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The thesis of Gail B. Cooke entitled
The Value of Nature in Modern American Culture

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The Value of Nature in Modern American Culture

A Thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies

By

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Abstract

Our modern high-tech industrial society alienates Americans from nature. From the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, Americans have looked to nature not only as a means of escaping these demands and seeking solitude, but also as a source of spiritual renewal inspiring us with its wonder and mysteries, heightening our sensory awareness, giving us perspective and helping us feel connected.

American artists turn to nature to gain perspective and seek inspiration for their expressions. I have explored the creative productions of contemporary American writers, painters, poets and filmmakers to find examples of nature’s ability to inspire, produce wonder, provide mystery, heighten sensory awareness, and offer perspective.

I have found the writings of Dillard, Oliver, Snyder, Roethke, and Harjo provide wonderful examples of the value of nature. The paintings of O’Keefe, Frankenthaler and de Kooning are also representative of the importance of nature to their lives and their work. In addition, the contemporary films, Field of Dreams, Dances With Wolves and The Gods Must Be Crazy also exemplify nature’s values.

Nature is an integral part of our lives and a source of enrichment that is invaluable. It brings relief from the stress of our high-tech society, nourishes our souls and inspires us with its wonder and mysteries.
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I. Introduction

Today's fast paced society, with its rapid development and technology, has sped our existence up to a level of stress that is almost debilitating. We not only have the telephone to contend with, but the fax, the answering machine, Email and now cellular phones. We are on-call 24 hours a day. From the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, Americans have looked to nature not only as a means of escaping these demands and seeking solitude, but also as a source of spiritual renewal, inspiring us with its wonder and mysteries, heightening our sensory awareness, giving us perspective and helping us feel connected.

Searching for a way to enhance their own lives by creating perspective, and seeking inspiration, American artists have turned to nature as a source of expression and rejuvenation. The artists' pursuit is a reflection of the individual in society seeking a more valuable existence by looking for meaning in the natural world. How valuable are these lessons that nature presents to us? Can we learn how best to survive the progress of humankind by observing the life choices and struggles of the animal and plant kingdoms in nature?

Our dialogue with nature is ongoing. It has not begun with modern technology; rather, it has been reshaped by the pressures of modern technology. Lynn White says that our acceptance of the "Baconian creed that scientific knowledge means technological power over nature. . . . as a normal pattern of action may mark the greatest
event in human history since the invention of agriculture.” (4-5) The way we view ourselves in relation to nature, whether we see ourselves as an integrated part of it, or whether we view ourselves outside of it, whether we see ourselves as superior or equal, are all aspects of how we value nature and how we express that value in our lives.

This paper will examine representative American artists, writers, painters and filmmakers, from the later 20th century, who have given artistic expression to the value of nature. Primary examples can be found in the writings of Annie Dillard, Mary Oliver, Theodore Roethke, Joy Harjo and Gary Snyder. In addition, the paintings of such diverse artists as Georgia O’Keeffe, Helen Frankenthaler, and William de Kooning, and films such as Field of Dreams, Dances With Wolves and The Gods Must Be Crazy, as exhibiting meaningful expressions of nature’s values.
II. The Value of Nature

Nature, for humankind, has always been at the core of our existence and our definition of self. Nature is our place of origin. In the Old Testament book of Genesis we are told that God creates man from the soil, “the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground,” (Gen. 2:7) Theodore Roethke's poem “Genesis,” is an expression of this origin:

This elemental force
Was wrested from the sun;
A river's leaping source
Is locked in narrow bone. (17)

He regards the very core, the "elemental force," of our being as coming from a primal source. The "force" or power of our life comes from nature. The action of the "river's leaping source" being "locked in [our] narrow bone" conveys the deep connection that humankind has to nature. The power and force of nature is embedded in the very core of our bones. This view of Genesis integrates humankind and nature. The more traditional interpretation of Genesis keeps man as separate and superior.

William de Kooning also takes inspiration from Genesis.

In Genesis, it is said that in the beginning was the void and God acted upon it. For an artist that is clear enough. It is so mysterious that it takes away all doubt. (De Kooning, 1)

For de Kooning, an artist starts from the same point, an origin of void, the empty space of a canvas which he then “fills . . . with an attitude . . . [t]he attitude never comes from
himself alone.” (Ibid., 13) De Kooning is talking about his own attitude towards, and his relationship with, the void and with humankind. (As the *Tao* says, “[t]he things of the world originate in being, [a]nd being originates in nonbeing.” [Ch. 40]) He is traveling the same line between origin and the present that Snyder and we travel when contemplating our life, its origin and our relationship to the world of nature.

According to the book of Genesis, after God created Adam he “put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.” (Gen. 2:15) Genesis is beginning to give us a definition for ourselves in relation to nature. In Genesis 1:28, God says to humankind, “[b]e fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” Later, in Genesis 15:20, we are told that “man gave names to . . . every animal of the field.” This unquestionably gives man superior reign and control over nature, raising him above and separating him from nature.

Lynn White describes an early Christian concept of natural theology, “[t]he religious study of nature for the better understanding of God.” (11) She says that “[i]n the early Church . . . nature was conceived primarily as a symbolic system through which God speaks to men: the ant is a sermon to sluggards; rising flames are the symbol of the soul’s aspiration.” (Ibid.) This “natural” view of religion started to change with man’s exploration into scientific discovery. Suddenly nature was no longer a
revelation of God’s communion with man, or as White puts it, “[natural theology] was ceasing to be the decoding of the physical symbols of God’s communication with man and was becoming the effort to understand God’s mind by discovering how his creation operates.” (Ibid.) Nature then became something to be explored, prodded, and eventually manipulated and exploited, for the benefit of man’s knowledge and supposedly the betterment of humankind. Oddly, this reminds me of the story of Adam and Eve eating from the forbidden tree of knowledge. God says, “[y]ou may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.” (Gen. 1:15) It is a story we would be wise to remember in our quest for “knowledge” least we not destroy that which we are intend to know.

God gives further caution to humankind in Deuteronomy 9:6 when he says “[k]now, then that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land to occupy because of your righteousness; for you are a stubborn people.” The intention behind this proclamation is to compel the people to respect God and his wishes. Or, looked at another way, we should respect that which God has made and given to us for safe keeping.

As we struggle with this concept of self in relation to nature and discover the inadequacies of our current ideas and vocabulary, we have turned to more ancient
disciplines for guidance. Our Western dualistic approach to life tends to be less amenable to the realization of our inherent desire to touch, penetrate, and be influenced by the power of nature. Lynn White says that, “[n]o new set of basic values has been accepted in our society to displace those of Christianity . . . [h]ence we shall continue to have a worsening ecological crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man.” (14) However, Christopher Manes says that “Alan Drengson . . . has established the Ecostery Project, which hopes to revive a medieval social form: monasteries whose purpose is to promote an understanding of, reverence for, and dialogue with nature.” (25) This is the difficult path we travel: how do we shift our perspective, change some values and keep others? Do we need to, as Lynn White hints, “displace” our Christian values, or do we need to re-evaluate how we have come to define those values? To this end, we are now looking towards Native American and Eastern cultures for guidance.

In Native American cultures we find a belief that man comes from nature, but it is a creation myth that maintains man’s integration with nature and does not set up the duality that exists in our Jewish or Christian beliefs. As Christopher Manes points out, “[n]ature is silent in our culture in the sense that the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative.” (15) (One way that our culture gives voice to nature is through poetry. The actualization of that voice in
poems like “Prayer for the Great Family,” by Gary Snyder is what makes poetry an enduring voice in our culture.) For animistic cultures, however, since their creation stories do not separate man as something superior to nature, but rather equate him with nature, the voice of nature is part of man. Therefore, when we encounter creation stories like that of the Navajo who believe that

The white ear of corn had become the man, the yellow ear the woman, First Man and First Woman. It was the wind that gave them life, and it is the wind that comes out of our mouths now that gives us life. When this ceases to blow, we die. (Erdoes, “Creation of First Man and First Woman,” 40)

we can see that the very essence of humankind is nature. Not only is the physical part of man a direct development of plant life, but the physical force of nature, the wind, is the energy behind life. Giving wind the power of life force makes a culture more respectful of that wind. For a culture with this belief, polluting the wind is polluting life; there is no separation, but direct cause and effect.

