

**Romanticism : Man and Nature**

---- Through paintings of *Mr. & Mrs. Andrews* and *Sir Brooke Boothby*

Romanticism is a reaction to the birth of a 'modern world' and changes how we perceive nature, children, love, work ethics, etc. It marks the birth of a new set of ideology, mindset and ways of feelings. Though there may be disputes in the precise dating of the Romantic epoch, it approximately begins in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century in the work of artists, poets and philosophers. In fact, it will not be an overstretch to argue that the entire social milieu is altered, and a large aspect of this change is the relationship between Man and Nature---- how we perceive nature. Through analysing the following paintings : *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews* (1750), by Thomas Gainsborough and *Sir Brooke Boothby* (1781), by Joseph Wright of Derby, this essay aims to shine light upon the impact of Romanticism on Man's perception and relationship with nature. Furthermore, the essay will delve deeper and explore the connotations and implications of the various elements in the painting, drawing inference to the changes in social milieu and ideologies during the time.

England was experiencing the ordeal of change from a primarily agricultural society, where wealth and power had been concentrated in the landholding aristocracy, to a modern industrial nation. These changes occurred in the context of revolution, unstable economies, and the constant threat to the social structure from imported revolutionary ideologies to which the ruling classes responded by the repression of traditional liberties. However, the sufferings were largely confined to the poor, while the landed classes and industrialists prospered.

*Mr. and Mrs. Andrews* (1750), by Thomas Gainsborough is the epitome of such privileged, landed class, the portrayal of 'elegant leisure' and moneyed privilege. The panoramic landscape of the painting creates a wide and vibrant view of the country side land (The Auberries estate) and their owner, the Andrews, on the left foreground. It may appear unconventional that the figures are not centralised in the middle as such portrait usually does, but instead the grounds of The Auberries are given equal attention on the right. The entire right half (or perhaps slightly more than half) of the painting depicts the beautiful and serene nature of a 'tamed land'. The diction 'nature' and 'tamed' appears to be oxymoronic here, but this is the connotation of the painting. The spaciousness and beauty of the 'tamed land' is a reflection of the landed classes' money, possessions and power. It is a demonstration of their wealth and a reminder of their prestige. The Andrews pose in the painting as members of the landed gentry. Hence, the portrait, or perhaps, more of a 'conversation piece' (informal portraits in the outdoor), not only conveys the young couple's social status through their figure, but also their estate--- the nature in their ownership.

The couple are located on the edge of a wheat and cornfield, while fenced-in animals (presumably cattle) populate the middle ground. The neat parallel corn and wheat field on the right foreground suggests modern agricultural technologies such as a seed drill are used, suggesting the farm is modern and efficient. The nature in such case, the animals and the land, are both completely under man's control with the help of modernised technology. It can be inferred that nature appears to be part of man's possession.

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Much inference can also be drawn from the figures' posture, **outfit**, and demeanour. The clothing of the figures, Mr. Andrews wears a sporty shooting jacket and large cocked hat, and Mrs. Andrew, a bright baby blue- pastel coloured dress with delicate lace of erotic French work, are the fashion trend of London during the time. Not only do they again signify their wealth, but they also suggest the synthetic element of Man utilising natural resources for their needs. Man **is** able to produce and synthesise such extravagant clothing products from natural's elements. The inference of Man's control and dominance over nature is reinforced by Mr Andrew's relaxed pose and hunting rifle. Hunting itself insinuates the Man's dominance over nature as they are empowered to 'kill' animals --- nature's creation, viewed as their property. The rifle can be inferred as a symbol of man's success in technology progression, or a cruel, murderous weapon as Man takes nature for granted. An interesting point is Mr. Andrews's hunting dog located on the left bottom corner of the painting. While dogs are also 'nature's creation,' they are also domesticated by Man and trained to serve Man for specific tasks, in this case, collect the **'trophies'** of hunting.

