail—serve as potent, unambiguous evidence of a mechanistic nature, devoid of feeling and ultimately beyond even the “Almighty Master’s” control.

Crucially, this mechanistic indifference manifests equally in nature’s beauty and its terror. Just as it unleashes storms, icebergs, blizzards, and hail, it also bestows sunshine, blue skies, vibrant flowers, gentle breezes, idyllic landscapes, and the sea’s solemn, magnificent calm. Thaxter neither glorifies nor condemns nature; she meticulously observes and structurally balances this inherent dualism in both her poetry and prose.

This balanced depiction is vividly apparent in the opening stanzas of “Betrothed”:

Softly the flickering firelight comes and goes;
The warm glow flashes, sinks, departs, returns,
And shows me where the delicate red rose
In the tall, slender vase of crystal burns.
The tempest beats without. The hush within
Is sweeter for the turmoil of night;
Ice clatters at the pane and snow-flakes spin
A web of woven storm, a shroud of white. (Bennett, 1998, p. 212)

Here, the tender domestic scene (“flickering firelight”, “delicate red rose”) exists *alongside*, indeed heightened *by contrast with*, the “tempest”, “ice”, “snow-flakes”, “web of woven storm”, and “shroud of white” raging outside, a microcosm of Thaxter’s vision: contrasting manifestations of the same indifferent, mechanical force.

The two stanzas of “Betrothed” present not only a thematic contrast (interior comfort vs. exterior storm) but also achieve an aesthetic balance through carefully mirrored diction and imagery. Opposing word pairs (“comes”/“goes,” “hush”/“turmoil”), juxtaposed images (“firelight”/“night,” “delicate red rose”/“snow-flakes”), and symbolic representations of vitality and mortality, all contribute to this composed dualism. Crucially, Thaxter avoids creating significant tension from these contrasts. This point reveals the core distinction between her philosophy of nature and Melville’s. Where Melville finds profound (often negative) meaning in the confrontation between humanity and nature, Thaxter presents humans situated amidst nature’s inherent, conflicting phases, her perspective implying: This is nature’s essential character: amoral and indifferent.

Alternative Perspectives: Female Contemporaries and the Revisionist Project

Thaxter’s nuanced view distinguishes her considerably from many contemporary women poets. Helen Hunt Jackson’s “Tidal Waves”, for instance, personifies the sea through blatant *pathos*, depicting it as an intentionally sadistic entity whose purpose is destruction:

Sudden from the vast bewildered sea,
 Fierce tidal waves, like unchained monsters, break:
 In cruel clutch the mightiest ships they take,
 Tossing them high in fiendish jubilee;
 Leaving them far inland, stranded hopelessly,
 Worse wrecks than sharpest rock or reef can make. (Bennett, 1998, p. 173)

Jackson’s sea is not merely powerful but consciously vicious and malevolent, a “cruel” actor taking “fiendish jubilee” in destruction. While both poets acknowledge the sea’s destructive capacity, Jackson’s rhetoric (“fierce”, “monsters”, “cruel”, “fiendish”, “jubilee”) employs aggressive pathetic fallacy, framing nature as an intentional, hostile adversary, a stance fundamentally alien to Thaxter’s worldview. This stark difference underscores Thaxter’s importance: She successfully transcended the dominant polarities of her time, namely nature as entirely beneficent as for some transcendentalists or inherently hostile as implied by Puritanism and Jackson, to portray a nature defined by dispassionate, mechanistic forces beyond human moral frameworks.

Though Thaxter’s mechanistic view of nature holds distinct significance for modern readers, it represented a strikingly uncommon, even unique, perspective in 19th-century America. The dominant trend among many women poets at the time was to depict nature through conventions of tranquility, purity, bounty, beauty, and even sensuality. Poets like Frances Sargent Osgood, Lucy Larcom, and Alice Cary exemplify this prevailing mode; their nature poetry consistently centers on the irresistible beauty of natural forms, employing recurring images such as the rose, lily, daisy, and tranquil lake.