Christopher Manes points out that, “[t]o regard nature as alive and articulate has consequences in the realm of social practices.” (15) There is an anonymous speech entitled, “How Can One Sell The Air?” that beautifully describes the Native American connection to nature.
We are part of the earth and the earth is a part of us. The fragrant flowers are our sisters... the great eagle our brothers... [t]he foamy crests of waves in the river, the sap of meadow flowers, the pony’s sweat and the man’s sweat is all one and the same race, our race. So when the Great Chief in Washington sends word that he wants to buy our land, he asks a great deal of us. (N. pag.)

This speech not only conveys the Native American connection to nature, but reveals European man’s objectification of nature in his offer to “buy” the land.

The profound connection between man and nature can also be found in the Yuma tradition. They believe the Creator, or “All-Father” rose from the waters to create the earth and then “[o]ut of mud he shaped a being... it moved, it walked it was alive: it was a man.” (Erdoes, 78) The Jicarilla Apache believe that “[i]n the beginning the earth was covered with water, and all living things were below in the underworld. Then people could talk, the animals could talk, the trees could talk, and the rocks could talk.” (Ibid., 83) Man was seen as equal to trees and animals; all had voices. In this Jicarilla Apache myth, it is the desire to live above ground, or below ground, that separates creatures, rather than some inherent superiority of humankind over other animals and plants. These beliefs bind these cultures to nature in a way that is far removed from our predominant American cultural belief that nature is here for our good and our use.

If we are to survive, we must learn to value nature. We must learn to listen to those who value nature and give voice to that value. When the anonymous
speaker of "How Can We Sell the Air?" spoke to the United States Government, he expressed the ultimate ecological truth that our politicians and big business want to deny and that is that:

All things are bound together. All things connect. What happens to the Earth happens to the children of the Earth. Man has not woven the web of life. He is but one thread. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself. (N. pag.)

If we truly want to have a dialogue with nature then, as Manes says, "we must contemplate not only learning a new ethics, but a new language free from the directionalities of humanism, a language that incorporates a decentered, postmodern, post-humanist perspective." (17) To that end, we can turn to the poetry of Joy Harjo who admonishes us in her poem "Remember" to:

Remember the earth whose skin you are:
red earth, black earth, yellow earth, white earth
brown earth, we are earth.
Remember the plants, trees, animal life who all have their tribes, their families, their histories, too. Talk to them, listen to them. They are alive poems.
Remember the wind. Remember her voice. She knows the origin of this universe. . . .

Remember that you are this universe and that this universe is you. (emphasis added) (40)
Harjo gives us the language to redefine ourselves and our values. In “Remember,” she gives us a perspective that is crucial to our understanding and this is our unquestionable connection to nature and our origin.

Our origin beliefs are crucial to our existence and the way we define ourselves and our universe. Therefore, our turning to nature can enhance our feeling of connectedness. When we ask ourselves who we are in relation to nature and where we are in the great scheme of things, the way we answer becomes the decisive point in that valuation. If we remove ourselves from society’s identifications (such as teacher, daughter, parent, voter, consumer) and immerse ourselves in a nature setting where we find ourselves between, or more poignantly a part of, heaven and earth then our sense of self changes. Society’s definition leaves us feeling fragmented and splintered in many directions at once. By allowing nature to be part of our definition, we can reconnect to a deeply personal and, at the same time, expansive and universal concept of self.

Another religion that offers insight into the human connection to nature is that of the Tao. Robert Henricks in his introduction to the Te-Tao Ching says that:
for any individual flower (a) to be what it can be--
for a sunflower to realize its “sunfloweriness,” its
genetic makeup; and (b) to live out is natural
lifespan . . . , there is only one requirement that must
be met--it must keep its roots firmly planted in the
soil . . . But this is precisely what humans do not do
. . . something happens to people as individuals (and
to societies as a whole) as they grow up such that as
adults that are “uprooted” and have lost touch with
the Way. (xxvi-xxvii)

In today’s society, we have trouble keeping our “roots firmly planted in the soil” in both a
literal and a figurative sense. The mobility and technological life style of today’s
American is such that our children no longer know their cousins or grandparents and we
no longer know our neighbors. Our environmentally controlled homes and offices and
our means of transportation work to keep us literally removed from our roots, i.e., nature.
The importance of escaping the environmentally controlled environment to touch the
Earth and gain a little solitude while communing with nature and renewing our spirits is
not an option but a necessity, at least according to the Tao. As Henricks explains the
philosophy of Lao-tzu in the Tao, “the Taoist must literally return to the Tao by achieving
mystical union with the Tao--experiencing the oneness of all things in the Tao.” (xxvi-
xxvii) Even though the Tao itself may be foreign to most Americans, the “mystical
union” it speaks of is one of the forces that compels us to value nature so highly. The
Tao further incorporates the idea of nature and mystery into its philosophy in Chapter 6,
The valley spirit never dies;
We call it the mysterious female.
The gates of the mysterious female--
These we call the roots of Heaven and Earth.

(Ch. 6)

Mary Oliver speaks similarly about regaining that “rootedness” in her poem “White Flowers:”

Never in my life
had I felt myself so near
that porous line
where my own body was done with
and the roots and the stems and the flowers
began. (59)

Oliver’s poetry is a wonderful example of the blending of many American cultures. Her work, like Snyder’s, expresses both Native American and Taoist ideals.

Houston Smith in his book The Religions of Man explains the deep connection between creative artists and the Taoist ideals. He says that “[t]he Chinese word for landscape painting is composed of the radicals for mountain and water . . .” and “suggests vastness . . . solitude . . . endurance, and continuous movement.” (284) Smith explores the image of man in early Chinese art and his relationship to the landscape, he says man

is not as formidable as a mountain; he does not live as long as a pine; yet he too belongs in the scheme of things as surely as the birds and the clouds. And through him as through the rest of the world flows the rhythmic movement of Tao. (285)
The life forces we see in nature, and reflected in ourselves, are a constant reminder of our connectedness. Joy Harjo, in her poem "One Cedar Tree" speaks about that connection when she says:

A continuum flows like births
because somehow
the sun gallops in most mornings on the eastern horizon.
The moon floats familiar
but changing.
And I eat, breathe, and pray to some strange god
who could be a cedar tree
outside the window. (24)

The familiar yet ever-changing aspects of nature (like our emotions, physical aging, birth and death) offer us reassurance in our own lives that change is cyclical and within the cycle is constancy. When Harjo speaks of the moon as "familiar but changing" we recognize the duality of constancy and change in nature and in ourselves. Harjo's proclamation of "eat[ing], breath[ing], and pray[ing] to some strange cedar tree" is at once a recognition of and praising for our deep connection to the earth and nature. That god can be all things and that we can immerse ourselves in the beauty of god is what compels us to seek the comfort of nature.

Gary Snyder, in his essay entitled “Wilderness,” says "[t]he reason I am here is because I wish to bring a voice from the wilderness." (106) He goes onto say that "the voice of nature herself" (107) is his Muse. He sees nature as the primal and primary
source of information and inspiration. He believes that it is an error in man's judgment to think that nature is as he cautions, "something less than authentic," (107) something less than what man has conquered and created. His word of caution to us is that

a culture that alienates itself from the very ground of its own being--from the wilderness outside (that is to say, wild nature, the wild, self-contained, self-informing ecosystems) and from that other wilderness, the wilderness within--is doomed to a very destructive behavior, ultimately perhaps self-destructive behavior. (106)

The "wilderness within" is what we stimulate and explore when we connect with the wilderness of nature.

This ecologically conscious voice is very timely. As we reach towards nature, and recognize her riches, we become aware of her fragility. The fragility lies in the delicate harmony and balance nature creates. As we begin to see ourselves as part of that nature, we become more aware of that harmonious balance and hopefully more respectful of preserving it. Maybe this is why we value nature so much, why we seek it to escape the man-made world we have created, to listen to the Muse, to return to the core and origin of our existence, to give us perspective, to inspire us, to renew our spirits, to seek what is locked inside our bones. We desire a state of harmony with our selves and our environment.
III. Renewal of Spirit

do you think there is anywhere, in any language,
  a word billowing enough
  for the pleasure

  that fills you,
  as the sun
  reaches out,
  as it warms you

  as you stand there,
  empty-handed--
  or have you too
  turned from this world--

  or have you too
  gone crazy
  for power,
  for things?

