



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 21
Number 2

Article 62

Winter 10-15-1996

Natural Mysticism in Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*

J. R. Wytenbroek

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wytenbroek, J. R. (1996) "Natural Mysticism in Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 21: No. 2, Article 62.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol21/iss2/62>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>

SWOSUTM

Online MidSummer Seminar 2025
More Perilous and Fair: Women and Gender in Mythopoeic Fantasy
August 2-5, 2024

Via Zoom and Discord

<https://www.mythsoc.org/oms/oms-04.htm>



Natural Mysticism in Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*

Abstract

This paper explores the use of Pan as the medium for an intense mystical experience in “The Piper at the Gates of Dawn”, and how this mystical passage fits in with the rest of *The Wind in the Willows*. The author also explores possible influences on Grahame from writers of the nineteenth century who had mystical emphases in their books. The “Piper” is one of the most beautiful passages of natural mysticism in twentieth-century literature, but one rarely discussed: the author hopes this paper will begin to fill this critical gap.

Additional Keywords

Kenneth Grahame; mysticism; Pan; romanticism; *The Wind in the Willows*

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

This article is available in *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol21/iss2/62>

Natural Mysticism in Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*

J.R. Wytenbroek

Abstract: This paper explores the use of Pan as the medium for an intense mystical experience in "The Piper at the Gates of Dawn", and how this mystical passage fits in with the rest of *The Wind in the Willows*. The author also explores possible influences on Grahame from writers of the nineteenth century who had mystical emphases in their books. The "Piper" is one of the most beautiful passages of natural mysticism in twentieth-century literature, but one rarely discussed: the author hopes this paper will begin to fill this critical gap.

Keywords: Kenneth Grahame, mysticism, Pan, romanticism, *The Wind in the Willows*

While many if not most of the great writers for children have clearly shown the influence of other children's authors on their writings, Kenneth Grahame seems to be an exception. While C.S. Lewis openly claims George MacDonald as an influence, while Burnett clearly borrows her description of the endless unused rooms in Misselthwaite Manor in *The Secret Garden* from MacDonald's descriptions of the Princess's house in *The Princess and the Goblin*, while Tolkien clearly bases Bilbo's hobbit hole in *The Hobbit* on Grahame's description of Badger's hole, and while these older authors obviously influence more recent writers, Grahame seems strangely removed from any influences by the children's authors he could have drawn from: Lewis Carroll, Edith Nesbit and his fellow Scotsman, George MacDonald, amongst others. In his *Wind in The Willows*, the reader gets a strong sense of Grahame's almost wistful love of the English countryside, filtered through a double filter of strictly adult influences: eighteenth-century Romanticism and nineteenth-century neo-paganism.

Neo-paganism, extolled and promoted by intellectuals such as Walter Pater, was a way out for the young person with spiritual tendencies who could no longer accept the seemingly outworn and certainly bowdlerized Christianity presented through either the Anglican or the Calvinist traditions. Grahame himself was thoroughly disenchanted by the strict and loveless Calvinism under which he had suffered as a child, later referring to it as "Scotch-Calvinist-devil worship" (in Green, 1957, p. 137). By the time of his writing the *Pagan Papers* (1893), he showed a strong sympathy for the neo-paganism embraced by many of the young intellectuals of his time.

Two elements seem to have been central to neo-paganism: a reverence for the Greek demi-god Pan and a pantheistic view of the universe (Green, 1957, p. 140ff). The concept of pantheism was fairly unified. A concept of wholeness, with all things within the natural universe being seen as holy

and imbued with the god and all things as part of the god, seems have to been the primary idea for many of the young, nineteenth-century pantheists. However, the role of Pan was seen in quite varies ways:

For some he incarnated terror and cruelty, the rejected forces of nature taking their revenge . . . More often his sexual attributes are emphasized, the fierce unrestrained lechery free of all human conventions . . . [There is] a third aspect of Pan which the neo-pagans emphasized: his role as protector and healer of herds and country folk . . . this is the Pan on whom Grahame largely founds his own variant. (Green, 1957, pp. 141-42)

Pan appears early in Grahame's writings, in fact in the *Pagan Papers*, his first book of essays, many of which extol the beauties of the countryside and the desirability of a simple, rural life. These themes are to appear again and again in Grahame's writings, but nowhere as completely or coherently as in that portrait of idyllic country life, *The Wind in The Willows* (1908). In this novel, Grahame's only novel, Pan will become central to the natural mysticism expressed in the seventh chapter, "The Piper at The Gates of Dawn."

