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## Metaphorical Construals of Nature in Thoreau's Writings

**Abstract:** The article investigates how the concept of nature is metaphorically construed in the writings of Henry David Thoreau, one of the earliest and most influential nature writers. The analysis has been inspired by insights from cognitive linguistics and cognitive poetics, especially Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Fauconnier and Turner's Blending Theory. Several different metaphorical construals of the concept of nature appear in Thoreau's writings which have been examined in this study, including *Walden*, *The Maine Woods*, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, a selection from his journal, and two collections of his earlier and later natural history essays and manuscripts. One can encounter there, obviously, conventional personifications of nature, such as Mother Nature, which, however, is questioned by Thoreau, as well as the occasional construal of nature as a companion or a bride. Other conventional conceptual metaphors, which are more frequently employed by him, include the metaphorical construal of nature as a work of art or as a literary work and once, more unconventionally, as a concert. Natural entities are also construed as other kinds of products. An original metaphor, which frequently appears in Thoreau's late manuscript on the dispersion of seeds, is the personification of nature as a forester.

**Keywords:** Thoreau, nature, metaphor

### 1. Introduction

*Nature* is a highly polysemous word, but only two of its meanings are relevant for the present study. The word is commonly used to refer to all animate and inanimate physical entities that are not human-made (such as animals, plants, soil, water, air), as well as processes and interactions between them, as opposed to human culture, civilization, and artifacts.<sup>1</sup> The word *nature* can also be used in the sense of an invisible force which creates and controls the non-human world. There is no specific entity that can be called nature, then; it is just a convenient abstraction.

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<sup>1</sup> This is obviously a simplification, as humans with their bodies are also part of nature, they interact with other natural entities, and their activities affect natural processes.

Like in the case of other abstract concepts, it is difficult to talk about nature without recourse to metaphors; therefore, investigating metaphors of nature can shed light on how this concept is understood by people living in different times and places (see Meisner 1995a: 11–12; Verhagen 2008: 9). As will be demonstrated, nature understood as an abstract force is often conceptualized and described by means of personification, whereas nature in the sense of the physical and biological world can be metaphorically construed as a human-made object.

This study of metaphorical construals of nature in the writings of Henry David Thoreau, one of the earliest and most influential nature writers, has been inspired by insights from cognitive linguistics and cognitive poetics. Conceptual Metaphor Theory, expounded by Lakoff, Johnson, Turner, Kövecses and others, is based on the assumption that metaphor is not just a linguistic phenomenon but also (and primarily) a cognitive one, as metaphorical language has its roots in metaphorical thought. Thus, metaphor is not just a matter of language but first of all a matter of thought, a very common and indispensable cognitive mechanism based on human experience, playing an important part in all areas of life. In this view, metaphor is not merely a superfluous rhetorical device or literary trope; it has the power to shape and influence people's thoughts and even actions. Conventional conceptual metaphors, pairings of a more tangible source domain and a more abstract target domain, give rise to conventional metaphorical expressions found in everyday language but also to more creative poetic metaphors, which are usually their more innovative modifications, the result of extending, elaborating, questioning, or composing conventional metaphors (Lakoff and Turner 1989: 67).

One of the oldest and most widespread metaphorical construals of nature is its personification.<sup>2</sup> Conceptual Metaphor Theory proponents point out its experiential motivation and conceptual function, explaining that people make use of the more familiar source domain of human beings to understand and to talk about less known or more abstract target domains.<sup>3</sup> The construal of nature as a person has its roots in a very common conceptual metaphor EVENTS / PROCESSES ARE ACTIONS. It enables people to conceptualize various processes occurring in the natural world as resulting from intentional actions, which are consciously planned and undertaken by an agent to achieve certain goals. Personification can be analyzed in terms of Blending Theory (Fauconnier and Turner 2002) as a double-scope blend, in which processes occurring in the natural world (focus input) are complemented by the presence of a conscious agent managing the world (framing input). The blend

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<sup>2</sup> As Buell (1995) points out, personification of nature dates back to antiquity, was present in classical, neoclassical and romantic literature (182–185), and in contemporary times as Lovelock's Gaia Hypothesis (201).

<sup>3</sup> "Personification permits us to use our knowledge about ourselves to maximal effect, to use insights about ourselves to help us comprehend such things as forces of nature, common events, abstract concepts, and inanimate objects" (Lakoff and Turner 1989: 72). Cf. Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 33), Kövecses (2002: 35).

helps people to understand and discuss complex natural processes by adding an intentional agent and providing compressions (especially of time and space) to achieve human scale. As will be demonstrated, personification is used to convey the understanding of nature as an abstract creative and guiding force acting in the world. It highlights processes occurring in the natural world, rather than specific entities and beings which comprise it (for example, by describing nature as an artist or a forester). It can also be employed to conceptualize the relationship between nature and humans (for instance, by presenting nature as our mother or lover).

