

Depiction of American Railways in Nineteenth Century American Poetry

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Abstract: American railway was introduced in the year 1827 and since the introduction of railways the nation progressed with tremendous amount of rapidity. The impact of railways furthered the connection of the broad landscape of America, which was at that time moving in a steady pace towards development and growth of American civilization. The importance of railways in spreading civilization across the huge landscape of America had been much appreciated. The introduction of railways in the 1830's meant a tremendous amount of increase in the pace and rapidity of transportation of goods and passengers in all the corners of America. For that reason, railway became life blood for the Americans and they could not help themselves but to use the services of railroads and freight trains. And for this particular reason, the nineteenth century American poetry is filled with references and appreciation of railways for the betterment and development of the huge landscape as a nation. In the earliest American poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman and Emile Dickinson, many a aspect of railways could be found very easily. The nineteenth century American poetry is in fact filled with images, metaphors and symbols of American railways. Such was the importance of railroads and trains in the life and daily activities, be it in the commercial field or in the spreading and establishment of civilization in America. The sound of the running trains, the whistle of the approaching trains found tremendous amount of impetus and importance in the nineteenth century American poetry or in other words, nineteenth century American literature.

Keywords: advent of railways, rapidity, economic development, freight trains, transportation of goods, nationhood

1. Introduction

American railways had a rich history of its own and unlike any other railways in the world, American railways had been one of the chief reasons behind the rapidity of the growth of America, in terms of industrial growth and also in terms of economic development. It would be worthwhile to mention that, American landscape was discovered only in the fourteenth century and since then many Europeans tried to colonize that particular place for its rich resources and habitation place. Several countries of Europe occupied several portions of the huge landscape of America but they were unable to maximize and utilize the rich resources of American landscape as most of the places were covered with dense wood and were inappropriate for human living. Effort was needed to convert such places into living places by cutting down huge trees and jungles. But there was no such cooperation and unity within those early settlers in America and for that reason it could not developed into its full potentiality before the advent of the railroads. The introduction of the railways furthered their reach and transportation of goods and passengers connected the huge landscape into one unity. The introduction of railways into the remote areas of the nineteenth century American landscape enabled the European settlers to create a brotherhood and fellow association. And this particular aspect of railways helped in all sorts of ways to build America as a independent and sovereign nation with a strong sense of brotherhood. The multifarious nature of railways depiction in several writers' works amazes a present day reader of the nineteenth century American poetry. The present day readers fails to acknowledge the importance of the railways because of the availability of all sorts of transportation medium in the modern day and for this reason the present day reader finds it hard to acknowledge and appreciate American railways' importance in the nineteenth century American landscape. The impact and importance of American railways in the nineteenth century American

landscape can only be best understood in the literature, specifically in the nineteenth century American poetry concerning railways.

The present article primarily intends to focus on the scenarios of American landscape before the advent of American railways in the 1830's. The article also intends to highlight railways representation in American poetry in the nineteenth century, in its various aspects. The present article would also focus on the multifarious nature of the depiction of American railways in the nineteenth century. The article would also highlight the impact of railways in the nineteenth century America as reflected in the poems of several nineteenth century American poets. The present article under discussion would also try to bring out the usage of railways in nineteenth century American poetry as similes, metaphors and symbols. By doing all this, the present article would become very crucial in giving us a brief understanding of the impact of railways in the nineteenth century American society and its consequent appreciation in the nineteenth century American poetry. And lastly the article would be also crucial in providing the modern day reader glimpses of the nineteenth century American society and its crucial association with the railways for the rapidity of development of the American nation.

