

Module 01: Can Humans Control the Natural World? Urban Landscapes and Perceptions of Nature

Conclusion

The excerpts from Wordsworth, Dickens, Tocqueville, and Gaskell, as well as the selected cartoons, provide contrasting perspectives on the relationship between humans and the natural world in the urban environment. In each case, the authors employed images of nature to illustrate the problems and costs associated with industrialization. The idealization of nature as a mythical presence, the determination to control nature in pursuit of profit and productivity, the description of open fields, woods, and pastures as contrasts to the urban world of factories, houses, and roads, the gritty images of the dirt, smoke, and disease that spread from the centers of production, and the challenge that industry posed to the traditional relation between humans and animals are all examples of how the literature invoked the relationship between nature and the human world in the context of urbanization. As the cartoons suggest, the intersection between urban and rural worlds remained a site for humor as well. The image of the countryman in the city, the spread of urban values into villages, and encounters between people on horses and people in cars provided fertile ground for humorous commentary on how changing social conditions affected practices and attitudes.

Elizabeth Gaskell's novel, *Mary Barton*, opens with a sense of loss due to the city's expansion into rural fields, but ends with a different evocation of the natural world. After numerous difficulties, including death by starvation, murder, strikes, criminal trials, and betrayal, the heroine finds peace by emigrating from Europe to the New World. The story that begins with the English city in conflict with the surrounding natural world ends with a more peaceful image of this relationship, but now in a Canadian context:

I see a long, low, wooden house, with room enough and to spare. The old primeval trees are felled and gone for many a mile around; one alone remains to overshadow the gable-end of the cottage. There is a garden around the dwelling, and far beyond that stretches an orchard. The glory of an Indian summer is over all, making the heart leap at the sight of its gorgeous beauty.

In this case, the symbols of nature — the garden, the orchard, and the beauty of the Indian summer — provide a sense of reassurance, and also of a successful escape from the horrors of the English industrial mill town. The novel has thus come full circle, yet the message is consistent with the other materials presented

in the module: industrialization and urbanization may have encouraged a belief in the possibility of controlling the natural world, but such control was neither easy nor safe. Rather than seeking to subdue nature, these materials suggest, Europeans were better off finding ways to live in harmony with nature, even within their urban landscapes.