Pan, as part man and part animal, seems to signify that marriage of humanity and the natural world espoused by the pantheists of Grahame's time and so soundly rejected by the established Church. The Church, set as it was on the concept of a spiritual hierarchy with the animals and plants underneath humanity and therefore in subjection to it, had dominated western thought for centuries. This idea of subjection had led to a sense of superiority over nature and a belief in humanity's right to exploit nature in whatever way it wished. To those for whom nature was a source of solace, even enlightenment, and certainly pleasure, this position was untenable. The basis, then, of their pantheism

is the oneness of creation – man as a natural force, differing in no essential way from plants and animals.

Then God is reduced to the same expression, and He and Man, and the Wind and Weather, Trees, Sheep, Love, Life, Death, Fear, all play their parts out and meet and merge, and mate and mingle . . .

(Hewlett in Green, 1957, p. 142)

This concept of oneness, wholeness, was not new with the neo-pantheists. Mystics throughout the centuries had espoused just such a vision of the universe, without the reductive quality mentioned by Hewlett. But even more concretely, all the English Romantic writers, including the two Christian Romantics Wordsworth and Coleridge, had also espoused such a vision of the universe.

And what if all of animated nature

Be but organic Harps diversely fram'd,
That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps

Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
At once the Soul of each, and God of all?

(Coleridge, 1971, ll. 44-48)

. . . And I have felt

A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:

A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

(Wordsworth, 1965, ll. 93-102)

These ideas permeate the Romantics' poetry again and again. They appear most clearly perhaps in Shelley's poetry. His Intellectual Beauty, praised so highly in his "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," is surely the pantheistic god. And throughout his great elegy for Keats, "Adonais," the concept of the integration of all things within the god and the god within all things runs, cohering life and death as well as all that is and has been.

The great mystic vision of these three poets in particular is ultimately nature-based. The vision seems no more an incongruity for the Christian Wordsworth or Coleridge than it does for the agnostic Shelley. Although Coleridge himself shies away from the idea to some extent in "The Eolian Harp," he comes back to the idea again and again in his other poems, perhaps most strongly in "The Rhyme of The Ancient Mariner." But Wordsworth is unabashedly joyous in his embrasure of the holiness of all things, and the spirit that flows through all, linking all to that divinity within whom all things exist. Thus Walter Pater's insistence that, ultimately, paganism and Christianity are not opposed but are rather complementary seems a reasonable assertion if one looks at Wordsworth (Pater, 1961, pp. 56-58).

However, to the Churchmen of Grahame's day there was no link, so many of the young radicals rejecting Christianity could find an immediate home in paganism. In itself, nineteenth-century paganism had many forms, including many darker, occult manifestations. But Grahame's paganism was really a completely nature-oriented form of pantheism, with Pan as the symbol of the possibilities of the

inherent spirituality within nature and therefore, although repressed, within humanity. In *Wind in The Willows*, this idea has its most perfect fulfillment of expression for Grahame, because in that novel he fundamentally discards human society, to which he had an increasing aversion during his life, and concentrates on the superior animal society. Although concerned almost exclusively with the lives of small animals, *The Wind in The Willows* presents two story lines that come together near the end of the novel. Many critics have discussed these two plots, some suggesting that it is an inherent weakness in the book, that Grahame could not make up his mind between the advantages of the life of adventure or the life of domestic bliss. Others insist that the book makes a coherent whole. I side with those who believe the "coherent whole" theory, partly because Grahame was too meticulous a craftsman to slap together two disparate stories and strain to bring them together into one novel and partly because of his intellectual commitment to a sense of pantheistic wholeness. The only dissenting factor in Grahame's sense of wholeness was people, who had deliberately separated themselves off from the whole by their sense of superiority and their lack of sense of proportion. This part of his world view is borne out through the novel through the character of Toad, who is the only truly arrogant character in the novel, the only one who never seems to learn from his mistakes, and the only one who is devoted to a product of the technological age: the motor car. All these attributes seem to belong to Grahame's concept of humans in general, particularly industrial-age humans. As is evident in the *Pagan Papers*, Grahame hated technology and the destruction not only of the countryside that the railway and motor car brought, but of the rural way of life. He also seemed, like Pater, to dislike the materialism that accompanied the industrial-technological way of life, and this dislike too is revealed through the ostentatiously wealthy Toad, the only one who boasts of and parades possessions that are not immediately linked to basic comfort and survival (Paglia, 1990, p. 482).