Nature in the sense of a collection of physical entities and living beings, on the other hand, can be construed metaphorically as a human-made artifact, such as a book or a painting. In this case, the target domain (nature) can be conceptualized in terms of various source domains. Some of these metaphors, but not all, are image metaphors based on physical similarities between a human-made entity and a natural one. The conceptualization of nature as a human-made object requires the existence of a creator; that is why it is often accompanied by personification of nature (for example, as an artist or a writer). Both construals of nature, as a person and as an object, are closely related in such cases.

## 2. Metaphorical construals of nature in Thoreau's writings

The most culturally entrenched metaphorical construals of nature as a woman, either our mother or a lover and companion,<sup>4</sup> are not very frequent in Thoreau's writings. Nature seen as a companion appears in the journal entry from November 8, 1858: "It is like a silent but sympathizing companion in whose company we retain most of the advantages of solitude" (*I to Myself* 367). Whereas the sex of the companion is not specified, nature is presented explicitly as a woman in the specific social role of a bride in the well-known entry from April 23, 1857: "How rarely a man's love for nature becomes a ruling principle with him, like a youth's affection for a maiden, but more enduring! All nature is my bride. That nature which to one is a stark and ghastly solitude is a sweet, tender, and genial society to another" (*I to Myself* 313). Both metaphors highlight the gentle, human-friendly aspects of the natural environment, its beauty and tranquility, while hiding its other, more

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<sup>4</sup> The construal of nature as a woman (mother / lover) played an important role in the colonization of North America and the expansion of white civilization across the continent, accompanied by gradual disappearance of the wilderness beyond the western frontier (see Kolodny 1975). It has been seen as one of the roots of exploitative control exerted over the natural world. On the other hand, in Europe the metaphor of Mother Earth had less harmful consequences for the natural world than the subsequent Enlightenment construal of nature as a machine (see Mühlhäusler 2003: 139; Verhagen 2008: 9; Merchant 2005: 41).

hostile and destructive side, including such phenomena as natural disasters, predator-pray relations, disease, and death.<sup>5</sup>

The same observations apply to the metaphor of Mother Nature. Thoreau makes relatively little use of this conventional, widespread metaphor. He even occasionally ventures to question it and elaborates it in original ways. The experience of traversing Mt. Katahdin and its rugged, desolate surroundings leads him to questioning the idea of benevolent Mother Nature. In the mountains, nature does not welcome him but says: "I cannot pity nor fondle thee here, but forever relentlessly drive thee hence to where I *am* kind. Why seek me where I have not called thee, and then complain because you find me but a stepmother?" (*The Maine Woods*, 31). Thoreau's feeling that he does not belong there leads him to doubt if nature is really his mother and not a severe step-mother. This is a new, wild face of nature that he unexpectedly encounters in the Maine wilderness, "not his Mother Earth" but "primeval, untamed, and forever untameable *Nature*" (*The Maine Woods*, 33). The actual experience of contact with the wild, desolate mountainous landscape shatters his cultural biases and preconceptions, and he begins to realize that there is no single loving nature waiting for him everywhere.

In the essay "Walking" Thoreau again employs the metaphor of Mother Nature in an unconventional way, giving it an unexpected twist and elaborating it in the following way: "vast, savage, hovering mother of ours, Nature, lying all around, with such beauty, and such affection for her children, as the leopard; and yet we are so early weaned from her breast to society" (*Wild Apples*, 84). The features conventionally highlighted by the Mother Nature metaphor (beauty, affection, nourishment) are unexpectedly supplemented with wilder aspects: she is called savage and is compared to a wild predator. The two distinct and incompatible images of nature, as a caring mother and a stern stepmother, which seemed irreconcilable in the Maine mountains, are united here in the image of a wild leopard mother, kind to her offspring and at the same time merciless to her prey. Both aspects of her behavior are equally natural and necessary for the survival of the species. Thoreau comes to realize, then, that nature is neither good nor evil, neither beneficent nor malicious to the beings that inhabit the earth, including humans. The elaboration of Mother Nature as a female leopard includes its wilder aspects, which are normally not highlighted by the metaphor.