(Oliver, "The Sun," 50-51)

The material and psychological burdens imposed by our society which values possession and status above spirit and soul, have fragmented our psyche. In order to make ourselves feel spiritually whole again, we require the refreshment of nature; a place where we can go to renew our spirit and regain a sense of self.

Two writers that provide examples of the spiritual values of the nature are Henry David Thoreau and Annie Dillard. Thoreau, in the mid-1800s, seems to have found value in the solace focusing on natural cycles at Walden Pond. Dillard, over 100 years later, sought a deeper meaning for her own existence in the woods in Southwest
Virginia. They each offer us, through their writings, road maps to solitude, to renewing the spirit, to finding perspective, and exploring the mystery of nature.

In *Walden*, Thoreau says,

> I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. . . . I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life. *(343-344)*

Thoreau removed himself from the demands of society in order to gain a deeper perspective from the solitude and seclusion offered by nature. He wanted to look closely at the lessons of nature and to apply those lessons to his own life. He took time to reflect and to search for greater meaning in his life and an inspiration for living from nature. Thoreau saw man as being trapped and dulled by the demands of industrialization.

> Most men . . . are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them. . . . He has no time to be anything but a machine. *(261)*

He saw in nature an opportunity to reach deeply into himself, into his very "marrow" and to touch and renew that very basic elemental life force. Thoreau says, "*[w]e must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep." *(343)*
The industrialization of society removes humankind from that elemental force of nature. The emphasis on production and consumption is exhaustive and makes humankind complacent. Thoreau likens this state in man to that of a snake languishing on the bottom of Walden pond. He says,

[i]t appeared to me that for a like reason [being in a torpid state] men remain in their present low and primitive condition; but if they should feel the influence of the spring of springs arousing them, they would of necessity rise to a higher and more ethereal life. (296)

Like Roethke's "Genesis," Thoreau expresses that very core connection that man has with nature. Once again, we can see the action of nature "the spring of springs arousing" man, inspiring him to a "higher and more ethereal life." The word "ethereal" itself connects us to the natural by implying the celestial and at the same time removing us from that which is worldly. In this way, we infuse our inward spiritual nature.

Mary Oliver addresses her fear of living in the same "torpid state" about which Thoreau speaks and at the same time expresses the value of a renewed spirit in her poem "When Death Comes." She says,
When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

(10-11)

Mary Oliver rejoices in life's "amazement" and her poetry in turn teaches us how to be amazed by taking us into nature with her. She wants something more than to languish from day-to-day, she wants not only to be amazed but to be "married to amazement" to have it be a constant part of her life. She wants more than to be a visitor; she wants to be a full participant. One of the obvious ways Oliver becomes a full participant in life is through her connection to nature and her poetry. One of her strongest poems connecting her, and her readers to nature is her poem "Sleeping in the Forest."

I thought the earth
remembered me, she
took me back so tenderly, arranging
her dark skirts, her pockets
full of lichens and seeds. I slept
as never before, a stone
on the riverbed, nothing
between me and the white fire of the stars

... By morning
I had vanished at least a dozen times
into something better.

(181)
This poem is reminiscent of Harjo, Snyder and the Tao. The Tao says,

The world had a beginning,
Which can be considered the mother of the world.
Having attained the mother, in order to understand her children,
If you return and hold on to the mother, till the end of your life you'll suffer no harm. (Ch. 52)

Oliver not only returns to the earth in her poem, but she lets go of the distinction between self and the “white fire of the stars” and in doing so she is transformed “into something better” something beyond the definition of self with which she laid down. “Return to hold on to the mother . . . [and] you’ll suffer no harm,” means that by renewing our connection to the origin, or beginning, by re-touching that core we are renewing our spirit and by keeping that spirit renewed, awakened, dazzled, we will “suffer no harm.”

Annie Dillard calls this “seeing,” the stepping out of the day-to-day demands of work and survival in the city, and immersing ourselves in nature. She hones her vision to look at what is in front of her everyday and to truly see that which everyday she overlooks. While training her vision upon a school of fish swimming in Tinker Creek, she observes:

I saw the pale white circles roll up . . . like the world's turning, mute and perfect, and I saw the linear flashes, gleaming silver, like stars being born at random down a rolling scroll of time. Something broke and something opened. I filled up like a new wineskin. I breathed an air like light; I saw a light
like water. I was the lip of a fountain the creek
filled forever; I was ether, the leaf in the zephyr; I
was flesh-flake, feather bone. (32)

By turning her attention completely upon nature, she let go of her image of self
("something broke"), and she found a new vision, a new connection ("something
opened"). Her spirit was renewed, "filled up like a new wineskin," and she was able to
"breathe air like light." By tapping into the minute power of nature, she is transformed,
renewed, awakened and spiritually reborn.

Gary Snyder gives voice to this spiritual renewal in his poem “By Frazier Creek Falls,” when he says

This living flowing land
is all there is, forever

We are it
it sings through us— (41)

Here, he not only expresses the unity he feels with Earth, but he gives that unity an active
voice. Similarly, Harjo’s poem “For Alva Benson, And For Those Who Have Learned to
Speak,” cautions us about our society and how it has silenced us. She speaks of the
“people in the towns and in the cities learning not to hear the ground,” and says of the
Navajo child born into this culture that the child “learned to speak for the ground, the
voice coming through her like roots that have long hungered for water.” (18) This
mixing of metaphors is strange to our urban minds, but at the same time we are attracted to the mystery.

Willem de Kooning adds another dimension to the voice of writers when he says

I like to be among writers as well as artists. I don’t think writers are necessarily more intelligent or better speakers than artists, but I find their conversation very stimulating. Sometimes I could say of myself that I painted with a good ear, because their talk, the words they used, made a picture in my mind. (128)

In de Kooning’s expression of praise for writers, we can see the exchange of inspiration. Just as the writer influences the painter, and the writers and painters influence us, all in turn are influenced by nature. The idea of words creating pictures and pictures speaking to us inspires us with the mystery of creation and this inspiration itself invigorates the spirit. We are called upon to see in a new way and to hear things we have not heard before.

One of the strong appeals of the movie Field of Dreams is the mysticism of The Voice. This contemporary film about an Iowa farm appeals to our sense of romance with pastoral settings. Our patriotic hearts are invigorated by its baseball theme, and it encourages our love affair with nature by giving a corn field a Voice. One of the universal struggles of Ray Kinsella is his fear of becoming old like his father. We find
humor in his statement, "I never forgave him [his father] for getting old, by the time he was as old as I am [36] he was ancient." The reason we find this humorous is because it is so true for us. One of our fears about getting older is that we will lose our dreams and our spontaneity. When the Voice speaks to Ray it says, "If you build it he will come." Ray is presented with a totally illogical mystery. Not only is he hearing a voice in a cornfield, but the voice is not making any sense. He is left then to respond by instinct and his instincts tell him that building a baseball field will bring back one of his father's heroes.

Not only are the wonder and mystery of the Voice compelling in this film, but also the descriptions of the "all American" game of baseball returns us to our childhood. When Shoeless Joe tells us that he'd "wake up at night with the smell of the ballpark in my nose, the cool of the grass on my feet, the thrill of the grass," we remember these sensations. Watching this film not only renews our spirits but recalls a sensual awareness that many of us left behind when we entered the adult world. This film about mystery and baseball appeals to us on many levels of sensory awareness that come directly from nature.

