

# Loathsome Insects and the Glistening Webs: Reflections of God's Character and Religious Authority in Natural Imagery in Early American Literature

Kaela Sue Loriz

*Colorado State University-Pueblo*

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the shift in views toward God and religious authority in Colonial America via a corresponding change in the use of natural imagery in literature. Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, there was a departure from the Puritanical Angry God model in favor of the Mechanic God model. In literature, this change is mirrored in a shift from violent, animal imagery to poetic descriptions of the environment. This argument aims to demonstrate how the spiritual ideologies of Colonial American authors manifest themselves in the authors' illustrations of the natural world.

Colonial America experienced an ideological shift from the belief in an angry God who condemned sinners in violent ways, to a mechanic God, who designed and created the natural world without post-creation intervention. A parallel in the natural imagery used in the time's literature echoes that change in ideology. Writers who subscribed to the angry God model employed violent animal imagery while those who embraced the mechanic or spectator God utilized softer, poetic descriptions of landscapes. With the ideological transition to Transcendentalist and Romantic thought, there is an undeniable spike in the use of positive natural imagery, which reinforces these movements' beliefs in the divine self and divine nature. For many writers in this time, God was the divine self and the natural world, so an observable rise in nature imagery in the literature of the time is unsurprising. While said imagery is relatively devoid of the violence and dehumanization of that seen in the Angry God era, the natural imagery in the Transcendentalist and Romantic Periods is—when not a clear ode to the divine nature—characterized by a gloomy foreboding that likely corresponds to the authors' critiques and distrust of human institutions. It is important to note that during this same time frame, many authors are beginning to dabble in fiction, a style rarely explored in colonial literature. This genre poses a challenge to interpreting authorial intent or belief, as he or she is creating a new world and new characters to tell a story, rather than using existing settings and real people to recount events. With that said, the religious views of the Transcendentalists and Romantics are translated in their writings, and a focused reading reveals these parallels.

In Bartolomé de la Casas's "The Very Brief Relation of the Devastation of the Indies," the writer, priest, and bishop denounces the conquests of his countrymen in Hispaniola. His devoutness is implied by his offices, but the language that he uses also suggests that sin shapes his view of the world. This is evident in his description of the pearl divers' plight: "Often a pearl diver does not return to the surface, for these waters are infested with man-eating sharks of two kinds, both vicious marine animals that can kill, eat, and swallow a whole man" (de las Casas 39). The violent animal imagery that de las Casas employs here is coupled with concern over sin: "These pearl divers perish without the holy sacraments" (de las Casas 39). First Nations Peoples, who did not convert or subscribe to the Spaniards' Catholicism—not having been baptized, receiving communion, nor partaking in confession—were damned in the eyes of de las Casas.

Despite de las Casas's recognition of the Native Americans' struggles, he also describes them using animal imagery in a manner that dehumanizes them: "The hair of these pearl divers...hangs down their backs making them look like sea dogs or monsters of another species" (de las Casas 39). Perhaps this imagery is only meant to aid the reader in understanding what the Spaniards put the Native Americans through, but it could also be reflective of the bishop's view of native, non-Christians being condemned because of their differing spiritual ideologies. The description of the violent sharks and the writer's concern over sin, when combined with his perception of a meddling God who damns sinners, suggests that his ideology may have influenced his use of imagery.

While de las Casas recognized the mistreatment of the First Nations Peoples as a gross abuse of power and denial of human rights, Mary Rowlandson did not view these same indigenous people as kindly. In her work, "A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Row-

landson,” she uses animal imagery to establish a religiously biased metaphor: “So many Christians lying in their blood, some here, and some there, like a company of sheep torn by wolves” (Rowlandson 237). In this comparison, establishing Christians as sheep—an animal with innocent biblical connotations—and the non-Christian Native Americans as wolves—violent, carnivorous creatures traditionally only associated with violence and evil—Rowlandson likens the attack to an animalistic slaughter. She continues to dehumanize the indigenous peoples, representing them as heathen animals, referring to them as “black creatures” (238). Her use of animal imagery has already implied an angry deity, but the following quote substantiates the importance of sin and the reality of divine intervention in her relationship with her God: “It was easy for me to see how righteous it was with God to cut off the thread of my life and cast me out of His presence forever” (239). For Mary Rowlandson, trials and tribulations were brought upon a person by this angry God in response to sin. Good Christians were part of the flock while sinners and non-Christians were reduced to animalistic beasts.

