

Welcome to Entanglements, the new podcast from the Jesus College Intellectual Forum. In the previous episode, I visited the British Library and sat down with Dr Tess Somervell to talk about how the Romantic poets viewed and interacted with the natural world. I found this fascinating; however, I wanted to also explore less Romantic views of nature.

To do this, I sat down with Dr Molly Becker, who recently completed her PhD in early 20th century Midwestern American fiction with a particular focus on how people related to their region and the environment around them. I sat down with Molly in one of the old courts at Jesus College, Cambridge. However, unfortunately, it was quite a windy day and at points, unexpectedly noisy. Therefore, apologies that at points, the audio sounds slightly muffled and you can hear some background noise. Nevertheless, our conversation rotated around some really interesting themes, particularly the importance of the frontier and the “other” in the construction of the American consciousness. We also went on to talk about the naturalist movement, which tends to see nature as amoral or at the very least, ambivalent to humankind, much unlike the Romantic movement discussed in the first half of this episode.

I started by asking Molly, what sort of literature was most popular in the Midwest a hundred years ago?

Dr Molly Becker: Midwestern novels from that time period that were really popular were all kind of idealistic farm novels, really thinking about kind of the farm as a place of wholesome American values. And that was really appealing at the time when people were very worried about the influx of immigrants to the country and the Midwest was seen more as a pure American region. That idea runs throughout American history. It's surfacing now, in ways that are incredibly similar to what they were in the 1920s, which is always interesting and disturbing to see when you're looking back at a hundred years ago, how similar it is to today. But the novels that were really popular were wholesome of the land, particularly with female heroines who were very attuned to the land and there were lots of links between female fertility and being able to get things from the land. Interesting in a way because it shifts away from the male connection to nature, which I think is really at the forefront when you think about American literature relating to nature. You think of men in the wilderness, but a lot of the popular novels were from the female point of view, which I thought was really interesting.

Noah Rouse: You mentioned before that ethics in these novels were nature-based. What role did the land play in this literature?

Dr Becker: If you look at this time period, the idea of rootedness becomes something that comes up over and over again and that has a lot to do with the xenophobic attitude towards immigrants that was really dominant at the time. And rootedness was a word taken straight out of agriculture and nature to show your connection to the land. In a lot of these novels there's motifs of people coming to farmland and planting things to show that they've staked their claim on the land and then they belong there. There's a really great scene in one of the novels that won the Pulitzer Prize in the 1920s—it's a quintessential novel of this period

that's not critically acclaimed anymore and probably shouldn't be—but it's a woman who's arrived from Germany and she's carried this plant with her all the way from Germany across the country to get to Iowa. And then she passes on cuttings of the plant to other pioneer women who have arrived there. And it's kind of a way to establish a community and a culture and tame the land that's already there and subjugate it and make it feel more like the place it's come from.

Noah: How did this literature and this self-identity which was starting to construct, how did that interact with the land? And what sort of land was it crucially it interacted with? Is it prairie land or farmland or mountain land?

Dr Becker: So this in the Midwest is primarily prairie land, so big wide open spaces that were really easy to farm. I mean, not easy, but they were productive farmlands. The Midwest at this time I think is really interesting because the frontier had moved on, so for a really long time in American history, the places around Ohio and Indiana, that area was the frontier. So if you're from the East Coast, you were from established, civilized land. And if you're from a little bit farther on, you're from the wilds. But by the time the turn of the century rolls around, the frontier has moved all the way out to the West. And so the Midwest had to redefine itself as a place that was in between the really established, civilized, cultural area of New England and the Wild West that was so mythologized in the American mind. And the Midwest is stuck in the middle in this weird liminal space. And they had to figure out what their new self-identity was in terms of having tamed the land, but still being considered to be from a more remote, uncivilized place than New England.

Noah: So if we think about taming the land, how did that come about? What was the process in which people constructed their ideas around the land? And if they self-identified from it, or was it a case of, this is the land, I work the land and I profit from the land? Or does there seem to be in the literature, sort of almost Romantic or Transcendental themes of connection to the land?

Dr Becker: So I think thinking about the frontier is really interesting and productive in terms of the American mindset and the dime novels and penny dreadfuls that were really influential in terms of making the West—the far West—really dominant in people's minds. It was all about man versus nature and kind of man versus natural forces and stereotypical forces of evil and all of that kind of thing. And that was really based in the West. Whether or not—by the point at the end of the 19th century when these novels were still incredibly popular, it wasn't really the case anymore as much, but it was still really prominent in people's minds in terms of defining what the American character was. And then moving on past that in the Midwest and farther in New England, especially as the country became more industrialized post-Civil War, there were really a lot of people who felt like the country was losing some of its inherent character by becoming more industrialized. More people were working in factories and fewer people were working on the land, and having that connection through those dime novels to an American character that was really of the land and was based in remote places and big mountains and rivers and big vistas—that was really important to people. It was really just the idea of nature being such a large part of

people's construction of the idea of self and that you can be in an urban environment but still idealize the natural world around you.