The character, Terence Mann, an inspirational writer from the 70s who stops writing because he decides that America is "too extremist or too apathetic to listen to him," exemplifies our society's weakening values. He is connected to Ray's dream
because of his own childhood dream “to play at Ebbets Field.” In trying to convey to Mann the importance of his place in the scheme of things, Ray explains that they are dealing with “primal forces of nature.” There is a recurring sense of “rightness” that artists express when they talk about their creativity and it is well expressed in this film when Ray quotes Terence Mann, “there comes a time when all the cosmic tumblers have clicked into place and the universe openness itself up for a few seconds to show you what’s possible.” It is the quest for the magical that pulls us into nature and it is experiencing the “cosmic tumblers” clicking into place that reinvigorates our spirits.

We search for a magical connection between past and present and future and Field of Dreams provides that. It takes us into a simpler world where adults listen to children, as when Ray’s daughter Karen says that people will come visit the Field because, “[i]t will be just like when they were little kids a long time ago and they will remember what it was like.” Or as Terence Mann describes it “they will arrive at your door as innocent as children longing for the past.” And it is just that nostalgic longing for childhood and our remembrances of knees bloodied from climbing trees and blisters from the bat that reawakens the child in the adult. The power of baseball lies in its location, the open field, the great outdoors, nature. Mann aptly describes viewing a ball game as being dipped in “magic waters.”
In a world changing as rapidly as ours we long for the constant and, as Mann tells Ray,

The one constant through all the years . . . has been baseball. America has rolled by like an Army of steamrollers, it has been erased like a blackboard, rebuilt and erased again. But baseball has marked the time. This field, this game is a part of our past . . . it reminds us of all that once was good and could be again.

This sense of renewal is exactly what compels us to sit in nature, to experience the ballgame, or to sit in the theatre and experience both through the film. The mystery and magic and the potential awaken us to our own potential, and to a depth of experience that makes us feel truly alive.

*Field of Dreams* encourages us to listen to our own voices, and to hear nature speak to us. But, if in all the chaos, we are unable to hear, we have an opportunity here then to listen to the voices of filmmakers, poets, writers and artists and to discover possibly something we have lost in our current culture. If we cannot find the words within ourselves or hear the voice of nature, then we can borrow from the artists of our culture. We can sing Mary Oliver's song of praise to the chickadee, we can say:

I said to the chickadee, singing his heart out in the green pine tree:

little dazzler,  
little song,  
little mouthful.  

("October," 60)
IV. Perspective (Distance and Connectedness)

A high tower
on a wide plain.
If you climb up
One floor
You'll see a thousand miles more.
(Snyder, “The Uses of Light,” 39)

By removing ourselves from the physical and psychological burdens imposed by our society, which values possession and status above spirit and soul, we can regain a sense of self. What meaning or purpose do we as individuals have in this larger rapidly moving society? We can find an answer if we look closely at nature. We can rediscover ourselves as a part of the bigger picture. Frederick Turner defines nature as “the process of increasing self-reference and self-measurement.” (44) We can see, by looking closely at nature, that our grand achievements are only a small part of the bigger picture. We can reconnect with the Earth, become centered and feel both significant and insignificant -- it is a precarious balance, man's place in society and man's place in the bigger picture of nature.

Our position in the 'greater' scheme is one of the perspectives we gain from nature. Annie Dillard found perspective in the insect world which may seem small, but it is vast. The great chain of being which connects the ant to aphid, the aphid to the wasp and the praying mantis and so on, continues up to, and beyond, man. So it is clear,
that for Dillard, nature affords the opportunity for a "wider view" and observation is only part of what life requires from us. Dillard says,

Our life is a faint tracing on the surface of mystery, like the idle, curved tunnels of leaf miners on the face of a leaf. We must somehow take a wider view, look at the whole landscape, really see it, and describe what's going on here. Then we can at least wail the right question into the swaddling band of darkness, or if it comes to that, choir the proper praise. (9)

If questioning is part of the "plan," then stimulating ourselves to ask more and greater questions must be part of the plan too. Certainly the mystery of nature pulls at us, demanding exploration.

The paintings of Georgia O’Keeffe illustrate this allure and exploration. Marion Goethals, in describing O’Keeffe’s *Skunk Cabbage*, notes that the painter has painted the flower outside of its natural setting. She says that “[t]he absence of roots and the earth that would nourish and anchor [the flower] creates a feeling that the plant is floating in a realm separate from its natural environment.” (11) We can identify with this flower in a unique way, because the “floating” and “separateness” exemplified by the painting is an association often manifested in our contemporary society.

Goethals describes O’Keeffe as being “a woman whose identity was grounded in the earth, in nature, and in the landscape.” (Ibid.) When we identify with this work of art then we vicariously experience this grounding. This grounding connects
us to the Earth and nature in a fundamental way that nourishes our souls. Speaking about the creativity of artists in general, Goethals says they have “[a] penetrating need to interpret the interior world of the soul and the personality created literary and visual images of nature balanced on the edge of the concrete and the abstract, the known and the unknown.” (18-19) We have this same need to interpret our interior world, and in an attempt to satisfy that need, we turn not only to nature, but the artists themselves for encouragement and explanation.

We also look to films to help us gain perspective on the chaos we quite often encounter in our urban lives. The film *The Gods Must Be Crazy* presents a head-on confrontation between primitive society and high-tech society. It focuses on a tribe of bushmen in Africa who believe that “the gods put only good and useful things on the Earth for them to use,” and that nothing in the world is evil. They live in total isolation from civilization until one day they have a freak encounter with a coke bottle. The bottle, the personification of industrialized society, is perceived as evil because it profoundly disrupts the bushmen’s tranquil and harmonious community. Where there had formerly been no concept of ownership, because the earth provided all that they needed, they now possess a single object, the coke bottle, which invokes envy, jealousy and hostility.

As they try to find meaning and a purpose for the coke bottle, they discover that “this thing never needed before became a necessity,” and “anger, jealousy,
hate and violence became part of society.” This bottle becomes the “evil thing” and they
decide to remove it from their world by throwing it off the end of the earth. This
adventure sends Xi Xiao into the world of technology. It is a world where the narrator
tells us that “[c]ivilized man has refused to adapt himself to his environment, instead he
adapted his environment to suit him.” This is a world that demands constant “adapt[ion]
and readapt[ion] every day” to adjust to the “self-created environment.” It is exhausting,
because we are not only applying the energy to create we are having to constantly find
new ways of adjusting.

Harold Fromm, in his essay “From Transcendence to Obsolescence,” says
that man’s

mind produces a technology that enables his body to
be as strong as the gods, rendering the gods
superfluous and putting Nature in a cage. Then it
appears that there is no Nature and that man has
produced virtually everything out of his own
ingenuity. . . . (35)

This is the world that Xi Xiao encounters on his journey. For a man so connected to
nature as he is, it is a completely incomprehensible world. Fromm is probably giving
clarity to Xi’s sentiments when he says that

it becomes apparent that man has failed to see that
now, as in the past, the roots of his being are in the
earth; and he has failed to see this because Nature,
whose effects on man were formerly immediate, is
now mediated by technology so that it appears that
technology and not Nature is actually responsible for everything. (Ibid.)

We end up no less alienated than Xi, except that most of us are unaware of just how alien our environment has become.

Our modern, urban society is certainly no less confusing and alienating for a man like Xi Xiao. Since his perceptions are not “mediated by technology” and he has no concept of time or ownership, he is much freer than the city dwellers he encounters. However, he becomes entangled in this modern society and the juxtaposition of his natural innocence against the confusion and petty jealousies of “modern” society offer a wonderful perspective on our world of technology gone amuck. Fortunately for Xi, he finds the end of the Earth, throws the “evil thing” away and returns to his tranquil life. Unfortunately for us, we have the fearful knowledge that his world will not remain “natural” and hidden for long.

In a reversal of Xi’s journey, we go into nature to escape the angst of urban life not only because it frees us from our fellow man and all that encounter entails, but also because it gives us insights into our existence. Looking through the eyes of writers like Annie Dillard or Henry David Thoreau, we can see life in the natural world as a parable of our own lives. We see an example of how we too can survive and thrive in a chaotic world.
Annie Dillard sees the sycamore tree's struggle for survival as analogous to her own struggle. She says, "[i]t is hard to understand how the same tree could thrive both choking along Pittsburgh's Penn Avenue and slogging knee-deep in Tinker Creek." Her revelation is that the tree is a metaphor for her life. In a similar gesture, Charles Demuth painted the *Poster Portrait: Georgia O'Keeffe*. It is, as Goethals describes it, "known as the cast-iron plant [and] particularly able to adapt to the poor conditions of city apartments, as O'Keeffe herself had to do during this period." Thoreau, on the other hand, sees the connection of man to nature as so strong that

all Nature would be affected, and the sun's brightness fade, and the winds would sigh humanely, and the clouds rain tears, and the woods shed their leaves and put on mourning in midsummer, if any man should ever for a just cause grieve. Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself? (389)

These examples from nature offer perspective on our own conditions and provide inspiration.