In “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” Jonathan Edwards uses violent, negative animal imagery that reinforces the temperament of his angry God, perhaps to an even greater degree than Rowlandson did in her captivity narrative. Early on in the piece, Edwards refers to “greedy, hungry lions,” and the animal imagery continues to induce fear (427). In a description of his God, Edwards writes, “The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked” (431). This excerpt establishes not only violent insect imagery, but also attests to a vicious God who is incensed by sin, as the “dreadfully provoked” comment suggests (431). Leaving this arachnoid metaphor behind him, Edwards turns to reptilian comparisons: “You are ten thousand times more abominable in His eyes than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours” (431). An earlier reference to the serpent appears: “The old serpent is gaping for them; hell opens its mouth wide to receive them” (427). Hell itself is like the jaws of a snake, in the way Edwards chooses to describe it, and it is ready to consume every individual not conforming to Christian practices.

This sentiment becomes clearer still when he states that “Every unconverted man properly belongs to hell” (427). The divine condemnation towards humanity and sin that Edwards promotes here is reiterated by his repeated use of the poisonous snake, an unsavory creature with a history of negative associations and satanic imagery.

While Edwards’s later work alludes to an angrier God with more negative descriptions of animals and nature, imagery in his earlier writings, namely “The Spider Letter,” is reflective of a kinder Creator. This piece, though talking about spiders as he does in “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” is in stark contrast to the later work, which mirrors the change in Edwards’s ideology to the vengeful God model. In the letter, a younger Edwards rhapsodizes on the wonders of the spider’s abilities: “I have seen vast multitudes of little shining webs and glistening strings, brightly reflecting the sunbeams, and some of them of a great length, and at such a height that one would think that they were tacked to the vault of the heavens, and would be burnt like tow in the sun, making a very pleasing as well as surprising appearance” (“The Spider Letter” 1). The awe that Edwards expresses in his musings on cobwebs is not one of horror or fear, but a genuinely positive fascination. In fact, Edwards is seeing the divine in the beauty of nature, a concept

that aligns itself more so with the Age of Reason's God than the Puritanical deity that Edwards ultimately chooses. As he continues, Edwards discusses the spiders, "from whose glistening webs so much of the wisdom of the Creator shines" ("The Spider Letter" 4). The reference to "Creator," and the idea that natural properties of the spider's web are responsible for the multifaceted refraction of God's wisdom, suggests that in this piece, Edwards has a spiritual relationship that is less focused on sin and divine interference than that of the Puritan relationship to their angry God. The tone of "The Spider Letter," and the beautiful, poetic imagery that Edwards associates with the arachnid, are indicative of a far more positive perception of his God's character.

Edwards's interest in divine design shares similarities to the views of Benjamin Franklin, who viewed God as a mechanic who designed but did not interfere with the natural world. In "To Those Who Would Remove to America," Franklin illustrates what can be expected from a new life in the colonies. While he does mention religion briefly at times, the tone of his descriptions of the natural environment, rather than those of animals, correspond to the characteristics of his God model. In introducing this new ideological figure, Franklin states, "The people have a saying, that God Almighty is Himself a mechanic, the greatest in the universe" (464). As he continues, the founding father promotes the loamy plots available to immigrants, claiming, "The property of an hundred acres of fertile soil full of wood may be obtained near the frontiers" (465). Rather than being shackled in thorny roots of hell or held in some purgatory lest your God predetermines your worth to be deserving of that land, Franklin's earth is simply there and ready for use. His mechanic designed and created it but has had a *laissez-faire* relationship with its inhabitants since, and Franklin's description of the land reflects that simplicity. The discussion of fertility is also a significantly more positive qualifier of the terrain than those associated with an angry God. The positivity continues as he recites the innate qualities of the colonial environment: "From the salubrity of the air, the healthiness of the climate, the plenty of good provisions... the increase of inhabitants by natural generation is very rapid in America" (465). The positive characteristics of Franklin's natural world are not bound to or dependent upon his God's view of humanity, God simply brought them into existence.

Like Franklin, Thomas Jefferson examined the wonders of the natural world and his Spectator God in his writing, with a focus on descriptions of landscapes rather than animals. Like the mechanic, the Spectator does not have a hand in interfering with humanity or the nature that Jefferson describes in "Notes on the State of Virginia." He writes, "This painful sensation is relieved by a short, but pleasing view of the Blue ridge...the sensation becomes delightful in the extreme" (658). While he begins with perhaps a more negative tone and a discussion of pain, Jefferson is clearly presenting the natural world in positive light and proceeds to show the joy that the beauty of the natural world brings. He continues, "It is impossible for the emotions, arising from the sublime, to be felt beyond what they are here: so beautiful an arch, so elevated, so light, and springing, as it were, up to heaven, the rapture of the Spectator is really indescribable" (658).