Noah: Do you think this idea of nature was shared throughout America in the sense that this humans versus nature frontier mentality, is that something which you think was found both in the frontiers and across to the east?

Dr Becker: I mean, where I've found most evidence of it is not in the frontier, you had less time and less capacity to get access to literature and to read the fiction that was shaping people's perceptions of the country and where you did have the time to do that, you were in places that were more established, more settled, where you could have the time to come in at the end of your day and sit with your gas lamp or your oil lamp, which you had to be able to afford and to read the book that you were then able to afford. So it was kind of a fictionalized version for people who weren't experiencing it and who had some reason to feel like they had a connection to it, they wanted to feel like they had a connection to that lifestyle.

Noah: And it's really interesting, maybe they're drawing on themes of othering nature and othering the land, constructing identities in opposition to it, but also that strange tension between constructing a theoretical identity in relation to nature and the tension there between nature as something which is to be conquered but also something which is quite powerful. So when we think about the literature or think about what people thought about it, how is nature presented?

Dr Becker: So I think what really speaks well to Romanticism in terms of where American literature went from there is thinking about naturalism, which is a reaction to Romanticism along the lines of realism, just deep loyalty to kind of what was actually happening and what was actually existing and kind of trying to represent that as closely as possible on the page. Naturalism, in terms of how nature played a role—it was less idealized than in Romanticism. It kind of wasn't idealized at all. It was really seen as something that was ambivalent to humanity. It's a force that man is battling against, but that is very indifferent to the lives of man in a way that's very different from how the Romantics saw nature. Zola was the person who's seen as one of the father figures of naturalism in the mid-19th century, but it came over to the US by the late 19th century. But Zola's idea of human beasts was really fundamental, and it's a man battling their inner natural selves and trying to have a veneer of social susceptibility while always fighting their more bestial side. That was very influenced by Darwin's theory of evolution in terms of that constant battle against your environment, but while still being incredibly influenced by your environment and what's around you.

Noah: So in this naturalistic view, does nature hold any moral weight, or is it amoral? Is it even a cohesive whole, or is it just a set of elements which man is trying to overcome?

Dr Becker: So Stephen Crane I think is really interesting in terms of thinking about this. He has a short story called "On The Boat" that was published at the end of the 19th century.

And it's about a shipwreck that he himself experienced, but he writes it from a different character's point of view. And at first when they're shipwrecked, the shipwreck survivors see nature as something to fight against, and nature is something that's against them actively. They're battling against nature to save themselves. But eventually the dawning realization of the character who's telling the story is that nature is actually ambivalent and doesn't care what happens to them and isn't motivated to destroy them or to save them. It's just something that exists and they have to exist within it and alongside it and figure out what to do. And it's quite the revelation at the end of the story that in fact nature is just ambivalent.

Noah: I've re-recorded my question here because a fire engine drove through the background. However, I asked Molly about this microcosm of fighting nature, then coming round to recognising its ambivalence towards humankind, and whether she thinks it links to or reflects anything about frontier and post-frontier ideas and ideology.

Dr Becker: Frederick Jackson Turner has the dominant frontier theory, which has a lot of issues and people have pushed back against it, are still pushing back against it. But it's the idea that the American character was shaped by the experience on the frontier, and that everything that's fundamentally American and that distinguishes the United States from Europe emerged from having to conquer land and settle land that's completely untouched—or, through the white perspective, completely untouched. And I mean, while again, people have pushed back against Turner's thoughts since the 1890s, it's really dominant as a starting point for how people think about how people then were thinking about the American character and it really fundamentally coming out of the frontier experience. And I think again, if you're thinking about having to redefine the nation after the frontier has shifted and after the frontier is closed—because Frederick Jackson Turner closes his speech where he gives this frontier theory by saying that now, in the 1890s, the frontier is closed, that it's the end of the first era of American history—now we have to move on to the next era of American history, thinking about how you react once that process of controlling the land is over.

