


## Nature and Childhood in Ruskin Bond's Short Stories

Himanshu Kumar \*   
Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
Hansraj College  
University of Delhi  
Delhi, India.

### ABSTRACT

Ruskin Bond, an eminent Indian author, is lauded for his ability to exquisitely capture the spirit of nature and the naivety of childhood in his literary creations. His short stories portray the deep influence of nature on the lives and experiences of his child protagonists. Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth and William Blake envisaged an intimate connection between nature and childhood. Wordsworth portrays nature as a comforting retreat offering relief and revitalisation where childhood innocence is idealised. On the other hand, Blake juxtaposes childhood innocence with the grim realities of life, often using nature as a symbol for these opposing states. Bond's stories delve into the importance of nature by highlighting how various aspects of the world serve as a setting for his characters' escapades. They explore how the distinct flora and fauna found in the Himalayan region play a significant role in shaping the characters' perceptions and choices throughout their journeys. In addition, they focus on Bond's portrayal of childhood, emphasising traits such as callowness, fortitude, and inquisitiveness exhibited by his characters. This paper examines how the young characters in Bond's stories manoeuvre through the challenges of a fast-changing world and find comfort and knowledge through their interactions with nature. His storytelling not only encases the innocent and delightful aspects of childhood but also delivers a powerful message about the environment. It encourages readers to value, protect, and peacefully coexist with nature.

**Keywords:** *Nature, childhood, Romantic, innocence, experience, storytelling.*

Children often perceive nature as a realm brimming with enigma and potential. To them, the wild elements of nature carry a sense of strength and consciousness. Our connection to nature as adults is often rooted in our childhood encounters with it. Parents or guardians hold influence in exposing children to the wonders of nature. However, what truly captivates children during their adventures in nature is the exhilarating sense of freedom.

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\* Authors: Himanshu Kumar

E-mail: [himanshukumar@hrc.du.ac.in](mailto:himanshukumar@hrc.du.ac.in)

<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-8377-083X>

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Nature's fascinating portrayal can be found in children's literature, both classic and contemporary. Even the simplest stories often carry a message about the significance of the natural world. Folklore and fairy tales, in particular, emphasise the notion that nature is alive and demands our respectful treatment. A prime example of this can be seen in Grimm's tale 'Mother Holle', where the girl who cooperates with nature is rewarded with gold, while those who fail to do so face consequences such as being covered in tar (134). Many beloved children's classics of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries depict nature as divine, inherently good, and brimming with inspiration and healing qualities. For example, in Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies* (1863), a soot-covered ignorant chimney sweep finds redemption through an encounter with a river.

In children's literature, one noticeable trait of nature is its tendency to reveal itself in enigmatic ways. Kenneth Grahame's novel *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) beautifully captures the author's affection and respect for nature. Similarly, A.A. Milnes' beloved Pooh books also depict nature as timeless and fascinating. However, not all children's books portray nature as benevolent. In J.R.R. Tolkien's tales, for example, trees such as Treebeard embody wisdom and goodness, whereas others possess malevolence. This duality is also present in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books, in which the Whomping Willow takes pleasure in slapping and striking those who venture close to it. At times, nature can even exhibit irrationality and instability, as seen in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), in which animals assume authority over Alice and relentlessly mock her. Regardless of its essence, most authors of children's literature appear to be pantheists when it comes to nature.

This paper attempts to redefine the role of nature in Ruskin Bond's short stories and its relationship with children. But to do so, one must consciously look back at the Romantics. Therefore, this paper also traces the positions of William Wordsworth and William Blake in this context.

During the age of Romantic Revival (1798-1837), the poets were influenced by Jacques Rousseau and, as a result, turned their attention to nature as their subject matter. They found that the urban setting, which had been favoured in the neoclassical period, was unappealing because it not only separated people from the embrace of nature but also caused them to deviate from their intended state according to God's plan. The poets were less interested in social paraphernalia and more concerned with understanding the essence of humanity itself. They

discovered this essence in individuals who remained unaffected by external influences and thrived within their natural surroundings. Nature captivated them because it seemed closer to unravelling the mysteries of the universe than the methodical man-made structures. In ‘Lines Written in Spring’ from *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), Wordsworth beautifully demonstrates the contrast between the vitality and integrity of life in nature and the destructive tendencies exhibited by mankind:

The budding twigs spread out their fan,  
To catch the breezy air;  
And I must think, do all I can,  
That there was pleasure there.