Alternatively, nature can be metaphorically conceptualized as a human-made entity or a collection of them. Thoreau quite often employs the metaphorical construal of a landscape as a poem or a book that he can read. For instance, in his description of the succession of forest trees, the woods themselves are construed as a history book to be carefully studied and deciphered: "At this season of the year, when each leaf acquires its peculiar color, Nature prints this history distinctly — as

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<sup>5</sup> The metaphor of "Nature as romantic companion" is based on the groundless assumption "that our love is necessarily reciprocated" (Meisner 1995a: 16).

it were, an illuminated edition — and we can read it from afar. Every oak and hickory and birch and aspen, sprinkled amid the pines, tells its tale a mile off" (*Faith in a Seed* 170). The location of different species of trees with their distinct colors is the illustration of the final result of the history of the developing forest, which facilitates the process of reading the book of nature. At the same time, each of these trees reveals its own story, which forms an integral part of the larger narrative.

In the journal entry from March 23, 1856, Thoreau laments the disappearance of larger wild animals, which were exterminated before he was born. Throughout his life, he carefully studied the natural surroundings around his native town and then suddenly became aware of the incompleteness of his environment. To express the deplorable consequences of the loss of so many wild species, he uses two metaphorical construals of nature. First, the impoverished ecosystem is likened to a piece of music played by an incomplete orchestra: "I listen to a concert in which so many parts are wanting." Then it is compared to a poem in which certain passages are missing:

I take infinite pains to know all the phenomena ... thinking that I have here the entire poem, and then, to my chagrin, I hear that it is but an imperfect copy that I possess and have read, that my ancestors have torn out many of the first leaves and grandest passages, and mutilated it in many places. (*I to Myself*, 262)

The extinct species are metaphorically construed as integral parts of a poem, significant passages, which have been removed and lost. The metaphor emphasizes both the value of nature, construed as a masterpiece of music or poetry, and the interconnection of all its elements, since the destruction of some of its parts affects the integrity and beauty of the whole and so is a great loss.

Such passages appear to have their roots the medieval metaphor of the book of nature written by God, a trope that was later revived in Romantic literature. Thoreau's reverent attitude to nature, whose pages should be carefully deciphered in order to gain wisdom, and not altered or torn out, is reminiscent of the medieval approach.<sup>6</sup> However, the author of the book of nature in Thoreau's writings is usually not God, but personified Nature, a writer or a poet, "with pensive face, composing her poem Autumn" (*A Week*, 245).

Another similar metaphor is that of nature as a work of art. Natural scenery is often construed by Thoreau as a landscape painting (or tapestry), for example in his description of the summit of Mt. Wachusett: "Our eyes rested on no painted ceiling nor carpeted hall, but on skies of Nature's painting, and hills and forests of her embroidery" (*Wild Apples*, 35), or the view from the streets of Concord: "there is not a picture-gallery in the country which would be worth so much to us as is the western view at sunset under the elms of our main street. They are the frame to

<sup>6</sup> "Nature, like the Bible, had been given to humankind as a means of instruction. The principal task for humans was to discover the signification of every single sign in this book, not to rewrite it or improve on it" (Harré et al. 1999: 93–94); "people who see nature as a divine text will be more likely to adopt a passive rather than an active attitude towards nature" (Keulartz 2007: 28).

a picture which is daily painted behind them” (*Wild Apples*, 129). Similarly to the metaphor of the book of nature, this construal can be accompanied by the personification of nature as an artist, whether explicitly or implicitly.

In such cases, the natural world is seen, through image metaphors, as analogous to a landscape painting, or individual natural forms to sculptures and elements of architecture. As masterpieces, they are precious and by implication should be admired, protected, preserved in their original state as part of our heritage, and not altered or destroyed.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, Thoreau is aware of the fact that the natural world, unlike a work of art, is a process, not a static entity: “The tops of mountains are among the unfinished parts of the globe” (*The Maine Woods*, 31). While a work of art, such as a painting or a sculpture, is static and perfect, with all its parts and details carefully designed, shaped, and arranged, the mountain scenery is in the process of continual creation, not fully predictable or controllable, in which geological forces, weather conditions, and forest fires constantly keep shaping the rocky summit of the mountain and its surroundings.

Apart from the metaphorical construal of elements of the natural world as masterpieces, there are some related image metaphors in which natural entities are conceptualized as practical and useful products. For example, Walden Pond is perceived as a great, richly decorated mirror, which is constantly being cleaned and repaired: “Walden is a perfect forest mirror, set round with stones ... which no stone can crack, whose quicksilver will never wear off, whose gilding Nature continually repairs ... swept and dusted by the sun’s hazy brush — this the light dust-cloth” (*Walden*, 122–123). In “Autumnal Tints” trees growing along the streets of Concord are compared to ingeniously designed huge parasols spread over the village: “Think of these great yellow canopies or parasols held over our heads and houses ... And then how gently and unobserved they drop their burden and let in the sun when it is wanted ... and thus the village parasol is shut up and put away!” (*Wild Apples*, 120). These are image metaphors, based on physical similarities of color, shape or functional properties, such as reflecting light or giving shade. Like the two previous construals of nature as a book or a work of art, this one too may evoke, explicitly or implicitly, the personification of nature, in this case a designer and maker of beautiful, functional, durable products, surpassing human ingenuity.

