

## **Interpreting Human Life through the Non-Human: Study of select works of Artists and Writers on Writing Life**

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**Abstract:** Human interpretation of life had become so anthropocentric by the end of modernism that an eco-centric interpretation of the same was inevitable which led to proliferating works of non-human narratives to understand human life. Artists and writers like Woolf, Gogh and Frost were philosophers who took to interpreting image of insects, each having different essences of its own. For example Van Gogh's Giant Peacock Moth is part of the butterfly series and so the moth cannot be interpreted individually but as a collective dissection of the winged insects that wholly symbolize transformations of human beings. Whereas Virginia Woolf's *The Death of the Moth* philosophize the inevitability of life and death in which the moth acts as a tool to understand ontological significance of being a human. They are essentially writing about the significance of human life through the life of an insect but at the same time critically placing us into the crux of knowledge about human ontology that forms a design of life as Robert Frost writes in his poem *Design*. Their writing of life is the constant "deconstruction" or an influx of the socially constructed idea of the human and non-human; stepping beyond the margins of anthropocentrism.

**Keywords:** Human, Non-Human, Van Gogh, Virginia Woolf, Robert Frost, Anthropocentrism

Writing about life of one's own and others or life in totality as in "being", placed in the universe and the knowledge about our existence through nonhuman symbolism post an obsessive anthropocentric epoch of literary and artistic narratives where man couldn't consider himself as having similar fate to the nonhuman, let alone an insect is definitely a commendable attempt. Life writing studies traditionally involves reading into journals, autobiographies and diaries to understand the position of its writer in relation to their immediate existing socio-cultural or political atmosphere however this article involves something beyond the text to interpret the true

nature of reality and human life in relation to the nonhuman world. Nonhuman life is not beyond comprehension so as to lack capacity to provide meaning to human life. As a matter of fact all life under the sun is governed by the same fundamental rule and human life can thrive only when we share a meaningful symbiotic relationship with the nonhuman world around us. If one was to set out on a quest to question the nature of reality they would find ties between all entities known as ontological dependence. An object whether concrete or abstract cannot exist in singularity but is dependent on another entity for meaning. Such as life is not without death and light is not without darkness and the above analogy is particularly relevant to understand the ontological interpretation of “life”. Similarly life is also not exclusive to human but is also true for the nonhuman. Looking beyond human world to justify the insignificance of man in a universe with its array of supernova, black holes, and gravity, man is indeed a petty being born to die and be cut short at the pleasure of the benevolent. At the turn of the modern age Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* published in 1915 changed the way man looked at himself. Changing a man into an insect overnight and the consequent downfall and disrespect that followed shocked man’s anthropocentric arrogance and at once writers started looking towards the metaphorical meaning of the moth’s or the fly’s fragility to be the same as man’s insignificance. Appreciating the nonhuman life form or at least frequenting the reference of nonhuman life in order to understand human life form better was the new turn at the approach of modern age. Artists and writers were taking to the natural world and the nonhuman life to reflect on their own lives. Anthropocentric approach of everything, literally everything was squeezing out the true meaning of being in this world and so when writers and artists took to the nonhuman world for inspiration it was their treading into the new world with an eco-critical approach to life. Writing or painting about this new world which had been for generations deemed to be inferior wasn’t much different from human life and as a matter of fact we were really like flies to be killed for sport in which neither the human nor the nonhuman could escape death. So when Vincent Van Gogh, Virginia Woolf or Robert Frost took to the nonhuman world to write or paint they were quintessentially writing not only about their lives but all of us. Their writing of life meant breaking of the socially constructed ideas of the human and non-human that enabled them to step beyond the margins of anthropocentrism after which no predetermined notion about the nonhuman could be assigned leading to deconstruction of the relationship between the human and the nonhuman.

Van Gogh’s *Green Peacock Moth* painted in 1889 was a later version of what he had seen at the garden of the clinic at Saint-Rémy, an emperor moth which Van Gogh believed to be a death-head moth at the time. At first he drew it on a paper with chalk and emboldened the outline of the moth with brown ink which enhanced the beautiful structure of the moth but he didn’t colour at first because “To paint it I would have had to kill it, and that would have been a shame since the animal was so beautiful” (Van Gogh Museum). This painting which is commonly referred to as *Green Peacock Moth* or *Giant Peacock Moth* is part of his butterfly series the whole of which was made between 1889 and 1890. His array of works on butterflies contains *Garden with Butterflies* (1889), *Grass and Butterflies* (1889) and *Poppies and Butterflies* (1890),