If this belief from heaven be sent  
If such be nature’s holy plan,  
Have I not the reason to lament  
What man has made of man? (17-24)

According to Robert Mayo, this contrast between the serenity of nature and the disruption caused by human beings is not inventive but rather a “fulfillment of an already stale convention” (491). He also states:

Nature is beautiful and full of joy; that man is corrupted by civilization; that  
God may be found in nature, and that the study of nature not only brings  
pleasure, therefore, but generates moral goodness. (490)

In their work *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth and Coleridge express a dislike for society from a Romantic perspective and salute the pristine quality of nature. In the poem ‘Tintern Abbey’, Wordsworth portrays nature in a way that reflects the experiences of the observer’s consciousness. In this context, both individual perception and nature itself are given an ethereal significance that goes beyond individuality and materiality.

In his work *Literature, Education, and Romanticism: Reading as Social Practice*, 1780-1832, Alan Richardson explores the period characterised by experimentation and innovation in the fields of education and practice. Richardson primarily focuses on the political, ideological, and social factors that influenced discussions on education during the Romantic age. This approach provides insights into the themes and formal aspects of contemporary literature (particularly

children's literature). This allows him to view the works of authors with respect to conflict between opposing values. Broadly speaking, there is often strife between the middle-class desire for reform and improving conditions for marginalised groups and concerns about the political repercussions of extending education to such groups. However, in reality, this dynamic is sometimes oversimplified as Richardson tends to use constructive aspects of Romantic writers' educational theories as a starting point for criticism.

Most discussions on the educational theories of the Romantic age often commend their constant critiques of the rationalist tradition, as exemplified by notable writers such as William Godwin, Anna Barbauld, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Maria Edgeworth. All of these authors primarily viewed literature as a means of conveying political and moral truths. However, Richardson challenges this viewpoint by asserting that the Romantic celebration of literature, childhood, and imagination was mainly a response to these “new rational pedagogies”(31), with its eventual objective of removing political influence from children’s education. Within this context, Wordsworth’s educational theories are viewed most unfavourably.

Richardson argues that the combination of politics and education emphasizes childhood as a subject of political interest. According to him, Wordsworth’s focus on the role of nature in a child’s education is “both the response and a reaction to the contemporary politicization of childhood typified by (but by no means limited to) the new educational programs developed in revolutionary France” (39). Richardson also points out that by depoliticising the issue, Wordsworth was able to evoke a transcendental concept of childhood, a retreat to the “ever more fragile and defensive alliance of church and state for managing childhood along traditional lines” (43).

In Richardson’s analysis, the ecological significance of the child’s connection with nature is not fully recognised in Wordsworth’s poetry. Wordsworth strongly emphasises allowing a child to grow and develop independently. This can result in the child becoming “unsocialized and frozen in a state of eternal innocence” (72). In this sense, Wordsworth’s concept of the ‘child of nature’ closely aligns with William Blake's idea of the ‘child of innocence’. While Richardson associates Wordsworth’s poetry with “Christian Moralities” (59), it is equally valid to argue that he aimed to grant children some freedom from those who wish to dictate their thoughts. Claiming that Wordsworth’s views on childhood block the child from an adult “prospect for intellectual development” (106) appears to be a misinterpretation of the poet.

William Blake (1757-1827) has a complicated association with the natural world. His poetic reaction to the realm of natural objects is more varied than one might initially think. Perhaps the only sweeping statement one can make about Blake's disposition towards nature is that he always considers nature within the human framework. While there are instances where Blake's understanding of nature is akin to that of Christopher Smart and James Thompson, these moments are few and far between and either involve minimal human intervention or direct human engagement.

Blake's descriptive passages often portray nature as energy. It rests upon the equilibrium established between the temporal and spiritual. For instance, in 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell' Blake explores the association of energy with spiritual wisdom, focussing on abstract attributes instead of tangible qualities:

The pride of the peacock is the glory of God.

The lust of the goat is the bounty of God.

The wrath of the lion is the wisdom of God.