Railroads played a large role in the development of the United States from the industrial revolution in the North-east (1810-1850) to the settlement of the West (1850-1890). The American railroad mania began with the founding of the first passenger and freight line in the nation of the Baltimore and Ohio railroad in 1827 and the "Laying of the First Stone" ceremonies and beginning of its long construction heading westward over the obstacles of the Appalachian Mountains eastern chain the following year of 1828, and flourished with continuous railway building projects for the next 45 years until the financial Panic of 1873 followed by a major

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economic depression bankrupted many companies and temporarily stymied and ended growth.¹

From the earliest days of railway introduction the joys and happiness among the European settlers could be very easily seen in the news reports and archival records of the nineteenth century. Several railway documents proved that, the nineteenth century railways of America proved to be very elementary for the economic development and rapid growth of the United States. The evolution that the railways brought in the lives of the American people in the nineteenth century had been non-negligible. The nineteenth century American poetry thus mentions the importance and impact of the railroads on American civilization. In several poems the railroads had been mentioned as the bringer of hope and stability along with the rapidity of progress in building up the nation. The earliest notion of nationality and nationhood occurred in the later end of the eighteenth century when America became an independent nation, but there was no brotherhood and unity between the European settlers as there was no such connection and communication between them. The huge landscape of the United States did not allow them to create a brotherhood as most of the early European settlers settled and occupied places in a scattered manner and created their own particular space and rituals. Thus there was a significant diversity among those early European settlers. But the introduction of railways connected almost every part of the huge landscape of America and brought them under a particular chain. This particular aspect resulted in the amalgamation of several communities and distant societies. And thus particular amalgamation resulted in a strong feeling of brotherhood between the European settlers. From then on, there had been a tremendous shift in the existence of the United States.

In the early nineteenth century or precisely in the poetry written in the middle of the nineteenth century, the railways were much appreciated and glorified because of their multifarious importance for the rapid development of industrial, economic and social growth of the nation. In the poetry of Ralph Waldo Emerson, the railways took a transcendental form. In his essay **Nature**, written in 1836, he pointed out the fundamental aspects of transcendentalism. Here he suggested that reality could be best understood by nature. And for this particular belief, in almost all of his writing, wherever railroads and trains had been mentioned, they took a transcendental form and became a part of the nature. To Ralph Waldo Emerson, the railroads and trains were the part of nature and he amalgamated the railways with the natural settings of American landscape. Emerson divided nature into four usages: Commodity, Beauty, Language and Discipline. These distinctions defined the ways by which humans use nature for their basic needs, their desire for delight, their communication with one another and their understanding of the world.

Henry David Thoreau was one of the most important nineteenth century transcendentalist writers. In his book **Walden or Life in the Woods** published in the year 1854, he expressed his deep down desires and thoughts about nature while living amidst the natural surroundings of the

Walden Pond for over two years. Thoreau was a lover of nature and nothing made him happy except the chirping of birds, trees and woods, hills and grass fields, ponds, gazing cattle in the distance and so on. In his book *Walden* reflects Thoreau's ideal of simple living in natural surroundings. And for this reason we find a contrast in Thoreau's representation of railways in the nineteenth century American poetry. Thoreau was sensitive to the social costs of building and maintaining railroads, and the worsening conditions of the laborers in the rapidly industrializing United States and Europe. In fact Thoreau commented that, **"We do not ride on the railroad: it rides upon us"**. It needed to be mentioned that a railroad ran along the Walden Pond about one third a mile from Thoreau's cabin, and he could hear the rattles of the trains, but he had little interest on such aspects. In his lifetime two new technologies were invented; railroads and telegraph, but he had little interest on them. It was primarily because of Thoreau's belief in plain and simple living in natural surroundings where the introduction of the technology becomes a bad omen and something which would harm the tranquility of our existence amidst nature. In matters of traveling through trains, Thoreau suggested that traveling through trains might be faster and might be ways of getting pleasure through railway travel for some. According to Thoreau, **"...the swiftest traveler is he that goes afoot"**. Thus, it was evident from the above discussion that Thoreau preferred the natural surroundings more than the human made technical inventions. However, Thoreau appreciated the advantages of railways for the economic and industrial development of the country in its various ways, but he also exclaimed the fact that this particular technological intervention would kill the bliss of the natural surroundings. In this aspect James C. Bodenstedt's observation would be suitable for understanding the matter more easily. James C. Bodenstedt observed that,

