

## Nature/Eco Essay

Nature writing is a form of [creative nonfiction](#) in which the natural environment (or a [narrator](#)'s encounter with the natural environment) serves as the dominant subject.

"In critical practice," says Michael P. Branch, "the term 'nature writing' has usually been reserved for a brand of nature representation that is deemed literary, written in the speculative personal [voice](#), and presented in the form of the nonfiction [essay](#). Such nature writing is frequently pastoral or romantic in its philosophical assumptions, tends to be modern or even ecological in its sensibility, and is often in service to an explicit or implicit preservationist agenda" ("Before Nature Writing," in *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, ed. by K. Armbruster and K.R. Wallace, 2001).

### Examples of Nature Writing:

At the Turn of the Year, by William Sharp

[The Battle of the Ants, by Henry David Thoreau](#)

Hours of Spring, by Richard Jefferies

The House-Martin, by Gilbert White

[In Mammoth Cave, by John Burroughs](#)

An Island Garden, by Celia Thaxter

January in the Sussex Woods, by Richard Jefferies

[The Land of Little Rain, by Mary Austin](#)

Migration, by Barry Lopez

[The Passenger Pigeon, by John James Audubon](#)

[Rural Hours, by Susan Fenimore Cooper](#)

[Where I Lived, and What I Lived For, by Henry David Thoreau](#)

### Observations:

"Gilbert White established the pastoral dimension of **nature writing** in the late 18th century and remains the patron saint of English nature writing. [Henry David Thoreau](#) was an equally crucial figure in mid-19th century America . . .

"The second half of the 19th century saw the origins of what we today call the environmental movement. Two of its most influential American voices were [John](#)

[Muir](#) and [John Burroughs](#), literary sons of Thoreau, though hardly twins. . . .

"In the early 20th century the activist voice and prophetic anger of nature writers who saw, in Muir's words, that 'the money changers were in the temple' continued to grow. Building upon the principles of scientific ecology that were being developed in the 1930s and 1940s, Rachel Carson and Aldo Leopold sought to create a literature in which appreciation of nature's wholeness would lead to ethical principles and social programs.

"Today, nature writing in America flourishes as never before. [Nonfiction](#) may well be the most vital form of current American literature, and a notable proportion of the best writers of nonfiction practice nature writing."

(J. Elder and R. Finch, Introduction, *The Norton Book of Nature Writing*. Norton, 2002)

### "Human Writing . . . in Nature"

"By cordoning nature off as something separate from ourselves and by writing about it that way, we kill both the [genre](#) and a part of ourselves. The best writing in this genre is not really '**nature writing**' anyway but human writing that just happens to take place in nature. And the reason we are still talking about [Thoreau's] *Walden* 150 years later is as much for the personal story as the pastoral one: a single human being, wrestling mightily with himself, trying to figure out how best to live during his brief time on earth, and, not least of all, a human being who has the nerve, talent, and raw ambition to put that wrestling match on display on the printed page. The human spilling over into the wild, the wild informing the human; the two always intermingling. There's something to celebrate." (David Gessner, "Sick of Nature." *The Boston Globe*, Aug. 1, 2004)

### Confessions of a Nature Writer

"I do not believe that the solution to the world's ills is a return to some previous age of mankind. But I do doubt that any solution is possible unless we think of ourselves in the context of living nature

"Perhaps that suggests an answer to the question what a '**nature writer**' is. He is not a sentimentalist who says that 'nature never did betray the heart that loved her.' Neither is he simply a scientist classifying animals or reporting on the

behavior of birds just because certain facts can be ascertained. He is a writer whose subject is the natural context of human life, a man who tries to communicate his observations and his thoughts in the presence of nature as part of his attempt to make himself more aware of that context. 'Nature writing' is nothing really new. It has always existed in literature. But it has tended in the course of the last century to become specialized partly because so much writing that is not specifically 'nature writing' does not present the natural context at all; because so many novels and so many treatises describe man as an economic unit, a political unit, or as a member of some social class but not as a living creature surrounded by other living things."

(Joseph Wood Krutch, "Some Unsentimental Confessions of a Nature Writer." *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, 1952)

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