The nakedness of the woman is the work of God. (33-36)

Blake's works exhibit an inclination to perceive nature through a human lens. The prospect of blending the realms of nature and humanity emerges in Songs of Innocence and Experience, The Four Zoas, and Milton. In the section titled 'Night the First' there is an advancement towards a complicated fusion, where the energy of nature triumphs over human physicality. Following Urizen's descent, human souls transform into clouds and

The Horse is of more value than the Man, The Tyger fierce

Laughs at the Human form. The Lion mocks and thirsts for blood. (13-14)

Blake emphasises the interconnectedness of all living beings in his early poems like 'The Fly' and 'On Another's Sorrow'. He often uses personification to convey the connection between humans and nature. An explanation for Blake's popularity could be his exploration of the unity between humans and nature within his mythological settings.

In 'The Book of Thel' Blake goes beyond giving human traits to objects, such as the cloud, worm, and lily. Instead, he brings them to life through a spectacular design. This approach also highlights the psychological repercussions of failing to fully connect with nature. Thel is capable of communicating with elements of nature but ultimately chooses to remain detached from them. Embracing a complete identification with nature would mean accepting the

inevitability of her own mortality. Unfortunately, Thel lacks both the insight and the resolution required for such a deed:

Dost thou O little Cloud? I fear that I am not like thee;  
For I walk through the vales of Har and smell the sweetest flowers,  
But I feed not the little flowers; I hear the warbling birds,  
But I feed not the warbling birds; they fly and seek their food. (15-18)

While Blake is not a pantheist, he often emphasises the risks associated with being involved in a belief system that worships the plant world in his prophetic books. However, he also rejects the idea of a separation between oneself and the natural world as well as between divine and material. Unlike Thel, Vala is capable of surrendering her individuality to such an extent that she can truly identify with nature. Ultimately, she attains completion and harmony in 'Night the Ninth':

Alas am I but as a flower then will I sit me down  
Then will I weep then I'll complain and sigh for immortality. (25-26)

In some passages, Blake perceives the natural world as an integral part of the human experience. At a point, the human element starts to distinguish itself from the world and gains some level of control over it. Blake firmly believed that the responsibility for achieving unity lies not in nature but in humans. Here, we witness Blake's rejection of Locke's views and his closest alignment with Berkeley. According to Locke, external reality holds primacy while the mind acts as a receptor for its impact on our senses. However, for Blake, nature takes on a passive role while the human mind becomes active to such an extent that perceptions and actions can genuinely influence and transform the state of the world. Notably, changes in the landscape in response to human will are particularly emphasised in *The Four Zoas*.

However, nature can react both positively and negatively to human determination. This duality is evident in 'Night the Sixth', where Blake clearly states that engaging in conflict with nature is neither continuous nor obligatory. In 'Night the Eighth' Blake does not imply that humans have dominion over all kinds of natural elements. Instead, he emphasises that nature can perceive human influence and react accordingly. The focus lies not on human control but on the adaptability of the natural world:

the rocks the deserts feel his power  
They shake their slumbers off. (10-11)

The power of vision can not only change the appearance of objects in the natural world but also impact the bond between humans and nature. This idea is beautifully conveyed in Songs of Experience, particularly in ‘The Little Girl Lost’ and ‘The Little Girl Found’.

One of Blake’s responses to the world of objects is his ability to transform natural energy into art. Previously, nature was seen as a passive force controlled either by human will or our senses. However, Blake now sees it as a dynamic force. In ‘The Little Girl Lost’, for example, the lion’s flaming eyes start shedding "ruby tears" as a way of teaching a lesson. What makes Blake unique is how he explores varied possibilities at different junctures in his works.

Born in 1934, Ruskin Bond is an author of the post-Independence period who is not a stranger to Indian heritage. Despite being Anglo-Indian, his writings vividly capture the essence of life as he observed and lived. His European lineage has seamlessly blended with the Indian spirit. In contrast to his contemporaries, such as V.S. Naipaul, Bond’s works do not depict political and social turmoil. Rather, his imagination is enticed by the beauty of nature, leaving no room for themes from the Indian Renaissance to pique his interest.