"For many of the nineteenth century poets, the image of the railroad expresses the promise and the danger of technology in modern industrial society, while the contemporary poets do not generally write poems about the railroad, but use train imagery to journey through the psychic landscape of the country and one's own mind and being."²

Another poet of the nineteenth century American literature Walt Whitman presented his views on railroads and its impact on the American landscape and society. Walt Whitman was one of the most notable poets between the phase of transcendentalism and realism in American literature. Whitman did not see railroads and trains as part of nature because it had its own set of rules and was governed by it, but Whitman's train transformed into a living symbol by the natural forces that embody it. Despite railroads existing as a symbol with the depth of nature, the railroads also exist as an entity separated from nature. In the poem **To a Locomotive in Winter**, published in 1876, Whitman presented the dynamic relationship between the railroad and nature. Images in the poem, such as; "black cylindrical body", "great protruding headlight", "floating vapor pennants, tinged with delicate purple", clarify a symbolic representation of the railroad, Whitman represents

¹Wikipedia source

²James C. Bodenstedt, *The Railroad in American Poetry*, p. 2.

railroads as an "emblem of motion and power". But by the end of the nineteenth century situation started to change for the railroads and emerging railways. In this aspect James C. Bodenstedt commented that,

"American railroads and American poetry came into the twentieth century on the same track. The railroad revolutionized life and changed the face of the continent. By 1917, our once agrarian nation had evolved as the foremost industrial economy in the world. Track mileage soared. Passenger trains and freight trains increased steadily. The train had tied the nation together in a web of wood and steel and, seemingly, fulfilled Whitman's vision to unite the world in brotherhood. At the same time, poetry had made a radical break from the English tradition and held the promise and hope of Whitman's vision, but American poets of the early century still clung to British continent."³

Emily Dickinson was also a famous nineteenth century poet, she has written over one thousand eight hundred poems, and most of them are quite short. In her short poems she uses several rhetoric devices and presents her thoughts in a complex manner. Her poems are filled with paradoxes and metaphors. In one of her poem, **I like to see it lap the Miles**, published in the year 1891, presents her views on the railroad and train. She uses trains metaphorically and paradoxically in her poems. In her poems trains take a metaphorical shape and become something else.

To conclude on this brief discussion about the representation or depiction of railways in the nineteenth century American poetry, it could be said that, there had been a contrast in the depiction of railways by several poets across the century. From the earliest transcendentalist to the later on realist, the presentation and usage of railways as a metaphorical symbol changed and shifted drastically. In the earliest poems, there had been tremendous amount of joy and appreciation of railroads and trains. In the early nineteenth century, trains were seen as crucial to nature and human existence. It was the lifeblood and spirit of the nation. The railroad also helped in tremendously in creating a brotherhood and fellow association for building up nationhood within themselves. There were much praises of railways in the earlier poems. In the poem **Sounds**, the sound of the trains whistle had been compared with a natural phenomenon. The sounds of trains on tracks made a sweet effect of pleasure on the ears and heart of the hearers. It was fact that, there could be no doubt regarding the impact and importance of railways in the rapid development of the United States in the industrial world. Economy increased by heaps and bounds. But in the poetry of the mid-nineteenth century, the railway started to degrade significantly in the poems of transcendentalists, because they preferred natural aspects over technological inventions. However, after the departure of the transcendentalist, the arrival of the realist shifted the railways representation in the poems. They saw it as something part of the nature because the nature embody it, and also as an independent phenomenon because it governed by its own rules and regulations. In the poems of Whitman, the railways were much praised because it helped in getting Whitman's much desired American brotherhood and unity among the

American people. However in the later phases poems of Emily Dickinson and other writers, the railways started to be used as a metaphorical symbol. And after the appearance of the Great Depression, the rapidity of railways growth got devastated in a hurried manner. Trucks and roads started to take the centre stage at the end of the nineteenth century. Railways and its importance almost vanished in the twentieth century and the great American railways only remained in the nostalgia of nineteenth century American literature, specifically in the poems of the nineteenth century concerning or depicting nineteenth century American railroads and trains.

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