

From Silenced Nature to Worldness in American Literature

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Abstract

As Christopher Manes writes, '[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' (Manes, 1996). According to this view, nature is less silent than silenced, the difference lying in a refusal to have a relationship with the natural world because of the lack of adequate language to describe our relationship with our natural environment. Human faculties promoted by the Enlightenment have led humans to believe that our language 'ha[s] no analogues in the natural world'. I will show that American authors such as Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold or Edward Abbey accounted for a multi-sensorial experience of nature that betrays an attempt to find a form of language that would relate humans to natural elements. Although nature does not 'speak', I will argue that humans were provided with their sensory perception that allows them to appreciate worldness and to develop a harmonious relationship with the rest of the world. I will also stress that our alienation from the natural world is as much a cultural problem as it is a consequence of Western consumer capitalism and supermodernity, as suggested, for example, in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985). Adopting an ecocritical approach, I will examine the ways in which we tend to perceive worldness as silent and how literary texts may revive worldness and world as essential concepts in the study of the relationship between literature and our physical environment.