We see the urban tree's great roots refusing to be subdued by asphalt and cement, or stunted by telephone or electrical wires. They grow, they thrive, they push up through the ground and reach around what man has made. They stand, if we let them, long after the roads have had to be rebuilt and the houses replaced. They stand as a supreme example of endurance and adaptability. They can withstand the pressures of city
life and the demands of nature. They offer us shelter, comfort and inspiration. We only need to look at them in the right way to see all they have to give.

Further reflecting upon the power of nature, Dillard asks herself, "[w]hat if God has the same affectionate disregard for us that we have for barnacles?" (167) If we see ourselves in the broadest of evolutionary lights, and we recognize a power greater than man, then we must move cautiously among the creatures of nature, we must value their existence and gifts and by so doing, we value ourselves in the great scheme of things.

In his poem "Prayer for the Great Family," Gary Snyder writes:

Gratitude to the Great Sky
who holds billions of stars--and goes yet beyond that--
beyond all powers, and thoughts
and yet is within us--
Grandfather Space.
The Mind is his Wife. (25)

Snyder sees the very light and energy of the stars as being "within us," part of us, our psyche, our being. By reflecting on the magnitude of this power, we are moved "beyond all powers and thoughts." Here again, we let go of our limited view of self and reach for a greater sense of being, we empty ourselves of the limited view and become full and expansive.
All of nature is here to help us feel connected. The same stars we gaze upon here in Virginia are the same stars the Bedouins gaze upon from the Sahara Desert. If music is the universal language, then nature is the universal voice. There is such power in this voice, such simplicity and yet such complexity of existence. Snyder says, "[a] flower for nothing; an offer; no taker" (34), a wondrous natural resource, an act of beauty, a gift for the beholder. Let it not be for nothing. The flower has its own life and creates its own world. It hosts its own special species of insects and bees and attracts its own kind of bird. It is an integrated microscopic universe on a stem. We think our lives are busy, the single flower entertains more guests in a day than we host in a month! If we look closely enough, we can see an infinite world just inches away from our front door.

Christopher Manes very poignantly points out, to a microscopic degree, just how important nature is to us in his essay “Nature and Silence.” He says:

If fungus, one of the "lowliest" of forms on a humanistic scale of values, were to go extinct tomorrow, the effect on the rest of the biosphere would be catastrophic, since the health of forests depends on Mycorrhizal fungus, and the disappearance of forests would upset the hydrology, atmosphere, and temperature of the entire globe. In contrast if Homo sapiens disappeared, the event would go virtually unnoticed by the vast majority of Earth's life forms. (24)

This perspective certainly gives us pause and something on which to meditate as we sit in the woods. This view embeds us in nature. We are a small and, according to Manes, not
very significant part of it all except for the fact that we have a tremendous power to impact it all. If we, who are less significant than mycorrhizal fungus, have the power to obliterate that fungus and in turn the world, then we must walk carefully, cautiously and respectfully through the world.

Joy Harjo admonishes us to expand our vision in her poem “Vision” in which she describes the power of a rainbow:

How it curved down between earth
and the deepest sky to give us horses
of color
horses that were within us all of this time
but we didn’t see them because
we wait for the easiest vision
to save us.

In Isleta the rainbow was a crack
in the universe. We saw the barest
of all life that is possible.

....................

... All the colors of horses
formed the rainbow,
and formed us
watching them. (41)

It would be easy for us to stop our vision at the reality of the power we have over nature and not see what Manes is pleading for us to see and what Harjo longs for us to understand. But we miss the ultimate power of life if we opt for “the easiest vision.” If we do not take the opportunity that nature offers to distance ourselves from our view of
self so that we can take a closer look, then we miss the opportunity to find the connection of which Harjo speaks.

The search for perspective, to stand back and try to view the world objectively is a challenge Mary Oliver offers us in her poem “October.” She tells us how she does this:

Sometimes in late summer I won’t touch anything, not the flowers, not the blackberries brimming in the thickets; I won’t drink from the pond; I won’t name the birds or the trees; I won’t whisper my own name.

One morning
the fox came down the hill, glittering and confident,
and didn’t see me--and I thought:

so this is the world.
I’m not in it.
It is beautiful. (62)

This poem backs away from our usual sensory experiences in nature. Oliver asks us to give them up, to not touch or drink, to not “be” for a moment so that we can see something greater, something beyond ourselves.

The quest for something “beyond” our current knowing seems to be an intricate part of the American psyche. We are a country, after all, founded on the basis of exploration. We still have grand dreams of exploration to the moon, the stars and beyond. But we continue to look close to home to satisfy that need to explore, because
part of that need to explore comes from a desire to find ourselves. And the powerful mysteries of nature compel us to explore her distances in order to find our connection.

Frederick Turner says that “[t]he two great historical givens in American culture are Puritanism and the frontier.” (45) About the Puritan he says, “the Puritan likes his nature as spiritually dead as a doornail.” (46) He says that “[t]he frontier experience both confirmed and profoundly modified this predisposition. . . . the frontier seemed to be the embodiment of the boundary between matter and spirit. Matter was ‘out there’ beyond the frontier; spirit was ‘in here’ among the brethren.” (emphasis added) (Ibid.)

The film Dances With Wolves beautifully illustrates man’s desire to experience the frontier and to explore that “boundary.” Lt. John Dunbar leaves the Civil War in Tennessee to travel to the Dakotas to see the frontier “before it is gone.” He is aware that man’s relentless drive to explore and conquer dooms the last vestiges of the frontier. The great expanse of prairie and the breathtaking sunsets provoke our romantic connection to the land. The juxtaposition of the life Dunbar left and the one he is now encountering add magic to the film.

Dunbar is very open to the exploration of frontier life and the plains Indians, and Costner is particularly interested in challenging our perceptions of Indian life. The awareness of Native American culture that he brings to the screen is a reflection
of our culture’s need to view life in a different way. Costner says of the film that “[i]t’s a romantic look at a terrible time in our history, when expansion in the name of progress brought us very little and, in fact, cost us deeply.” (viii) Our quest for perspective has led us to look to the Native American culture for answers and *Dances With Wolves* provides many of those answers. The author Michael Blake describes the Indians as “a people living in rough perfection; at home with sky, earth, and plain; strong families living in societies that valued and cared for their members.” (xvi) It is through Costner’s character, Lt. Dunbar, that we too learn the value of Native American culture and through that culture the value of nature.

In this film, we are presented with the juxtaposition of European values to Native American values. We see European Americans killing needlessly for sport or out of boredom. We see Native Americans killing for survival and with dignity and respect for the necessity of that killing. Native Americans place great emphasis in preparing for the hunt by praying, chanting, burning herbs and painting their bodies and their horses. All of these symbols have great meaning for the Native American and reflect the integration of his life with the animals and his respect for nature. In the scene where the Native Americans have been tracking buffalo, and they come upon a field of skinned carcasses, Dunbar says that it is evident that these buffalo were slaughtered by a “people without values and without soul,” the buffalo were killed “only for their tongues and the
price of their hides.” Even the manner by which each culture chooses to kill expresses the value of their connection to the animal. The European American kills with a gun, from a distance; his action of firing the gun is removed from the death of the animal. The Native American on the other hand kills with arrows and spears; there is a direct connection between hunter and hunted.

As Dunbar learns the ways of the Native Americans, how they hunt, how they feel about possessions and their respect for life, he is transformed. After their custom, they give him a spiritual name, Dances With Wolves. He describes feeling a new pride upon hearing this name and says that “perhaps the name John Dunbar had no meaning” and believes that “I knew for the first time who I really was.” Through this naming, Dances With Wolves becomes the “embodiment of the boundary between matter and spirit.” His life has a new meaning. In seeking to distance himself from civilization and immerse himself in the plains culture, he gained a new perspective not only of life but of himself.

