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# Cultural Nature in Andrew Marvell's *The Mower Against Gardens*

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**Abstract:** There has always been a dichotomy between 'nature' and 'culture' in literary theory and criticism, the outcome of which is but preference of one over the other. In this study, a poem by Andrew Marvell is chosen which best exemplifies the play of these two terms which result in merging this binary opposition in a way that defining one concept is conceivable in terms of the other. In view of the fact that culture functions a basic and inevitable role in literature and considering Baroque reasoning of the seventeenth century in mind, impact of culture in Marvell's *The Mower Against Gardens* on the basis of Terry Eagleton's definition of culture is noticeable. In this regard, analysis of the poem embraces consideration of the speaker's tone and consciousness as well as the poet's viewpoint toward historical and cultural indications of the time, exposing how nature and culture affect each other without being conflicting to each other. The present paper aims to prove impact of culture with ample extracts of natural descriptions of the poem and disclose that 'nature' and 'culture' are applied interchangeably. In this study, the dominant cultural, socio-political and religious ideas and their impact on Marvell's poem are taken into account. Application of Eagleton's definition becomes possible through differentiation between the poet's and the speaker's idea toward nature and existing dialogism between the artificial and the natural in the poem.

**Keywords:** Culture, Nature, Terry Eagleton, Baroque, Andrew Marvell, *The Mower Against Gardens*, Historical, Religious

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## 1. Introduction

Considering concept of culture versus nature as explained by Terry Eagleton, and regarding Andrew Marvell's nature poetry which regards both human nature as well as natural nature, this article tries to analyze whether concept of culture as nature is applicable to Marvell's nature poem specifically to the one in which there is a speaker-as-Mower. In this sense, *The Mower Against Gardens* has been selected among the collection of "Mower Poems" since the subject of the poem elucidates relationship between nature and art and hence the claim of this article is best suited. Along with a holistic view of Eagleton's idea of culture, the purpose of this study is applicability of this view on controversial Baroque poetry from a philosophical, historical as well as religious point of view.

Moreover, for present analysis a 'poem' was chosen since among different definitions existing for social concept of

culture and analysis of some related parts of a poem, there remains a functional idea of culture as something very natural to human nature and society, which is best illustrated in poetry in the sense that poetry aligns directly and naturally to human nature. As Eagleton puts it in his *How to read a poem*, poetry is the language which the reader 'reconstructs' with the help of a context in order to make sense of it and these contextual clues are not arbitrary, but rather, they are cultural clues for the reader to grasp out of the world. In this way, the features that the reader examines in a poem are not actually on the page as the world does not come to us as a raw material, but as 'already signifying' for instance connotations in poems are clusters of associated meanings which are built into its language [4].

Although 'nature' has always been opposed to 'culture', Eagleton considers it as a derivative of 'culture'. He believes that one of the original meanings of culture is husbandry cultivating and transfiguring nature to be in accordance and harmony with human living conditions [5]. The word culture

shifts from rural to urban existence and etymologically comes from nature as the word 'coultur' means blade of ploughshare. Of course, 'nature' as so is the subject of both 'spontaneity' as well as 'regulation' meaning that the spontaneous growth is sometimes changed to be regulated in order to reach to the individual and social targets on the basis of human conditions. It is clear that this idea of nature is culturally transmitted from one generation to the other for having been a social heritage. Both 'culture' and 'nature' are to be seen outwardly as well as inwardly as they mean what is around us and what is inside [5].

For understanding a familiar and easy meaning of culture, human beings are considered for making things, translate the ideas into objects and hence the very first sense of the word 'culture' conveys normal behaviors and experiences by which they live and engage; the second sense of the word is the artifacts, the shape that human beings give to the natural environment [10]. Marvell also always discusses nature in terms of its relationship with a human being, here the Mower, and because man and nature are parts of a total entity completing each other [9], the Mower poem is considered as a scene for interpretation of the cultural on the basis of the natural descriptions, the objects on the basis of which man/poet translate his ideas.

Since 'culture' generally contains some subjective functions such as philosophy, art, morality, traditions, as well as religion, the dramatic discussion in the poem is illustrative of the different religious ideas between the speaker's and that of the poet's in Baroque historical atmosphere in the sense that artificiality of Baroque gardens is recognized as the 'denaturation' of the ideal simplicity and innocence of anti-Catholic Protestantism [8]. Moreover, as culture traces a historical transition and reveals related philosophical concepts, discussion of change and identity is paid attention and in the way that culture means "active tending of natural growth, then it suggests dialectic between the artificial and the natural" [5] which is analyzed in the Mower conversation in the Mower Poem. So in this article, how Marvell's Mower poem reveals Eagleton's idea of culture is analyzed.