For more than seventy years, Ruskin Bond has celebrated the marvels and splendours of nature through his writings. His initial encounter with the natural world was quite distressing as he experienced an attack from a swarm of aggressive bees. Growing up, Bond developed an appreciation for flora and fauna. He immersed himself in books such as Ballantyne’s *Coral Island* and *Hudson Bay*, Jack London’s *White Fang*, the *Panchatantra*, and the *Jataka Tales*. Settling in Mussorie’s hills has made his connection with nature stronger. Bond dedicates his life to discovering and documenting the wonders of the natural world and incorporating them into his stories, essays, and poems. In his introduction to *The Book of Nature* (2004), Bond writes, “Nature doesn’t promise you anything...Nature is a reward in itself” (viii-ix). Though nature provides us with everything we need, we do not appreciate it enough. At times, it can even become unfavourable for us. Nevertheless, it remains true to its nature of giving, taking, and giving again.

Bond’s writings are deeply personal and autobiographical. However, there is a lack of sentimentalism in his works. The objectivity and detachment of his art guide the experience and elicit an emotional response. Bond’s formative years were challenging as he had to navigate the world on his own due to the circumstances surrounding his parents’ separation, his mother’s remarriage, and the loss of his father at the tender age of ten. These experiences



left an indelible mark on his mind. The baggage of the past compels him to write about what he does as memories drift away from their creation. Immersed in introspection, Bond continuously rearranges his recollections, revealing glimpses into his connection with time. His collections of short stories, such as *The Man Eater of Manjari* (1974), *Time Stops at Shamli* (1989), and *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* (1991), present plausible portraits of life that reflect his artistic splendour, insightful perspective, and narrative inventiveness.

Ruskin Bond explores the lives of common people and captures the essence of everyday events. Set against a simplistic backdrop, his stories delve into the experiences of individuals who may not have prominent backgrounds but still have intriguing stories to tell. Through his writings, Bond subtly conveys his appreciation for life and his ability to find joy and wisdom in nature, which he regards as a spiritual guide. The serene beauty of nature accompanied by breezes and harmonious notes, captivates him. This natural backdrop serves as the foundation for most of his stories, like a brook flowing through the complexities of modern society. Like Wordsworth, Bond perceives nature as a lively entity rather than an embellishment— a force that transforms human beings and establishes a profound connection with them. The hidden magnificence of nature is reflected in his narratives about simpletons in their natural milieu. Bond has the eyes of a poet and a heart that echoes Wordsworth's sentiment – "nature never did betray the heart that loved her" (312). As M.K. Naik observes:

Another special feature of Bond's stories is his acute responsiveness to nature. It is not simply a matter of nature description as a narrative technique, but a genuine feeling for the natural world which has somewhat of a Wordsworthian quality about it. (250)

Bond's deep connection with nature is evident in his writings as he brings to life the timeless beauty of the world. His works create an enchanting atmosphere that allows readers to appreciate the symphony of life. Nature mirrors and outlines a realm of freedom in his stories, which often capture the intriguing unison of the self and the universe. Bond's stories are set in towns enveloped by forests, rolling hills, and majestic trees. These towns are not only home to simple-hearted individuals, industrious children, and free-spirited animals and birds but also harbour their fair share of artful characters.

According to Bond, great writers in fiction have never been as captivated by mountains as they have been by the sea. Celebrated novelists such as Joseph Conrad, Herman Melville, R.L.



Stevenson, and Sir John Masefield have paid homage to the sea in their works. But seldom have mountains been given the attention they deserve. As a writer, Bond has found mountains to be incredibly inspiring. He says, “When you have received love from people and the freedom that only mountains can give, then you have come very near to the borders of heaven” (199). He echoes what Byron said years ago and expands on it through his enticing stories:

I live not in myself, but become a portion of that around me; And to me high  
mountains are a feeling , and the hum of human cities torture. (332)

Ruskin Bond has a distinct approach to storytelling. He focuses on developing his plots around defined characters and avoids overwhelming the narrative with incidents. What sets his stories apart is that the characters themselves drive the plot, fuelled by passion and motivation. His male and female characters are portrayed as people with a genuine sense of humanity rather than as abstract figures. Bond’s child characters, in particular, Romi, Rusty, and Sita, have a harmonious connection with nature and the world around them. They embody both an empathetic and venturesome spirit that is beautifully enhanced by their interactions with nature.