Michael Blake says that his hope was “that in showing what was lost, something might be regained--not the least of which could be new respect for the proud descendants of the people I wrote about.” (xvi) He goes on to describe his love for the animals, the plant and the “humbling quality of open space.” (Ibid.) This film certainly
conveys the loss, the pride, and the love and leaves us with feelings of awe, humbleness and humility.

Theodore Roethke’s poem “In Praise of Prairie,” also illustrates man’s connection to the open Western spaces:

Horizons have no strangeness to the eye.
Our feet are sometimes level with the sky,

When we are walking on a treeless plain,
With ankles bruised from stubble of the grain.

The fields stretch out in long, unbroken rows.
We walk aware of what is far and close.

Here distance is familiar as a friend.
The feud we kept with space comes to an end. (12)

Roethke clearly expresses how distance can make one feel connected. Having our feet “level with the sky” toys with our perspective and the physicalness of the line “with ankles bruised from stubble of the grain” pulls us beyond the poem and onto the prairie. There is a sense remaining here of having stepped out of ourselves into open space only to find our feet planted firmly on the ground. This is the perspective that nature has to offer. It leaves us with a feeling of connection and contentment that often evades us in urban life.
When we compare our lives and our culture to the culture of the plains Indians we seem very fragmented. In a very moving poem about a woman on the verge of suicide, Joy Harjo captures the harsh fragmentation imposed by society upon our souls.

... She thinks of the color of her skin, and of Chicago streets, and of waterfalls and pines. She thinks of moonlight nights, and of cool spring storms. Her mind chatters like neon and northside bars. She thinks of the 4 a.m. lonelinesses that have folded her up like death, discordant, without logical and beautiful conclusion. Her teeth break off at the edges. She would speak.

The woman hangs from the 13th floor window crying for the lost beauty of her own life. She sees the sun falling west over the grey plane of Chicago.

("The Woman Hanging From The Thirteenth Floor Window," 23)

Similarly, in her poem "For Alva Benson," she describes the Navajo child’s attempt to "speak for the ground" with the "voice coming through her like roots." (18) Where are the roots to keep the woman from jumping from the Thirteenth Floor Window? We can sense how close she is to the edge in the phrase "her mind chatters like neon." Neon produces the most harsh and artificial of lights. There is no warmth from the sun, there is no sense of connection, their is only an overwhelming feeling of discordance. This woman would "speak" but her teeth have broken off at the edge. She cries for "the lost beauty of her own life." A Native American prayer to the morning asks "may I walk in
beauty.” How can this woman walk in beauty when her experience in this society has left her fragmented, discordant, and on edge?

Turning to nature provides us with a nourishing escape from the often harsh and fragmenting life in the city. With the power to transform and repair our souls, it is our greatest asset.
V. Inspiration (Wonder, Mystery, and Heightened Awareness)

It seems that a lot of artists, when they get older, they get simpler: they feel their own miracle in nature; a feeling of being on the other side of nature.

I get excited just to see that sky is blue; that earth is earth. And that’s the hardest thing: to see a rock somewhere, and there it is: earth-colored rock. I’m getting closer to that.

Then there is a time in life when you just take a walk: And you walk in your own landscape.

(De Kooning, 178-179)

When the only sound life makes for us is the ringing of the phone and the honking of car horns, it dulls our senses. When we let ourselves believe that we have, or by technology and science can have, all the answers, we lose something. We lose the wonder and mystery of life. It is Annie Dillard’s deep appreciation for this mystery and wonder that make reading Pilgrim At Tinker Creek so rewarding. Scott Slovic, in his analysis of Dillard’s book says she “uses unexpected language to transform the quotidian into the cataclysmic, thus snapping herself alert to the world and to her own thought processes.” (358) It is exactly Dillard’s ability to transform that allows the reader to undergo a mystical conversion by immersion into nature through her book. Slovic says that Dillard’s “highly animated language stimulates the engagement of her readers through surprise and exaggeration.” (359) A simple example of this is when she asks the question, “[w]hat if I fell in a forest: Would a tree hear?” (92) In the brief moment we
encounter this unexpected twist on a common thought, we pause and our awareness is heightened. We suddenly see ourselves as small and needing that tree to hear us fall in order to validate our existence.

Dillard challenges us to "try to look spring in the eye." (122) She challenges us to view nature with an innocent eye, curious, and inflamed by mystery. She feeds off of this challenge, pitting the rational against the irrational. She asks, "[i]f I swallowed a seed and some soil, could I grow grapes in my mouth?" (113) This is not just an attempt on her part to be clever or humorous. She wants to see nature and the power of creation in a new way. She wants to be "stirred and quickened" by the life around her. (Ibid.) Her enthusiasm knows no bounds, she is an adventurer, and explorer. As she says,

I want to climb up the blank blue dome as a man would storm the inside of a circus tent, wildly, dangling, and with a steel knife claw a rent in the top, peep, and if I must, fall. (31)

Her enthusiasm inspires us to pursue the wonder and mystery of nature beyond the realm of the ordinary, beyond that which is easily seen, and to look deeply, into another dimension.

For the Native American, the pursuit of the mystical in nature is quite different. Dhyani Ywahoo describes the centrality of mystery in Native American life in her telling of the Cherokee origin story:
From the mysterious void came forth a sound, and the sound was light, and the light was will, intention to be, born of the emptiness: "Creator Being," fundamental tone of the universal song, underlying all manifestation. Compassionate wisdom arose as will perceived the unmanifest potential of mind streaming forth. Will and compassion together gave birth to the fire of building intelligence, and thus was formed the sacred triangle from which all matter is derived, the Three in One. It is a Mystery, we say. (9)

The harmonious and unifying beliefs of the Native Americans are reflected in this story, as is the Christian influence of the "Three in One" mystery. The acceptance of mystery as part of the creation story allows the pursuit and stimulation of mystery in life to be a natural and inspiring pursuit. Ywahoo says that "[l]ife unfolds in the world around us, and our interaction is a part of its unfolding. (76) Since Will, Compassion and Intelligence form the "sacred triangle," Mystery is central to understanding self and the world. As Ywahoo says, "through this world we are given the opportunity to realize the Great Mystery, the One from which we all descend. To recognize that Mystery is to recognize oneself in step with the seasons, attuned with the voice of the sun and the cycles of the moon." (77)
It is obvious then that reality for Native American peoples is one of unity with nature. Just as Harjo says of the moon,

The reflection is within all of us.

We are alive. The woman of the moon looking at us, and we looking at her, acknowledging each other.

("September Moon," 60)

Their souls are infused with nature and their ceremonies reinforce their beliefs, and their wonder at the power of nature and life, and their sensual awareness of this power is expressed through song, dance, chanting, poetry and storytelling. As Paula Gunn Allen says in her essay "The Sacred Hoop,"

[a]t base, every story, every song, every ceremony tells the Indian that each creature is part of a living whole and that all parts of that whole are related to one another by virtue of their participation in the whole of being. (247)

Therefore, touching the wonder and mystery of life is an integral part of their culture which directly ties them to nature.

Alternately, for Dillard, the insect world is the key to one of the greatest mysteries and wonders of our universe. The very fact that insects, as Dillard says, "make up the bulk of our comrades-at-life," prompts her to "look to them for a glimmer of companionship." (64) How can we feel alone in the midst of so much life? Alien
maybe, but not alone! Dillard even goes so far as to suggest that we might be the wiser if we kept water bugs and praying mantises in our homes and churches for close observation and worship. To her, the brazen, irrational workings of the insect world open her mind and point the way to wonder, mystery and discovery. As she so humorously points out:

Fish gotta swim and birds gotta fly; insects, it seems, gotta do one horrible thing after another. . . . The remarkable thing about the world of insects, however, is that there is no veil cast over these horrors. These are mysteries performed in broad daylight before our very eyes; we can see every detail, and yet they are still mysteries. (63-64)

She says, "[n]o form is too gruesome, no behavior too grotesque." (65) That nature allows the outrageous seems to suggest a perverse hope that humankind will also be allowed its follies, up to a point that is. It also suggest that no amount of scientific study can answer all the mysteries of life.