Finally, in Thoreau’s late manuscript “The Dispersion of Seeds” nature is frequently presented as a wise, experienced, and patient forester, working slowly but steadily and effectively. The way in which nature manages forests turns out to be quite different from human practices and expectations. While human planters typically would like to achieve tangible results of their actions very fast and try to avoid wasting any seeds, nature works in a distinct way:

Nature works no faster than need be. ... she may seem to us slow or wholly idle, so leisurely and secure is she. She knows that seeds have many other uses than to reproduce their kind. If

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<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, by emphasizing its beauty, “we may implicitly be making nature into a visual resource to satisfy human aesthetic desires” (Meisner 1995b: 241).



every acorn of this year's crop is destroyed, or the pines bear no seed, never fear. She has more years to come. (*Faith in a Seed*, 37)

Thoreau points out that seeds are produced by trees in excessive quantities because they serve other functions as well, being the source of nourishment for numerous animals. In fact, given their large numbers, it would not be desirable for all of them to develop into trees, as he observes: "it will not do to let many of these willow seeds ... succeed, for if every white-willow seed were to become a tree like this, in a few years the entire mass of the planet would be converted into willow woods, which is not Nature's design" (*Faith in a Seed*, 61). Nature even predicts the possibility of natural or human-caused disasters and takes measures to repair their consequences by planting on the forest floor bushes of berries, which begin to grow rapidly in the sun once the taller trees suddenly disappear: "Nature keeps a supply of these important plants in her nursery under the larger woods, always ready for casualties, as fires, windfalls, and clearings by man" (*Faith in a Seed*, 77). Managed wisely by nature, woods develop, thrive, and recover.

Owners of woodlots, however, ignorant of the way nature works, actually ruin natural processes of forest regeneration by their imprudent interventions, instead of letting nature take care of their woodlots: "They may have designs of their own on those acres, but they have not considered what Nature's design is. By a judicious letting Nature alone merely, we might recover our chestnut wood in the course of a century" (*Faith in a Seed*, 129). By adding an intentional agent, the metaphor serves as a tool for explaining complex phenomena of the succession of trees and for persuading readers to pay attention to and cooperate with natural processes instead of disrupting them: "When we experiment in planting forests, we find ourselves at last doing as Nature does. Would it not be well to consult with Nature in the outset? — for she is the most extensive and experienced planter of us all" (*Faith in a Seed*, 134). Using this metaphor, Thoreau argues that both the woods and their owners would benefit if the people cooperated with nature according to her own plans or even let the forests alone.

This particular construal is different from the others employed by Thoreau because it does not introduce any source domain distinct from the target domain of nature: the forest is both the source and the target. The metaphor just adds an agent to the construal, presenting natural processes as resulting from nature's plans and deliberate actions, through the metaphor EVENTS / PROCESSES ARE ACTIONS. Thus, unlike the other metaphors discussed above, which involve source domains connected with human culture and civilization (family, literature, art, design and production), it clearly presents nature as distinct from humans and governed by other laws. Unfortunately, this interesting alternative construal has not become widespread, and NATURE IS A FORESTER has not become a conventional conceptual metaphor, perhaps because the text has been published quite recently and remains relatively unknown, in contrast to Thoreau's other, more popular and more influential works.

### 3. Conclusion

Many of the metaphorical construals of nature that Thoreau employs are based on conventional conceptual metaphors, such as NATURE IS A COMPANION, NATURE IS A WOMAN, which is elaborated by him as his bride, and NATURE IS OUR MOTHER, which is questioned by him and elaborated as our stepmother or leopard mother. The conventional conceptual metaphors NATURE IS A BOOK and NATURE IS A WORK OF ART are supplemented by novel metaphors created by Thoreau himself: NATURE IS A CONCERT and NATURAL ENTITIES ARE PRODUCTS. Another original construal invented by Thoreau is the metaphor NATURE IS A FORESTER.

Personification suggests that nature is an active, creative, wise being governing the surrounding world. It also implies a holistic, organic vision of nature. On the other hand, the metaphor of nature as a human-made artifact presents it as inorganic and inanimate. At the same time, however, seeing nature as a masterpiece of art, literature, or music reveals Thoreau's reverent and full of admiration attitude to it. The manner in which he employs and elaborates both metaphorical construals reflects his conviction of the preciousness, perfection, and wisdom of nature.

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