Ruskin Bond’s stories for children are often situated in remote towns or villages nestled in the Himalayas. These places still uphold values such as trust, love, and honesty. Parents do not fret about their children’s safety as they loiter freely. In this setting, Bond portrays his childhood and that of his characters as a never ending summer afternoon filled with joy, playfulness, and recklessness. His characters enjoy climbing mango and lychee trees, riding bicycles down hillsides, swimming in forest pools, taking refreshing naps under trees, and embarking on adventures along rivers and mountain paths. The stories effortlessly capture their enterprises, while the enchanting and enduring ambience of the place silently encases his stories.

*The Road to Bazaar* (1980) is a compilation of stories that beautifully encapsulate childhood's carefree and playful essence. It vividly portrays the pleasures and occasional hardships experienced during those years, when our biggest concerns revolved around morning racing matches while our parents were fast asleep, making it to the cricket team, and dreading the wrath of our parents when presented with a disappointing report card.

In situations where children find themselves facing dangerous challenges, nature acts as a protective force. In the story ‘Flames in the Forest’, Romi hurriedly makes his way through a burning forest, seemingly unaware of the intensity of the situation. Despite the engulfing flames, he is hopeful that he will make it to the river. This contrasts with the anxiety

experienced by his friend, whom Romi saves, and the terrified animals running across their trail. Similarly, in 'The Adventures of Rusty', Rusty and his friend Daljit escape from their regimental boarding school in Simla to experience the enigmatic world hidden under the mountains. They use time-saving methods to negotiate through the Himalayan jungles, work their way through streams, and even encounter a tiger but manage to escape unharmed.

Social differences among children do not matter in this genial environment. In the story 'The Hidden Pool', for example, Laurie, a fifteen-year-old boy whose father is a British engineer in India, befriends Anil, a cloth merchant's son, and Kamal, who sells small items and is a high school student. They break down economic and cultural fences when they embark on an adventure to the Pindari Glacier. On his return to England, Laurie yearns for the tranquillity of the Himalayas and the hidden pool nestled in its mountains.

Ruskin Bond's short story titled 'The Cherry Tree' beautifully portrays the employment of a tree as a character. The narrative revolves around a boy named Rakesh who plants a cherry seed and witnesses its growth into a magnificent tree. As time goes by, both grow, one more than the other, and a robust relationship is established between them. It becomes evident that Rakesh's emotions and actions are influenced by the sapling and the tree. This theme is beautifully depicted in the following lines:

Rakesh and Grandfather gazed at the tree as though it had performed a miracle.

There was a pale pink blossom at the end of a branch. (12)

In the story 'The Leopard', it becomes evident that humans should peacefully coexist with nature. The hills' vibrant plant and animal life easily adapts to the presence of humans without considering it a disturbance. Bond shares details about his multiple encounters with a leopard in this story, in which the author remains unharmed because he bore no ill will towards the leopard. Bond writes:

As I had come not to take anything from the forest, the birds and animals grew

Accustomed to my presence, or possibly they recognised my footsteps. (32)

In 'A Little World of Mud' Rusty discovers a boggy pool in his backyard that goes on to mean the world to him. In this setting, Rusty meets Ramu, a buffalo herder, and gains valuable insights into the rich tapestry of nature. Another sanctuary that provided solace to Rusty is a tree located at his grandparents' residence in Dehradun. Perched on a tree, Rusty plays with squirrels, reads, and observes the interplay between nature and human life. Like the birds and

squirrels who find refuge in the tree's canopy, Rusty keeps his cherished possessions safely tucked away in a secret hollow in the trunk.

When we examine Bond's nature writings as a whole, they provide us with a better understanding of the author's life and body of work. The lines between the author and his characters gradually blur. What truly matters is that Bond succeeds in immersing the reader in the stories. A careful analysis of his stories uncovers elements of Blakean mysticism intertwined with the exploration of innocence and experience. The characters that we encounter in Bond's narratives serve as sufficient evidence to support this notion. It appears that mysticism stems naturally from the author's connection to nature in all its forms and complexities. When young readers engage with such stories, they begin to grasp what the author intends to convey—that nature holds the captivating magic of transforming lives.

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