Osgood’s “The Lily’s Delusion” opens with this characteristic serene imagery:

A cold, calm star look’d out of heaven,
 And smiled upon a tranquil lake,
 Where, pure as angel’s dream at even,
 A lily lay but half awake. (Bennett, 1998, p. 65)

Similarly, Larcom’s “Wild Roses of Cape Ann”, while celebrating a more vigorous wildness, ultimately situates it within a framework of divine benevolence and healing purity:

Wild roses of Cape Ann! A rose is sweet,
 No matter where it grows; and roses grow,

Nursed by the pure heavens and the strengthening earth,
 Wherever men will let them.
 Every waste and solitary place is glad for them...
 But our wild roses, flavored with the sea,
 And colored by the salt winds and much sun,
 To healthiest intensity of bloom,—
 We think the world has none so beautiful.
 Even from his serious height, the Puritan
 Stooped to their fragrance... (Bennett, 1998, p. 118)

While often romantic in tone, the nature representations of Osgood, Larcom, and Cary mark a distinct departure from the core tenets of the American Romantic Movement. Transcendentalist Romanticism typically glorified wild nature as embodying the promise of ultimate freedom and untamed spirit. Critically, its framework remained bound by Western metaphysical binaries, defining nature only in relation to human pursuits and projections. These poets, conversely, shifted the focus: They depict nature primarily for itself, based on close observation and perception, rather than as symbolic of the human-nature relationship.

Osgood crafts a vision of nature as idyllic serenity: The “tranquil lake”, “angel’s dream”, and “lily half awake” conjure an image of innate purity, peace, loveliness, and innocence, a restorative “sleeping beauty”. Larcom celebrates nurturing harmony, bestowing positive attributes on all elements: heaven (“pure”), earth (“strengthening”), humanity represented by the appreciating Puritan (“Stooped to their fragrance”), and, especially, the rose—the ultimate expression of collaborative natural beauty, “nursed by the pure heavens and the strengthening earth”, “flavored with the sea”, and “colored by the salt winds and much sun”. Larcom presents a potent idyllic landscape whose compelling beauty irresistibly draws individuals.

Alice Cary’s “Summer and Winter” reinforces this focus on nature’s cyclical autonomy, though with slight dissonant undertones:

The winter goes and the summer comes,
 The cloud descends in warm, wet showers;
 The grass grows green where the frost has been,
 And waste and wayside are fringed with flowers.
 The winter goes, and the summer comes,
 And the merry blue-birds twitter and trill,
 And the swallow swings his steel-blue wings,
 This way and that way, at wildest will. (Bennett, 1998, p. 91)

Cary’s theme resonates partially with Thaxter’s core principle: She portrays nature governed by immutable seasonal laws (“The winter goes and the summer comes”). However, her lens is fundamentally aesthetic: The focus remains on the observable beauty resulting from this cycle (“green grass”, “fringed with flowers”, “merry blue-birds”)—aligning her much more closely with Osgood’s and Larcom’s appreciative stance than with Thaxter’s unsentimental, mechanistic detachment. A subtle tension exists: The inherent agency implied by nature’s processes (“cloud descends”, “grass grows”, birds act “at wildest will”) contrasts quietly with the surface impression of simple, beautiful inevitability emphasized by the repetitive, rhythmic structure and pleasing imagery.

While acknowledging nature’s beauty is commonplace in international nature writing, such recognition carried distinctive significance in 19th-century America, emerging only gradually within our own century. The relative uniqueness of this perspective in the U.S. context underscores its intellectual courage and literary merit,

exemplified by Thaxter and the aforementioned poets. Prevailing American views persistently framed nature as a polarized force: an adversary embodying wilderness “evil” or a passive reflection of divine benevolence. Against this backdrop, representing nature not symbolically, but with its intrinsic complexities, neither wholly hostile nor purely beneficent, constituted a significant challenge to dominant ideologies.

Within this challenge, Thaxter stands as a pivotal figure, arguably the first prominent voice to assert nature’s fundamental indifference: its actions governed by inherent whims and laws, utterly detached from human aspirations or emotions. Her signature artistic achievement lies in the unsentimental equilibrium with which she portrays nature—beautiful and brutal, generative and destructive. This balanced realism renders her strikingly modern to contemporary readers. Therefore, the 19th-century project of re-envisioning nature as an autonomous system, distinct from human projections of morality or divinity, advanced significantly through the collective efforts of women poets, with Thaxter making a particularly profound contribution through her mechanistic detachment and refusal to idealize.

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