Sinclair Lewis actually has a really interesting quote in *Main Street* (1920) about this. They're talking about the “village virus”, which is American small-town small-mindedness, which one of the characters is lamenting having fallen into. And he says at one point that: “We have nature beaten, we can make her grow wheat, we can keep warm when she sends blizzards, so we raise the devil just for pleasure. War, politics, race hatreds, labor disputes”. So he's basically saying that now that we've conquered nature, we are fighting amongst ourselves and we're finding all these petty little issues because we don't have this massive task to focus on anymore. And I think that shift in mindset around the turn of the 20th century was really challenging for the American mindset to deal with and to figure out where to go next.

Noah: Because you suddenly lose the idea of virtue and such like. If you just, let me take a slightly wider view there, where did it go next? And how do you think the natural world plays a role in that, if it does?

Dr Becker: By the time the 1930s roll around you get to the Depression, so that's a period when the temptation again is to start to go back to the land as something that will be a provider even during this terrible economic time. So that was again like a shift towards the conservative mindset of viewing the land as the rooted place that you can go back to even amid all this strife. So that's kind of where they went to immediately after. But there's a lot of kind of really interesting writing that comes out of cities and that's really productively engaging with the polyglot country that's forming at this time. Many people are seeing this as dangerous, but I think a lot of writers are seeing it as really productive, and that's really focused on the urban environment. So I think there's a shift towards that, where there hadn't been as much in the decades prior in the mid-20th century. I think while the land has been seen as really fundamentally American, there's a shift, or at least a new school of thought that's emerging that sees something distinctly American in the urban environment as well. So all of a sudden, you don't have to define yourself by the land, you can find things in other environments that can become distinctly American.

Noah: And just on that, do you think that, obviously a hundred years later, do you think that there's still resonances of this sort of thinking?

Dr Becker: In terms of the American concept of nature, I think there's still kind of a lot of pride in the natural spaces that the United States has. I mean, the early 20th century was when they start establishing national parks and really protecting nature in a way that roots it to the nation. National parks are all national land, so they're very tied to the national identity in a way that they might not be as much if they belonged to individual states.

Noah: Apologies, I've also re-recorded this question because once again a fire engine drove by. I asked Molly, coming back to the idea of Americanisation being connected with the land, how did frontier and post-frontier literature relate to Indigenous people, if it did at all, and were these people connected with the American idea of nature or the land in any way?

Dr Becker: The way that people thought about Indigenous people in the early 20th century when I was focusing was that they weren't there, and in a lot of the novels that were really popular it was kind of something that was too difficult to think about. It is quite interesting, because if you think about the dime novels, a lot of the early dime novels, they were really focused on white pioneers versus Native Americans. But as Native Americans were subjugated and put onto reservations, that became much less appealing, even though the dime novels are focusing on a fictionalized version of the West. So you could still imagine that that's still a conflict. But as soon as reservations were put into place and the Native American threat, so to speak, was contained, that became a lot less interesting in fiction and so then it became much more about nature or other types of threats that white heroes, cowboys, outlaws had to fight against.

Noah: So sort of the "other", and the indigenous as this constructed other, which American identity was defined as opposite to, do you think sort of nature itself started to take that place or do you think that's too much?

Dr Becker: I think it's all tied together. I mean, Theodore Roosevelt very much defined American identity by conflicts with Native Americans. And so if Frederick Jackson Turner was thinking about the frontier as in the place, the land just behind the border, Theodore Roosevelt was very much thinking about it as the border itself. And he saw the American personality or American culture as emerging from skirmishes, very, very rooted in violence and kind of violence of two races against each other. So that was another conflicting school of thought with Turner's, and I think Turner's point of view, as problematic as it is, at least started to supplant that, the more kind of racially oriented view of the frontier, to make it more about the land and nature.

Noah: I really enjoyed speaking to Molly and I found it really interesting that just like at the beginning of the podcast when we talked about nature as being a placeholder, so too at points does nature, or at least the idea of nature, seem to have become a placeholder for various different concepts which the American consciousness used to identify and define itself in relation to. I think this is a powerful reminder of the inescapability of our own subjectivity. For instance, it seems to me that both the experiences of Romanticism and naturalism are valid. This led me to reflect on the extent to which our different ideas of what nature is, and the role that nature can play and does play in our lives, is so deeply intertwined with the way we already see ourselves and our own place in the world. To do this further, I decided to try and explore the scientific or mathematic view of nature. Therefore, in the next episode I sit down with Professor Marcus de Sotoy to discuss the impact of a mathematical world view on our perceptions of nature and our place within it. I look forward to you joining me there and, for the time being, thank you for listening. I've been Noah and this has been Entanglements.

Credits: Written, produced, presented and edited by me, Noah Rouse, on behalf of the Jesus College Intellectual Forum. Original music by Xanthe Evans.