## 2. Discussion

### 2.1. Definitions and Etymology of Culture, a Historical/Religious Perspective

General definitions of 'culture' comprise different explanatory contexts such as 'descriptive', 'historical', 'psychological', 'structural', 'genetical', and 'normative' ones. In general, some of the mentioned definitions allude to human being's behaviors or learning on the basis of which they perform in relation to their environment and for the aim of adjustment to their living conditions. Some other definitions are based on a legacy of traditions, rules, ways, and habits; or emphasize on a genetical construction, ideas and symbols from which the concept of 'culture' has come out [1]. What can be implied and deduced from all of the above is what Terry Eagleton has summarized in his

definition of 'culture' as related to 'nature'. By drawing a metaphorical meaning, he compares human's nature to the natural environment which is the raw material out of which humans should construct or 'cultivate' the 'culture' in harmony with their needs. As the poet belongs to Baroque era, he reveals the idea of an enclosed nature in the form of a metaphorical garden in which man has made the garden square, as he says in *The Mower Against Gardens*: "He first enclosed within the garden's square/ A dead and standing pool of air," (line 5-6), so since nature is an emblem of culture and reveals human nature, the same artificiality existing in human's nature also exists in nature itself: "With strange perfumes he did the roses taint;/ And flowers themselves were taught to paint." (Lines 11-12).

Eagleton alludes to the Latin root of the word 'culture' as 'colere' which is "anything from cultivating and inhabiting to worshipping and protecting. It also ends up via the Latin 'cultus' as the religious term 'cult', just as the idea of culture itself in the modern age comes to substitute itself for a fading sense of divinity" [5]. As religion is a cultural system of behaviors and world views which relates human beings with the cosmos they live in, the relation between religious concept and its reflections on 'nature' and consequently its influence on 'culture', are traced in the history from Middle Ages when religious speculation symbolized as 'garden of love' was intimate; and to the Renaissance when the religion symbolized in nature became grandeur, hence the religious symbolism being secularized. It metamorphosed from a fruit garden into an ornamental one. This progression at the time of Baroque came into being as a specific garden fitted to the palaces demonstrated in the architecture as well as paintings of the time [8]. There are mazes or labyrinths with the fountains and sculptures as ornaments in these gardens. This artificial nature as garden was based on the Absolutist prince's enclosed power. It means that nature was enclosed like the power in the hands of the prince who thought his power to be centralized and concentrated [8]. As the kings were cut off from the populace and religion was internalized and more inward, so did nature also follow the same process of change. During the puritan rein of Cromwell, Baroque gardens as well as Stuart absolutism were destroyed (ibid, p. 46). Andrew Marvell's *The Mower against Garden* explains this by changing artificiality of Baroque garden into a metaphysical poem. Marvell appoints a 'mower' to talk and criticize as his out-speaker that humans have destroyed pure nature transfiguring into their own needs as: "Luxurious man, to bring his vice in use,/ Did after him the world seduce,/ And from the fields the flowers and plants allure,/ Where Nature was most plain and pure." (lines 1-4).

Religiously speaking, beside the fact that some words have biblical allusions such as 'vice' and 'seduce', a number of sins are also assigned to humans such as 'pride', 'adultery', and 'luxury' which is seen through unnatural breeding of the plants as: "He grafts upon the wild the tame,/ That the uncertain and adult'rate fruit" (lines 24-25). The 'mower' favors nature to be plain and pure not being cultivated because Marvell lived at the time when a 'new heaven' and a

'new earth' were expected due to the religious as well as political chaos and he regarded this damage done by the Civil War and the religious controversy [3]. So, the cultivated gardens refer to the time when people yearn for Eden which symbolically they do the reforms to reach the desired Eden. Culturally, the point of Marvell's interest in meaning of the pastoral is that mind is fitted to structure of the world it perceives and it is unity of mind and nature.

## 2.2. Philosophical Considerations

Considering historical transition of culture, some philosophical issues come to exist such as "change and identity, freedom and determinism, and also the given and the created" [5]. What human beings do to the world is the artificial and what the world does to them is the natural, both of them being two sides of the 'culture' itself; therefore, regarding the fact that "culture means the active tending of the natural growth", there exists "dialectic between the artificial and the natural" [5]. Nature is the raw material and there should be some constructive element transforming it into the humans' desired form. Viewing the concept of 'change and identity', the mower defines himself as a god-like figure who thinks that the natural has been tainted by the luxurious man, whereas the poet presents him as a child-like figure who cannot distinguish between his desires and reality. In this sense, the four Mower poems can be viewed as the famous 'innocence and experience' approach in which *The Mower Against Gardens* is a song of innocence, revealing the speaker in a state of defending the nature against the corruption done by the luxurious man. But since the mower lives in a garden and not in Eden, nature is supposed to conform to his nature. It is as if there is a gap which should be filled with culture. Eagleton in his comment in a preface on Edward Bond's drama, *The Fool*, says: "we don't have a fixed nature in the way other animals do. We have a gap left by our freedom from the captive nature of other animals, ... The gap is filled by culture. Human nature is in fact culture" [6]. As in Marvell's poem, it is the human nature that is cultural constructive element; in other words, the artifice is in a way naturalized. The fields and meadows are natural nature which are cultivated and transfigured into a desired garden by human artificial purposes and interferences as a cultural element. So, as a review on *Nature and Art in Renaissance* reveals, the poet is engaged in a philosophical debate on nature of his mower's contact with nature he knows and in this interaction, man is involved in a "double estate" of having a capacity both for harmony with nature and also alienation from it [12].