The emotional experience that Jefferson recounts is resultant from the design of his Spectator. Ann Eliza Bleecker is in good company with Jefferson, as she too expresses awe toward the "labors of God" that she sees in the natural world within her poetry (721). Bleecker begins the poem "On the Immensity of Creation" by stating, "Oh! could I borrow some celestial plume"

(721). This demonstrates her interest in astronomy, which—when combined with her birth into a wealthy merchant family—suggests that she is of a rationalist mindset. While it is difficult to find an explicit reference to her religious views, her understandings of astronomy and physics suggest a favorable view of the divine design and mechanic ideological model. She questions humanity's importance in this natural world, arguing that a human being is, "No more than a small atom to the sandy shore" or "A drop of water to a boundless sea" (721). Sin is not discussed here, and the environment is shown in a positive light. The natural world is incontrovertibly important to Bleeker, but her discussions of the physical world implies that humanity has such an insignificant role in its greater design that God would not be interested in interfering with human fate.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, like many of his contemporaries, placed all spiritual import on the self and the natural world, believing that social institutions corrupt the *tabula rasa*, and by extension, the innate goodness of the human being. In *Nature*, he writes extensively on the titular subject: "Nature never became a toy to a wise spirit. The flowers, the animals, the mountains, reflected all the wisdom of his best hour, as much as they had delighted the simplicity of his childhood" (Emerson 1112). This excerpt from "Chapter I" is doubly demonstrative, showing the divine self and the divine nature that follow Emerson's Transcendentalist ideology. By referencing the "wise spirit," he establishes the thoughtful, divine self as the Transcendental God, and revisits the ways that this model sees the divine in nature, which, in the circuitry of his piece, helps return the individual back to the innocence found in childhood.

Not unlike the Transcendentalists, Romantics also emphasized that importance of the self and nature, which displayed a distrust of human systems. They differed in their desire to elicit an emotional response from their readers. Edgar Allen Poe showed more characteristics of atheism than other writers, but his wariness of human constructs is, arguably, a more important indicator of the type of ideology that the latter portion of this paper is dealing with. A rejection of human systems can easily be extrapolated to a rejection of religious orthodoxy. Poe's dark references to nature appear to be reflections of his negative views towards religion. In "The Fall of the House of Usher," he repeatedly uses nature imagery, many of which could be seen as critiques of organized religion: "During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone" (Poe 1553). Poe proves time and again that he is remarkably skilled at painting a portrait of lugubrious doom, and this short story is no exception. Nature seems, though, to be associated with death and decomposition here to an extreme degree. Perhaps he was attempting to adopt a particular vernacular, but Poe's use of "heavens" and "oppressively low" hanging clouds rather than sky appears to be a critique of religious superiority and control. As a Romantic, Poe had masterful diction which he used to trigger reactions. With this in mind, it is hard to imagine that his word choices in this selection were not deliberate. The narrator continues to describe "a few white trunks of decayed trees" (Poe 1553). When combined with the critiques of politics, religion, and society that exist in his writing, it is difficult to escape the symbolic power of the color that Poe has assigned to the trees. Whiteness, historically associated with religious purity and sociopolitical superiority, is disintegrating before the readers' eyes, as Poe simultaneously makes scathing criticisms of monarchy and the Church. He is figuratively dissolving white nationalist, classist,

and religious ideologies through his literal use of nature imagery.

In “Shiloh,” Herman Melville examines the toll of the American Civil War and of warfare. Instances of both animal and environmental imagery can be found in the poem:

“The swallows fly low

Over the field in clouded days...

...Over the field where April rain

Solaced the parched ones stretched in pain” (Melville 2464).

The imagery here is working in a few different ways and, as is often the case in exceptional literature, is open to a multitude of varying interpretations. The vision of birds hovering over a field of battered bodies is an ominous one that draws the reader’s attention to Melville’s critique of war. The field itself, being set in such close proximity to the church, is also a natural image which Melville is manipulating to powerful effect, in what is a doubled criticism of religion and war. Additionally, the field, being both in such close proximity to the church and speckled with dying soldiers who are lyrically likened to gravestones,<sup>1</sup> functions as a cemetery. One of the many ironies within this poem is that these victims of fratricide find comfort neither in religion nor in that church in their final moments, but in the rain. This further cements the notion of divinity in nature that so many intellectuals at the time shared.

An evaluation of early American literature between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries reveals texts that are rich in descriptions of both the natural world and varying perceptions of a higher power or religious authority. These threads can be examined independently. However, a joint analysis shows a correlation between these two ideas, and while correlation does not confirm causation, the trends mirrored in these changes are important to note. If this observed underscoring of religious belief through the use of natural imagery is not a contrived imagination, it suggests that spiritual ideologies influence more than an individual’s views towards religion. These ideologies pervade the stylistic choices that writers make in describing the natural world and other facets of their existence. Furthermore, if the past is any predictor of the future, personal ideologies almost certainly still influence the ways that writers choose to express their work today.

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1. Namely, the use of the words “parched” and “stretched” are eerily suggestive of dry stones rising out of the ground in commemoration of the fallen.

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