We are therefore inspired to pursue the mystery. Roethke expresses this beautifully in his poem "Once More the Round,"

What's greater, Pebble or Pond?  
What can be known? The Unknown.  
My true self runs toward a Hill  
More! O More! visible.

Now I adore my life  
With the Bird, the abiding Leaf,  
With the Fish, the questing Snail,  
And the Eye altering all;
And I dance with William Blake
For love, for Love’s sake:

And everything comes to Ouc,
As we dance on, dance on, dance on. (243)

As we read through this poem, Roethke leads us from mystery, “what can be known,”
through wonder and adoration of animals and plants, to the expression of his heightened
awareness and sensitivity, and his connection to the Oneness through dance.

In a similar vein, Mary Oliver tells us that what she wants from life,

is to be willing
to be dazzled--
to cast aside the weight of facts

and maybe even
to float a little
above this difficult world.
I want to believe I am looking

into the white fire of a great mystery.
(“The Ponds,” 93)

Here Oliver, like Roethke in “Once More, The Round,” is inspired by a pond, as Dillard
might say, to look nature “in the eye.” By exploring nature this deeply, Oliver hopes to
“float a little/above this difficult world.” It is a perspective that inspires us to want to
“float a little” and look into that “white fire” too. Dillard says “[t]he secret of seeing is to
sail on solar wind. Hone and spread your spirit till you yourself are a sail, whetted,
translucent, broadside to the merest puff.” (33)
The ever changing give and take and random selection that sometimes takes place is beyond the grasp of those who wish to fix it all in a moment in time, with unyielding purpose and limited function. Dillard says, "[t]he fixed is the world without fire--dead flint, dead tinder, and no where a spark. It is motion without direction, force without power." (67) Dillard's fear is that she, and humankind, will become fixed along a path of destruction, too removed from the wonder and mystery of life to envision another way, or to see the way to enlightenment. Harjo was inspired by the power and life force of nature to write,

I am memory alive
not just a name
but an intricate part
of this web of motion,
meaning: earth, sky, stars circling
my heart

centrifugal.
(“Skeleton of Winter,” 31)

Harjo’s expression of connection to “this web of motion” is an inspirational and motivational force for the reader. We want to feel ourselves at the center of that “centrifugal” force with the “earth, sky [and] stars circling” us.

Dillard also stands in awe of nature’s ability to inspire. She says,

So many things have been shown me on these banks, so much light has illumined me by reflection there where the water comes down, that I can hardly believe that this grace never flags, that the pouring
from ever-renewable sources is endless, impartial, and free. (68)

The eternal mystery of nature continues to inspire us with its wonder and to challenge our adherence to scientific knowledge. We should use the wonder of this mystery to inspire us to live more deeply, and to walk closer to the mystery all around us.

Full participation in this world requires us to develop to the greatest possible measure all our senses. If we live each day with our heads tucked into books and computers, with our blinds drawn against the sun in our climatically controlled environment, how much we have missed! Can we truly say we have lived today if by living we mean we have been cloistered in such an environment? Roethke’s poem “Dolor” captures the disparity of this kind of existence:

I have known the inexorable sadness of pencils,
Neat in their boxes, dolor of pad and paper-weight,
All the misery of manila folders and mucilage,
Desolation in immaculate public places,
........................................
And I have seen dust from the walls of institutions,
Finer than flour, alive, more dangerous than silica,
Sift, almost invisible, through long afternoons of tedium,
Dropping a fine film on nails and delicate eyebrows,
Glazing the pale hair, the duplicate grey standard faces.

(44)

What salvation would Roethke have had, feeling this kind of despair, if he could not also have been inspired by nature's energy to feel rejuvenated and awed by her mysteries?
William Rueckert in his essay “Literature and Ecology” talks about the energy of poetry. He says,

A poem is stored energy, a formal turbulence, a living thing, a swirl in the flow... [it is] part of the energy pathways which sustain life. Poems are a verbal equivalent of fossil fuel (stored energy), but they are a renewable source of energy, coming, as they do, from those ever generative twin matrices, language and imagination. (108)

Poetry, particularly that of Oliver, Roethke, Harjo and Snyder is generative because their inspiration comes from nature. Rueckert goes on to say that

Unlike fossil fuels, they cannot be used up. The more one thinks about this, the more one realizes that here one encounters a great mystery; here is a radical differential between the ways in which the human world and the natural world sustain life and communities. (108)

Rueckert is talking about the “laws of thermodynamics, energy is never created or destroyed: it is only transformed.” (109) “One of the basic formulations of ecology,” he goes on to say, “is that there is a one-way flow of energy through a system.” (Ibid.) He sees poetry, however, as capable of being disbursed in many directions, repeatedly. He says, “[i]n literature, all energy comes from the creative imagination.” (Ibid.) And for many writers, as the ones I’ve cited here, that “creative imagination” gets its inspirational energy from nature.
Painters are also inspired by nature to create their art, and we in turn are inspired by their creations. When we need a temporary escape from our urban lives, we can find refuge in museums. If we cannot personally visit the forest or plains or oceans, then we can experience them through the illustrations and translations of painters. Dillard describes heightened awareness as coming from a state of innocence. She explains by saying, "[w]hat I call innocence is the spirit’s unself-conscious state at any moment of pure devotion to any object." (82) She describes one of her pure moments while in a museum:

I stood planted, open-mouthed, born, before that one particular canvas, the river, up to my neck, gasping, lost, receding into watercolor depth and depth to the vanishing point, buoyant, awed. . . .

(Ibid.)

Painters do not always paint what we, or they, actually see, but rather they give us an illustration of their inspiration. In other words, they paint what nature makes them feel.

William de Kooning’s paintings are a good example. He painted a series of landscapes in the late 1950s and early 1960s. These paintings, by any stretch of the imagination, do not look like mountains, or trees or fields of flowers. De Kooning loved the experimental aspect of nature and continued to play with the application of paint throughout his life. He also moved the canvas while painting so that the top of the canvas one moment would become the side of the canvas the next. Recognizing these
dimensions in his work, it is easy to see that something more than replicating what he saw in nature was happening. In a televised interview in the early 80s, he commented about his painting *A Tree (Grows) in Naples, 1960*, that he had not painted a tree, but rather what that tree had made him feel. Writing about de Kooning’s technique in *Rosy-Fingered Dawn at Louise Point (1963)*, Harry Gaugh says that a particular brush stroke “may stand, physically, for a landscape equivalent... [n]ot necessarily a specific landscape feature... [b]ut this may allude to an unseen, yet surely felt force in nature at a particular place and time.” (71) Surely, the power of such landscapes comes from that force of nature moving the artist so deeply that he is compelled to express his feelings in this physical manner. When one steps back and looks at this painting, the sharp deep yellows jump out from the pastel creams and it is not hard to imagine yellow fingers of sunlight creeping across the horizon. Just like Frankenthaler said of her *Mountains and Sea*, “I know the landscapes were in my arms as I did it” (Carment, 12), the dawn was in de Kooning’s hands when he painted *Rosy-Fingered Dawn*. Experiencing these paintings not only allows us to experience the artists’ wonder and inspiration of nature, but they heighten our visual awareness and cause us to rethink what we really see when we are in nature.
To explore nature in this way is to learn a new language, a new way of naming life, our life, a new way of seeing ourselves. As Dillard says about her explorations in nature,

[w]hat I aim to do is not so much learn the names of the shreds of creation that flourish in this valley, but to keep myself open to their meanings, which is to try to impress myself at all times with the fullest possible force of their very reality. (137)

By opening our minds and fine tuning our senses in this way, we enhance our lives. Like Dillard, by “impress[ing]” ourselves “with the fullest possible force,” our sense of self is expanded and enhanced.

Gary Snyder has a poem entitled “The Dazzle,” in which he describes being dazzled by nature and his heightened sense of awareness and inspiration.

the dazzle, the seduction the design intoxicated and quivering,

.................