## 2.3. Nature / Culture Concepts

Based on the familiar definition of nature and specifically garden, poets generally seek for different meanings in nature. In other words, natural objects function as arbitrary signs for ideological purposes for poets. These signs can be theological, philosophical, scientific, and aesthetic, all of them existing in the culture of Marvell's age. Accordingly,

the ways nature is viewed as figurative, objective, and subjective, are categorized [13]. Marvell is a poet who uses natural objects for a very allusive purpose to initiate his ideas. His description of natural nature is a particular one and not something general in the sense that he talks about a scene in a special time and place because in the seventeenth century people were under the influence of scientific new learning which was based on exact observation and experiment. Of course among the poets of different ages, the Romantics were the ones to reflect a particular description of nature, yet they took the origin of the idea from seventeenth century poets, who turned to the physical environment while the Romantics made use of more sensuous words in their solitude. Among the seventeenth century poets, Marvell was the forerunner of the Romantic 'nature poets'. However, unlike the Romantics, Marvell took the natural not as a pure sensuous but as something 'spiritual' and objective which "later poets like Crashaw and Milton took as their sources" [7] stated by the poet that "Their statues polished by some ancient hand/ May to adorn the gardens stand;/ But, howsoe'er the figures do excel,/ The gods themselves with us do dwell" (lines 37-40).

Regarding Marvell's nature poem and Eagleton's idea of nature, gardening and its distinctions are natural in the way they are produced by nature somehow as mentioned in *Mower against Garden* when mower says that "fauns and fairies do the meadow till,/ More by their presence than their skill." (Lines 35-6). In these lines, "labor, art, and agency are erased in a nature that 'is' rather than 'does', yet paradoxically tills or cultivates at the same time" and so, the given order of nature is reappropriated against the ideas of those who think that it's by an artificial agency and this is what culture gentrifies and naturalized the artificiality [2].

The viewpoint of the poet himself and that of his speaker's, the rustic mower, can be best understood by assigning a dialogism between them. There is a conflict between opposing ideas which on one side is the mower having a hostile tone and judging the horticulturalists based on the standards of a purer world; on the other side is the idea of "horticultural improvements of nature" [11]. The mower's hostile tone is due to the corruption and duplicity the luxurious man brings about by being seduced and seducing the garden by saying: "The Pink grew then as double as his Mind;/ The nutriment did change the kind./ With strange perfumes he did the Roses taint./ And Flow'rs themselves were taught to paint." (Lines 9-12). The poet, by referring to fertilizing and grafting as the symbol of the civilized gardening, suggests the wondrous results of civilized gardening and reveals his happiness with the renovation of the horticulturalism. So, by bringing this sort of conflict, the poem is analyzed as a changing society and culture.

## 3. Conclusion

As culture etymologically comes from nature and also nature reflexes culture of Marvell's poetry, so these two concepts can be interchangeably being applied. Within ourselves culture is a sort of division between that part of us

which cultivates or refines and the other part which is the raw material for being cultivated. Nature also is a subject which is spontaneous and at the same time regulatory, meaning that it grows spontaneously while it can be changed according to the rules of the society. This was the idea applied in Andrew Marvell's poem, *The Mower Against Garden*. In the dialogism between the poet and his speaker, the mower who criticized the 'luxurious man' for seducing the nature, and viewed this manner of cultivation as a form of adultery was culturally shaped in a self-reflexive way. Yet, the poet believes that human beings are not born as cultural or natural beings, but rather, as beings whose nature is such that culture is a necessity and in this respect, culture and nature are not two opposing elements but the supplementary concepts. In other words, when man encounters one cultural element in nature, his nature is transformed rather than destroyed. In this poem, the poet reveals in the mower, realization of a capacity which is alienated form nature and at the same time is in harmony with it and human nature is compared to the natural environment from which man reconstructs or cultivates culture based on his own ideas and needs as the word culture etymologically conveys.

Everything related to culture at last becomes natural in the way that seemingly plays the same role as nature does and man feels cultural just as natural. This happens when man feels a move within his/her nature in order to cultivate a habit in mind as the mower first finds and criticizes the new cultural elements in nature and then feels a move towards it by creating a habit in his mind and at the end, the poet reveals this cultural feature as being natural, which is interpreted in multiple ways such as religious, philosophical as well as historical since Marvell himself is a very allusive poet.

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