*The Green Peacock Moth* being his only painting on a moth which he self titled as Death's Head Moth. Van Gogh was confined within the compounds of his asylum as Saint-Rémy when he painted this series because of his mental instability. The scenic events of the above mentioned paintings were largely a part of the untamed, overgrown garden of the asylum which one day happened to be visited by the moth which eventually became the subject of his *Green Peacock Moth*. Behind the moth are Lords and Ladies a flower native to Europe that belongs to the same family as Peace Lilies. The idea of a butterfly or a moth is not without the idea of metamorphosis and it is exactly what caught Van Gogh's interest. To become a moth entails the becoming of a caterpillar at first which isn't attractive but shows the inner meaning of having to wait to become something great. The ability of the winged insects to transform its form from something hideous to something as beautiful as the butterfly is the true meaning of transformation and although their essential work is to pollinate plants and flowers, symbolically they will always represent the metamorphosis of their bodily form. The flowers in his paintings as Gogh himself describes in a letter are licks of colour which are exactly as they are in nature but would appear ugly to a spectator who would want to view each stroke used to paint the whole painting separately (qtd. in Grant 104). Similarly the butterfly or the moth represent in the Butterfly series transformation as a symbolic meaning that cannot be comprehended separately but as something that the insects entail as a whole. Curtis Farmwald writes in his poem *The Existential Butterfly* about Van Gogh's *Poppies and Butterflies* (1890) about his want to recreate the same based on the similar poppy field scene around him. Farmwald sees kindred field filled with red poppies around him, it is summer and it is the similar wildness of these poppies which have grown just by the road. His expectation from the scene is to live beyond the trouble of the soul to exist in ease as Van Gogh had done in his painting *Poppies and Butterflies*. Van Gogh's painting cannot be thought without the madness he was living with at the time and the beautiful field of poppies studded with the butterflies must have eased him off the trouble both in his mind and soul which led him to create the masterpiece that *Poppies and Butterflies* is. The title *The Existential Butterfly* and Farmwald's want of seeking survival against his "troubled soul" is his flight to exist which the butterfly represents. The butterfly represents more than a winged insect to both Van Gogh and Curtis Farmwald. This butterfly is the escaping of a troubled soul, a transformation that humans await in midst of all fundamental existential crisis. It is rather amusing that Van Gogh painted the most colourful paintings during his years at the asylum which were subjected by the green landscape and the winged insects outside the hospital.

Robert Frost writes on the unseen unknowability of the "design of darkness" that has been set loose on all things living whether human or nonhuman since the creation of universe and our planet Earth. The design that dominates the process of creation and destruction is as Frost writes in "Design" a dark one; dark because this poem essentially discusses energies of death. The dimpled spider that sits on a white coloured heal-all holds the moth like piece of satin cloth. Having killed the moth that was probably resting on heal-all like Van Gogh's moth on the Lords and Ladies the spider represents everything that is associated with "death and blight". Although

the spider has killed the moth resting on the flower innocently is it by its own rights correct because even this dimpled spider the symbol of death has to survive. In “Design” the ending stanza poses the fundamental questions related to the nature of being in this case the nature of being of whatever scene Frost describes in the first stanza. Why is the flower white or why are the spider and the moth both at the same place? These questions are answers in themselves of the nature of being or of reality. The poem doesn’t challenge the ontological positioning of things around us but rather supports the nature of being such as death is not beyond ontological manifestation of everything that is around us. Ontology as Martin Heidegger assumes consists of humanly pre-ontological understanding of being that determines how we experience everything around us. M. R Ayers finds in his understanding of Descartes or Locke that “the perception of things as having colours, tastes, etc., is to be attributed to the sense modality proper to each quality, i.e. to the manner in which the perceived object affects us” (406). The matter of death and the nature of being of things like the white heal-all or the white moth around us is eventually a carrying out of the plan organized by the “design of darkness”. The inescapability of the design is the ultimate destiny of human life and also of the non-human life. Frost’s “Design” and its predestined provision of what becomes of life on earth reminds me of the related theme of death and inability to escape what Gods have stored for us in Katherine Mansfield’s *The Fly* and William Shakespeare’s famous lines that appears in his *King Lear* “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; They kill us for their sport.” (Shakespeare 4.1.1099). Mansfield and Shakespeare’s motif portrayed through their work is of similar kind which shows the fly-like inability to escape death. In both case the fly as a representative of the nonhuman speaks louder about the nothingness of human life than any other possible form of life. Although human life’s nothingness is not the be all and end all but only a part of the existential dread we all come across more than once in our lives. Part of treading into the nonhuman world to find appropriate conveyance of what it is to be human is what we call ontological anthropology. The difference in different world views and the possibility that separate worlds exists simultaneously and neither of each is untrue is the ontological turn in anthropology which makes us think beyond the existing worldview as the nature of culture or epistemology as the predetermined given. Ontological anthropology marks our entering into a world which is different from what we already know within the givenness of things as in entering into spaces where meaning is given in reference to the interaction between the human and the nonhuman world.

Surely a creator who will “smother” unaware animals and human beings in their lairs for being “absent-spirited” is neither benign nor even involved. He is to be feared. There seem to be only two choices: a designer who appalls or no designer at all. (Fagan 85)

Frost lived a disturbing childhood and had a family with history of mental illness. His mother was spiritual but had bouts of depression and his sister was admitted to a mental hospital where she died in 1929. His son committed suicide in 1940 and his daughter was sent to a mental hospital in 1947. It is not surprising that Frost himself was disturbed majorly by the mental

illness that affected his family along with the deaths and financial crisis which shadowed him most of his life. The unnoticed appeal of Frost's darker poems and his venture into worlds which speak of the unknown comes from his deep insight about the true meaning of life. His was indeed a life as frail as the moth in the eternal design of the omnipotent. Therefore "Design" appeals itself by the notorious grip that the design of darkness has on life. Life is not and cannot be beyond this design and the design's synchronicity which brought the "kindred spider to that height" and then "steered the white moth" at the same place is the ontological meaning of life.