"all that moves, loves to sing"
the roots are at work. unseen.

(65)

The spectacular in nature is dazzling and mystifying and we are seduced by the unseen, by the song of nature behind the dazzle. The heightened visual awareness is alluring and inspiring and we wonder at the complexity and originality of nature.
When we allow ourselves to become awed by the wonders of nature, we can step out of ourselves. We let go, become self-less, this is what Dillard calls the present. She tells a story about stopping at a gas station in rural Virginia and being overcome by the moment. The sun is setting, the air is scented and she stops to stroke a fat-bellied puppy.

The air cools; the puppy's skin is hot. I am more alive than all the world. This is it, I think, this is it, right now, the present, this empty gas station, here, this western wind, this tang of coffee on the tongue, and I am patting the puppy, I am watching the mountain. And the second I verbalize this awareness in my brain, I cease to see the mountain or feel the puppy. (78-79)

This letting go of self, becoming subjectless, allows us to heightening our sensory awareness, and moves us to a higher spiritual state. It is like the Buddhist idea of emptying self in meditation in order to become complete and filled with a spirit of godliness; or, as the Te-Tao Ching says, “[t]ake emptiness to the limit;/[m]aintain tranquility in the center.” (Ch. 16)

The seclusion and stillness of nature along with our ability and desire to be awed by its mysteries allows Dillard, and us, to achieve this sensory awareness and to capture these pure moments. She ventures into nature to feel, to experience sensations, to heighten her senses and be inspired by life. She says, "I have come to the creek . . . to feel the delicate gathering of heat, real sun's heat, in the air and to watch new water come
down the creek. Don't expect more than this, and a mental ramble." (85) Even the reading of the phrase "real sun's heat" allows us, for a moment, to feel the heat. We can remember the smell of the sun, for a moment, we are removed from our reading chair and transported into nature. Our need for this kind of sensory awareness is so great that our memory stores it for us.

Georgia O'Keeffe, reflecting on her painting *Painting No. 21 (Palo Duro Canyon)*, 1916, says that hiking in the remote regions of Canyon, Texas frightened her so much she would incorporate the fear into her dreams. Rather than being a debilitating feeling, on the contrary, the fear became a stimulus to her creative expression. She says,

"Those perilous climbs were frightening but it was wonderful to me and not like anything I had known before. . . . Many drawings came from days like that. (N. pag.)"

By plunging herself down into the dark mysterious canyons, O'Keeffe was able to open herself to new dimensions, dimensions she converted into the language of her art. When we view paintings like her *Painting No. 21 (Palo Duro Canyon)*, 1916 we can see the fear in the thick black edges and wonder and mystery in the bright yellows and deep oranges and reds, and hidden expectations lie behind the small piece of turquoise blue sky in the far right corner. It is a painting that cannot be viewed without stirring these emotions. The semicircles, arcs and softly fading circular boulders pull the viewer into the canvas and into the heart of the canyon.
Viewing O’Keeffe’s paintings inspires us to want to visit nature firsthand. When we see her *Blue II* water color (two half-circles of blue fading to green then to gray-white, above angled slashes of blue color fading to lighter blue), we want to go to Niagara Falls again, and take another look. Can we see what she saw? Are we capable of this kind of vision? If we walk with Thoreau while Dillard holds my hand and Mary Oliver recites her poem “Peonies” and asks,

Do you also hurry, half-dressed and barefoot, into the garden,
and softly,
and exclaiming of their dearness,
fill your arms with the white and pink flowers,

with their honeyed heaviness, their lush trembling,
their eagerness
to be wild and perfect for a moment, before they are nothing, forever? (22)

will we be able to see O’Keeffe’s brush strokes in the falls, will we smell of peonies?

This heightened awareness is addictive. We sense that there is something more to be learned from these reflections of nature in art. The physicality we sense in reading Oliver’s poems or looking at O’Keeffe’s paintings inspires us to search for new ways to heighten our awareness. This is where a painter like Helen Frankenthaler can be fully appreciated. We not only are allowed to experience nature through Frankenthaler’s paintings, but we also experience Frankenthaler’s sense of self in relation to nature. As Barbara Rose has said of Frankenthaler, “[she] does not view art in terms of formal
problems and their solutions, but . . . as different ways of knowing herself.” (82) So the allure of the mystery and the heightened awareness, the letting go of self to discover self, is like a mobius strip, magically turning in, out, and around itself, a continuum, the beginning and the end being the same.

Heightened sensual awareness is the language that Frankenthaler uses to speak to us. We see her transform her sensations of nature onto canvas. As Rose describes it:

Frankenthaler learned how to reinforce her ties to nature . . . by imitating the processes of nature--by allowing an image to spontaneously grow and evolve from the materials and process of its creation. (38)

Frankenthaler was not concerned with showing us a flower as we might actually see that flower, but rather she wanted to convey the process of that flower becoming a flower. As Rose says, “Frankenthaler . . . does not depict a shape that looks as if it is growing and blossoming or flooding; she creates form by allowing paint literally to flow, spread, and unfold to create an image.” (38)

Frankenthaler painted large canvases on the floor so her act of painting was a physical, muscular act. We sense this physicality when viewing her paintings. As Rose says, “[o]ne identifies with Frankenthaler’s paintings not only through the eye but with the body; one senses her space not only optically but kinesthetically.” (74) We
totter between seeing and feeling her painting. Vision becomes like the light in Harjo’s poem “Late Summer Leaving,” in which she describes the sense of light as being “like another/ kind of touch/like air and water to the skin.” (53) Or, as Dillard puts it, "[t]here is a muscular energy in sunlight corresponding to the spiritual energy of wind." (118)

There is a point where we waiver between being the viewer and actually being in that painting we are viewing. It is the expression of the life force in Frankenthaler’s paintings that pull us in. Rose says that

to acknowledge and deliberately give expression to the forces and the strivings of the unconscious is to take a particular stand, not only about art, but about life. . . . Automatism and the spontaneous expression of the unconscious viewed in this light are valued for their capacity to free man from the repression and alienation from nature and the instincts imposed by a mechanistic civilization. (42)

Frankenthaler’s expression of her personal inspiration in nature not only frees her, but by stepping into her world, we too are freed, yet at the same time connect, and become a part of her view of nature. Our greatest hope may be that through our own experiences in nature and by recognizing and appreciating the shared experiences and inspirations of our artists, we will bring about a unity of consciousness and a harmony with nature. Or as Snyder would have it, we should “[t]aste all, and hand the knowledge down.” (51)
VI. Conclusion

Going to Walden is not so easy a thing
As a green visit. It is the slow and difficult
Trick of living, and finding it where you are.
(Oliver, “Going to Walden,” 239)

If we are to continue to find value and nourishment from nature, then we must preserve nature. We must guard it, nourish it and value it for what it is, a place of solitude, a place where we can renew our spirits, become inspired with wonder, and fine tune our perspective of life and self. If we want to go to Walden and experience all that it has to offer, if we want to discover the “trick of living,” we must continue to allow ourselves access to nature.

Nature is more than the physical components that can be measured by scientific means. It is more than plants, animals and earth. It is the mystery beyond what we can reach by scientific study. Nature gratuitously offers us the opportunity to renew our spirits by quickening our senses and entertaining us with its mysteries. Nature amazes us with her power and glory and makes us feel innocent in her midst. We undergo a nurturing spiritual transformation when we integrate our lives with nature.

Nature is a doorway to perspective. Nature provides an opportunity to remove ourselves from our day-to-day world and to step into another dimension of life. Nature awakens us with her unexpected and outrageous acts. When we fully explore nature, it requires us to use all our sense. Through nature, life becomes new and original.
We can heal our fragmented lives by integrating our lives with the enduring qualities of nature.

Nature provides us bountiful opportunity to enrich our lives, as evidenced by the writings and paintings of our American artists. Nature inspires their creativity and enhances their lives and we in turn benefit from their inspirations. By recognizing and appreciating these shared experiences of nature, we bring a unity and harmony to our lives. Nature holds the key not only to our deeper understanding of self and our own culture, but to our greater understanding of life in its fullest capacity.
Works Cited


