

Nature's Boundaries; Shaping Human Beings' Re-Balancing Acts – Reading E.B. White.

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Abstract

E.B. White once said, reading his literature is one of the simplest acts, it is not about writing about its themes or critiquing about it. It is about reading and just expressing how one feels about it or thinks about it. White wrote primarily about children. The simplicity of his writing makes him an unchallenged writer of children's books. White said while writing for children one has to 'write up' not down. Children are most attentive, observant, sensitive, quick, eager, and generally congenial readers of this earth. This paper is a tribute to E.B. White's contribution to children's literature. It signifies his responses and responsibility that he felt towards writing for children. White's stories represent plainness, simplicity, orderliness, sincerity that lead to balance in thought and action. It pronounces more what man is than what man knows. White transmits his love of life at his best along with his appreciation of the world. White confirms to nature's boundaries with integrity and honesty. His mouse child Little Stuart, his dying heroine, and the defective trumpeter are faithful in their own manners to life and nature. The characters, scenes and events in his books present life and humans, human and animals and nature in their balancing actions. White loved Walden his home since childhood and called it his favorite book. Walden is the chief character of his stories which invites him always to life's dance. For him life is a dance, a habitat both for animals and humans. White propagates co-existence of both. He inspires the imagination of his readers for a safe and secure environment for all. He allows the humans and animals to speak for themselves by remaining in their own boundaries. His books call for shaping a new world. Environmentalist must have been thinking children once, is White's prophecy for the world.

Keywords: E.B. White, Nature, Man, Sustainable, Responsibility, Children's Literature, Reader-Writer-Society, Environment

Reading E.B. White, the creator of the eternal character of Children's Literature – 'Stuart little' deeply explicates Love and Respect for nature. White's writing is a remarkable benchmark in exploring the relation between man and nature explicitly. His books and essays loudly proclaim that the Goods of nature are not unlimited Goodies. Nature has its boundaries and Man needs to be responsible in not devouring them.

Elwyn Brooks White, as named by his parents, never liked this name. "I never liked Elwyn. My mother just hung it on me because she'd run out of names," he told The New York Times in 1980. White was the youngest child of a large family. His parents loved kids; that's probably where his passion for writing children's books came from. He has always said so, "We should all do what, in the long run, gives us joy, even if it is only picking grapes or sorting the laundry".¹ White, a private human being right from his childhood always shied away from speaking in public. He only loved the typewriter.

He loved to live away from the buzz and Bustle of the city. This made him escape with Katherine – his wife to this farm house in Maine. His experiences at the farm firmly furnished his writing further.

He says, “Just to live in the country is a full- time job; you don't have to 'do anything'. The idle pursuit of making-a-living is pushed to one side, where it belongs, in favor of living itself, a task of such immediacy, variety, beauty and excitement that one is powerless to resist its wild embrace”.²

White's joy at the farm was unbounded. He had rather contrasting thoughts about the New York City's Bustle. It metaphorically sketches the city's geo-socio-cultural set up. He is often quoted:

“There are roughly three New York ; There is, first, the New York of the man or woman who was born here, who takes the city for granted and accepts its size and its turbulence as natural and inevitable. Second, there is the New York of the commuter-the city that is devoured by locusts each day and spat out each night. Third, there is the New York of the person who was born somewhere else and came to New York in quest of something. ...Commuters give the city its tidal restlessness; natives give it solidity and continuity; but the settlers give it passion”.³

- E.B White, Here Is New York

This mosaic of the City's restlessness, solidity and continuity, and its passion could never have been drawn with such insightful pen. The relation between people and cities, urban and rural, man and nature, and development and sustainability remains the core of E.B. White's thought. However, White's natural world, his Heart as well as his Hearth, is more than just the beasts, leaves or lakes. It is an archetype of our oneness with the earth. E.B. White's name has been synonymous with Books of Children in the long span of Nineteenth Century, When his book CHARLOTTE'S WEB ranked in the top One Hundred Children's Book in a 2012 Survey of the United States School Library Journal.

This paper is a tribute to White's contribution to Children's Literature. Here is White, The Child of Nature. Nature nourishes him, flourishes him as well. Nature moulds the boyish responses of the person that E.B White is. Nature even shapes the responsibilities of the writer that he is. The glow of his 'Love for the Published Word is likened to the 'Essential Goodness' of the 'Smell of the Leaf Mould'. Studying White's Children's Books is like a guiding light to the thought process of not only a growing child but also to an adult's perception of responses and responsibilities. E.B. White's books present vistas on a little boy's/girl's growth in a sustainable manner. They also further contribute to a long, sustainable and inclusive development of the society and culture into a well-thinking, responsible unit, necessary for the socio-economic, environmental and global existence. The paper translates the need to save the globe, to save the children's dreams for a bright and secure future. It is in going back to nature, in being one with it that this objective could be achieved.