Both Vincent Van Gogh and Virginia Woolf were sufferers of mental illness. Van Gogh had chronic manic depression and Woolf was suspected to have bipolar disorder; both of whom committed suicide. Although highly saddening their relatedness through mental disorder and consequent suicide reflects largely on what they perceived of life through their works which have come to be greatly celebrated today. Woolf's *The Death of the Moth* (1942) also takes to observing the nonhuman which discloses to her the meaning of life and death. The moth which flutters around from one square of the windowpane to the other eventually embraces death and its death reveals to Woolf the truth of being human whose ultimate end is with death. Death again becomes the inescapable dark energy that governs all like Frost writes in his poem. Moth is particularly an interesting choice among the insects because of its neutral unattractiveness. These creatures of night with their inadequateness in beauty compared to butterflies also represent transformation of life, having emerged out of their cocoon formerly being a caterpillar. During May of 1889 Van Gogh wrote to his brother in a letter describing the moth which he found outside in the garden of his asylum. What attracted Van Gogh the most about the moth was as he described in his letter "its coloration astonishingly distinguished: black, grey, white, shaded, and with glints of carmine or vaguely tending towards olive green; it's very big". Van Gogh was admitted to the small asylum in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence while he painted his Butterfly series therefore the winged creatures in asylum's wildly grown garden as subject of his Butterfly series represented his fine sense of beauty that he found in nature. The winged insects represented not only their literal and symbolic capability of transformation but also Van Gogh's unconscious appreciation of something greater and beyond as he wrote in his letter to his brother Theo. These nonhuman life fundamentally represented his wish to transform, to appreciate beauty in life as it is although he was mentally unstable particularly at Saint-Rémy during a time when asylum's weren't sure what to do with mentally instable patients because of absence of knowledge regarding mental illness during late 1800s. While Van Gogh's interpretation of the nonhuman life was full of life Woolf's interpretation of the same taught her about the implacability of death. More than so Woolf's *The Death of the Moth* came out in 1942 fifty three years after Van Gogh had painted *Giant Peacock Moth* however she suffered from mental illness which was not treated during her lifetime. Her discernment of the moth that fluttered to death at the window of her room had to greatly influence her idea about true nature of life but the problem with Woolf's life in the social circumstance she was living in was her being a woman in a society which still perceived mental illness as taboo.

Moths come out at night and as Woolf says are well suited to be the creature of the dark. The moth that fluttered at her window trying to escape the confines of the glass was not as attractive as one would expect of a night moth. Its wings were a pale yellow, seemingly content with life although such contentment with life is relatable to human life as well till the moment prior to death. Life beyond Woolf's window was steady on an autumn day. The farmers ploughed the field for readying new yield and this activity that was going on opposite to her window marked certain "vigour" also within the rooks and the horses and this energy which without doubt resembled life reflected back within the moth itself at this side of the window. Because the initial time when Woolf finds the moth inside her room and everything outside her window at daytime, the energy that lingers in them is white, full of life. This life without any touch of the dark or death marks human life in their prime, like Frost's narrative background in "Design" where we must at once imagine that the white snow drop spider has not killed the moth yet, the white heal-all is in full bloom and there is a moth also white and full of life fluttering through the wayside yet to be preyed on by the spider. The constant vigorous fluttering of the moth at Woolf's window is its try to escape so that it doesn't have to die within the confine of this unknown room where it has suddenly landed. The moth keeps flying from compartment to compartment resembling what Woolf imagines "He was little or nothing but life" (4) but eventually stops for a moment when its body is drained out of energy from all that fluttering and dancing. The "queer spectacle being at an end" (5) is the spectacle of the moth's movement which is the reason why Woolf finds it interesting and would be true for anyone of us—movement is the mark of life. The moth eventually dies by the end of the day from the constant fluttering and exhaustion with which his struggle to survive ends too. Because Woolf's works were characteristic of the stream of consciousness method of writing this work too reveals the inner most thought of her mind that the moth's survival instinct ignites. Stream of consciousness narrative texts are without the probability of modification meaning these were sentences true to its origin of thought. The moth's instinct to survive and eventual death is the life map of all human life. Death is viewed by Virginia Woolf as a relief, an aid by which the struggle that the living world entails is cut short and death is stronger than all forces combined. The reality of being for Van Gogh, Woolf and Frost is essentially tied to the reality of life that is again dependent on life and death and because death is the ultimate truth, their ready acceptance of it liberates them from the illusionary burden that causes existential dread in human beings. More than so Van Gogh's attempt at painting the emperor moth in *Green Peacock Moth* is his desire to transform. This also leads him to mistake the moth to be death-head moth after which he names his work as *Death's Head Moth* hinting towards his appreciation of the moth's beauty and the capacity of death to transform an anguished soul to evolve beyond the pettiness of life and death.

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