On the other hand, the remainder of the novel is devoted to the more "natural" Ratty, Moly and Badger, who live in appropriate dwellings for their species (Toad lives in a manor house). Their pleasures are simple and all related to the natural world around them. Even Ratty's temptation to run away to sea in "Wayfarers All" springs from a longing for excitement related to another great place of nature, the sea. Never does he long for things mechanical such as those that have entranced Toad from time to time. As sensible animals, Ratty, Moly and Badger tend to steer clear of places where humans congregate. Therefore their lives remain simple and full of joy based on natural pleasures. There are adventures, not all of them comfortable, but they do not contain the elements of self-destructiveness that Toad's adventures do because they do not involve the human world of excess, imbalance and disregard for the natural order.

Thus throughout the novel, nature is extolled. In fact, frequently throughout the novel such natural objects as the river and the moon are personified, acting as conscious beings and therefore part of the holistic vision of nature

presented here. However, Grahame is not so idealistic or simple-minded to believe that nature itself is always idyllic or safe. Moly's adventure in the Wild Wood indicates that, as does the take-over of Toad Hall by the weasels and stoats. Despite whatever satirical and social comments Grahame is making through these passages, he is also letting the reader know that nature is not the same thing as paradise. However, there is hope and balance and beauty shown in this novel through the "natural" animals that is quickly eroded in the Toad chapters, where police and prisons and hunger and danger proliferate at every turn.

In this novel, then, the human world is shown clearly to be a place where all real values have been replaced by the artificial values of the technological era. "Humanity" is rarely expressed amongst people; it remains for the animals to show true humanity and community. Grahame clearly believed that people have lost their sense of having an important and unique part to play in the wholeness that is the natural world, and the universe itself. By losing touch with their natural roots, they have lost touch with their true being and purpose, and therefore are spiritually adrift. The animals, however, are not. In *Willows*, their lives are full of purpose and meaning. They are fulfilled by simple things like the joys of a summer's evening, the warmth of a good fire on a cold day, the pleasures of food and companionship after an excursion or adventure. They do not require much but give a great deal. The discontented and bad-tempered barge-woman, the grasping, shifty gypsy, the warders at the prison all seem to be lacking in some fundamental way that the animals are not. Toad is presented negatively, not because his desire for adventure is bad, but because he cannot be content with what he has. He needs more and more things, and even when he has them, he is not truly content. His desires are excessive and therefore insatiable. In this way he represents the human adult who can never get enough of material things, who is never satisfied. The animals are more like children: easily satisfied and yet fulfilled in a way the human adults can never be.

Therefore the "Piper at The Gates of Dawn" chapter flows directly and consistently out of the vision that Grahame is presenting in this novel. At the beginning of the chapter, in an act of deep kindness and friendship, Ratty and Moly spend the night searching for young Portly, Otter's son, who has been missing for several days. Fearing the worst, they none the less search by moonlight both the river and its banks for any sign of the missing youngster. This act of kindness, together with their harmony with their natural world, leads them to an experience of Pan, the benevolent god who cares for and protects animals.

Following music imbued with divine beauty, they arrive at an island shrouded in awe and mystery and then, in that utter clearness of the imminent dawn, while nature, flushed with fullness of incredible colour, seemed to hold her breath for the event, [Mole] looked in the very eyes of the Friend and Helper; saw the backward sweep of the curved horns, gleaming in the growing daylight; saw the stern, hooked nose between the friendly eyes that were looking down on them

humorously, while the bearded mouth broke into a half-smile at the corners; saw the rippling muscles on the arm that lay across the broad chest, the long supple hand still holding the pan-pipes only just fallen away from the parted lips; saw the splendid curves of the shaggy limbs disposed in majestic ease on the sward; saw, last of all, nestling between his very hooves, sleeping soundly in entire peace and contentment, the little, round, podgy, childish form of the baby otter. All this he saw, for one moment breathless and intense, vivid on the morning sky; and still, as he looked, he lived; and still, as he lived, he wondered.

(Grahame, 1908, pp. 126-27)

Because of their kindness and harmony with their world, they have heard the call of the pipes that lead them to the god and the baby otter he is protecting. Because they answer that call, they see the god. "Transcendence of self and of the moment permits . . . the intensest consciousness of the immanent divine" (Gillin, 1988, p. 173). And because of the innate preciousness of their being, they are caused to forget.

Lest the awful remembrance should remain and grow, and overshadow mirth and pleasure, and the great haunting memory should spoil all the after-lives of little animals helped out of difficulties, in order that they should be happy and light hearted as before.