The objective of the paper is thus to restore White's communion with every aspect of nature in this books seeks to re-invent the thought of saving the earth for posterity. Echoes from E.B. White's stories are no empty words. The Jacket Art C 2016 by Melissa Sweet is a book that interestingly starts with the taste of the typewriter tapping and White's love for words. His earliest responses towards writing come when he said:

“I fell in love with the sound of an early type-writer and I have been stuck with it ever since.” - E.B. White.

White loved words; he chased words as a child. Dictionary was his favourite play tool, which he used to extract words in order to craft them into poetry. He wrote poems for St. Nicholas magazine. It was his love for words that led him to big-city news papers and writing jobs and eventually 'The New Yorker'. He spun his words into classics such as 'Stuart little', 'Trumpet of The Swan', 'Charlotte's Web' – He has made his readers chase his words.

Nature, especially at Maine, inspires E.B. White to record his own unique perception. He is the chronicler of the resonance, the tone, the rhythm, the clarity, the reality, the fantasy, and the obscurity reverberating and chained to the human world. E.B White's relationships with the earth emphasise the eternal existence of both the goodness of the words and the sounds of nature. White might differ a little from John Burroughs:

“The works of a man dwindle and the original features of the huge globe come out...you discover with a feeling of surprise that the great thing is the earth itself which stretches away on every hand so far beyond your ken.”

White's journey in 'Some Write seems closer to the philosophical and literary questions which John Muir would have pondered over in his spiritual quality and enthusiasm towards nature, in his understanding and envisioning a writers relationship with the natural world – as Ansell Adams has mentioned many times in his photographic explorations. Also, White is seen in the light of what Stevens Holmes once critiqued about John Muir.

“A personal guide into nature – the archetype of our oneness with nature.” 4

White sails through nature smoothly. His characters evolve and go through what he goes through. They grow and evolve along with him. The journey of evolution is literal as well as symbolic. Just as in the 'Charlotte's Web' Charlotte and Wilbur have a poignant talk at the barn: “You mean you eat flies?” gasped Wilbur. “ Certainly, flies, bugs, grasshoppers, choice beetles, moths, butterflies, cockroaches, gnats, midgets, daddy-long-legs, centipede mosquitoes, crickets – anything that is careless enough to get caught in my web. I have to live don't I?” 'It's cruel' replied Wilbur, who did not intend to be argued out of his position. “ Well, said Charlotte. 'You have your meals brought to you in a pail. Nobody feeds me. I have to get my own living. I live by my wits. I have to be sharp and clever, lest I go hungry. I have to think things out, catch what I can, and take what comes...And furthermore,' said Charlotte, shaking one of her legs, 'do you realize that if I didn't catch bugs and eat them, bugs would increase and multiply and get so numerous that they'd destroy the earth and wipe out everything.' 'Really? Wilbur Said,. 'I wouldn't want that to happen. Perhaps your web is a good thing after all.’” 5

This isn't a bad trap at all, as the 'Charlotte's Web' pronounces. Not as disastrous as the Human trap that devastates the earth. The planet that is the earth is as much as for a web, or a pig, a goose, as much as it is for man. Yet mortals have shown 'scant respect' for the mother earth. Man has perhaps forgotten that nature is his/her home and to manage the goods of nature as the gift of goodies is of utmost and comprehensive responsibility.

White writes for children, yet his thought is for all ages. The best of his eloquent essays – that appeared in 'Harper's', The New Yorker, and The Atlantic in the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, have now come as a reprint in Essays of E.B white (Harper Perennial, 1999). His 'Death of a Pig' is an 'adult version' of the “Charlotte's Web. Another essay 'Once more to the Lake' is a 'startling meditation on mortality.'

The responsibility of a writer is to reflect, interpret, inform and shape life. Once he was asked about the responsibility of the writer. In 1969 responding to The Paris Review about the writer's commitment to national, international, or environmental affairs he said:

“A writer should concern himself with whatever absorbs his fancy, stirs his heart and unlimbers his typewriter. I feel no obligation to deal with politics. I do feel a responsibility to society because of going into print: a writer has a duty to be good, not lousy; true, not false; lively, not dull; accurate not full of error. He should tend to lift people up, not lower them down. Writers do not merely reflect and interpret life, they inform and shape life.”

Truly so as White once recorded “Writing is an act of faith, not a trick of grammar. Ascent is at the heart of the matter.” 6

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