(Grahame, 1908, p. 127)

Here we have a natural order that, in its naturalness, allows the presence and action of the god and yet is made to forget its vision of the god so that it can remain truly itself.

In this view that Grahame is presenting, then, the being of each person is infinitely precious, and must remain truly itself to be able to participate fully in natural life. There is an awesome transcendence described in this chapter, yet that transcendence does not irrevocably alter the lives of those whom it touches. It aids, it touches, it moves on, leaving their lives fundamentally unchanged so that they can explore and develop themselves rather than becoming lost in the god, or in their experience of him. Surely this is the ultimate view of natural mysticism – a mysticism that in fact encourages only more naturalness, changing nothing of the essential nature of those it touches. This presentation of natural mysticism ties directly in with Grahame's view of nature as presented throughout the rest of the novel.

Yet, for all that, it is none-the-less a truly mystical experience that Ratty and Moly have. Through the agency of the god, and their own receptivity, they come face to face with the Friend and Helper. Through the power of his music they see the world through different eyes, colours and scents heightened, all of nature revealed in its truest splendour.

On either side of them, as they glided onwards, the rich meadow-grass seemed that morning of a freshness and a greenness unsurpassable. Never had they noticed the roses so vivid, the willow-herb so riotous, the meadow-sweet so odorous and pervading.

(Grahame, 1908, p., 125)

This vision is not one of imposed order, or of something beyond what is really there. It does not transcend their time and place. Rather, it reveals that place in its true glory,

making plain the beauty inherent within each plant and flower they pass. The music and Pan himself, of course, are quite transcendental of the time and place. But what is revealed to the animals, and in them, is simply the deepest truths of the being of each. Ratty is revealed in this chapter truly as the poet he is. He is the first to hear the music; he is the one who hears the words in reeds that hold the last of the mystical melody. Moly is revealed as the deeply caring and intuitive creature that he is, as he is the first to decide they should seek for Portly and he feels the sadness of loss the longest after Pan has gone. Moly is the one to row them home, after Ratty falls asleep, exhausted from the experience they have had. Mole moves into a depth of character here that he has not revealed before, but which stays with him the chapters that follow. This movement is not a change so much as a release of what was already latent in him, glimpsed only occasionally in earlier chapters. Also during the chapter the comfortable and familiar diminutives, Ratty and Moly, are dropped for the more mature-sounding Rat and Mole, signifying that their truest and most essential selves have been touched through this experience of the god.

This mysticism is deeply spiritual but is completely natural, also. It reveals and augments what is already there in those who experience it. It does not alter them or demand of

them. It simply reveals a greater reality both within the world at large and within them in particular.

This vision, then, is truly Romantic, truly pantheistic. The life they lead throughout the rest of the novel is, in some ways, a reflection of the essential harmony they have with the rest of their world, a harmony that exhibits the presence of the god in and of itself. Much has been made of this chapter as anachronistic in the context of the larger work: it is well-known that Grahame added this chapter and "Wayfarers All" to the book after he had written and compiled the rest. However, it seems that this chapter, rather than being an "addition," an "afterthought," is actually a coalescing, a summing up of the spiritual principles of natural harmony that inform all the other chapters. These principles permeate the whole book. The division between the Ratty and Moly chapters on the one hand and the Toad chapters on the other simply revolves round the fact that the former two animals live primarily within those principles while Toad, like most human beings, revolts against or, at the very best, ignores those principles. Thus in putting in the "Piper at The Gates of Dawn" chapter, Grahame has simply made explicit, in a passage of unparalleled beauty, his spiritual vision of the universe.

References

- Coleridge, Samuel T. 1971. "The Eolian Harp" in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Selected Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Elizabeth Schneider. San Francisco: Rinehart. pp. 14-16.
- Gillin, Richard. 1988. "Romantic Echoes in The Willows" in *Children's Literature*. Vol. 16. New Haven: Yale UP. pp. 169-74.
- Grahame, Kenneth. 1893. *Pagan Papers*.
- Grahame, Kenneth. 1908. *The Wind in The Willows*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Green, Peter. 1957. *Kenneth Grahame: A Biography*. London: John Murray.
- Paglia, Camille. 1990. *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. New Haven: Yale UP.
- Pater, Walter. 1961. *The Renaissance*. Glasgow: Fontana.
- Wordsworth, William. 1965. "Lines Composed A Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" in *Selected Poems and Prefaces*. Ed. Jack Stillinger. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. 108-11.