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The upper part of the background depicts the blue sky, covered by grey clouds. Whilst the overall tone of the painting is bright and vibrant, especially with sunlight reflecting on the figures, the greyish clouds create a gloomy overtone. Perhaps it is to infer **Man's pollution** to nature? It may be rash to make such judgemental conclusion, but an interesting point I notice is that the sky behind Mr. Andrews (on the left top corner) is particularly grey. Perhaps it is simply the artist attempting to show contrast and bring the figure to the foreground more vividly, or perhaps there is something metaphorical behind this. Is Man casting shadows **on** Nature? **[I think here Gainsborough is showing off his mastery at depicting the changeable weather of England.]**

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Though with similar backgrounds of 'nature', the second painting *Sir Brooke Boothby* (1781), by Joseph Wright of Derby conveys a rather disparate message. To place the painting in context, the painting is a portrait of Boothby, Derbyshire owner and an intellectual. He is seen as a 'progressive man of his time'. The painting can be seen as "An endorsement of Rousseau's argument for return to nature" as he prides himself in his association with Rousseau after the latter's success. The book by Rousseau is deliberately painted in the paracentral space in the foreground, in Boothby's left hand. His left forefinger even points to the book's title ROUFSEAU.

Jean. J. Rousseau's philosophy calls upon **Man's return to nature, to cherish the natural's goodness**. Therefore, this painting is an **illustration of Rousseau's philosophy**, emphasising the importance of man to live in harmony with nature. The figure is dressed in dull, soberly coloured wool suit, his cuff and suit unbuttoned, his legs in shrubs, ankles covered by leaves, his entire body is in a reclining position on the ground, in contact to dirt. This deliberate depiction of his dishevelled appearance may be the artist's and Boothby's attempt to **bridge the gap between Man and Nature**. Together with the untamed woodland scenery in the background, the painting exemplifies Rousseau's ideology of **connecting Man and Nature**. Such relaxed aura within the dark untamed woodland showcases the figure's intimacy with nature, but perhaps also to the viewer. He is 'as pure as a rustic stream', not in society but in nature where he rejects the formal and indirect relationship of cultivated modern life in favour of a direct and authentic act of communion in nature. Is he perhaps **inviting the viewer to join him?**

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A very noteworthy observation I have made, is that the man's reclining position with his head supported by his hand, draws reference to the **Classical River God** lying in a stream – as Boothby is ( a gentle stream is in the central foreground). This also resonates with the ideology of the Romantic Period to reminiscence the past, the archaic beauty. The River God is also a symbol of nature, emphasising again the connection between Man and Nature. An important idea is that Romanticism's 'Nature' is more meditative rather than descriptive. Nature is a site of freedom from society, a **commune between nature and man**.

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The figure's pose also looks **back to the melancholy tradition** in Elizabethan portraiture, especially with the setting of trees enclosing the man at the centre, obscuring the light. The autumn-colour scheme of the painting does create a dark overtone. However, it is not suggesting that Boothby is in a state of depression but rather in a state of meditation and contemplation. Reading is seen as an act of introspection, the book in his hand also suggests this. It is also an embodiment of the Romantic Period's ideology of introspection, the self-reflective and philosophical individualism. The painting also depicts Boothby's contemplative, sharp gaze towards the viewer. It is perhaps manifesting an invitation to us, to join his philosophical, contemplation outdoors.

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Boothby's reclining pose on the ground juxtaposes the domineering aura of Mr. Andrews. Though both are privileged gentlemen (as seen by their clothing), Boothby's right finger on his face also delineate a delicate **sensibility**, a flamboyant departure from the conventions of the society portrait in which people would sit or stand authoritatively, as in the first painting's case. Whilst the overtone of the Andrews' painting is bright but with grey clouds in the background creating a feeling of imminent danger and gloom, the Boothby's painting is the contrary. Although the overtone of the second painting is darker and duller, there is this glowing sky in the middle background, conveying a feeling of brightness and hope in the distance. Perhaps, this is what the Romantic artists aim to convey, connecting Man and Nature will bring forth light while the opposite, gloom?

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In conclusion, although both paintings depict sceneries of Man and Nature, the former is of dominance whilst the latter, of embrace. Though both showcase only the privileged class during the period, the relationships between Man and Nature conveyed are disparate. The second painting is painted approximately 31 years after the first, perhaps the disparity in ideologies and man's attitude towards nature can be attributed to the change in social milieu during the Romantic era. As Man starts to rebel against the modernised world where machineries, development and technologies seem to take precedence before nature, the emotions are conveyed vividly through the arts.

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I mark this piece 95.

**Bibliography (please check your spelling and punctuation),  
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English Romanticism

Homework 1: Introduction

### **Comparison of *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews* and *Sir Brooke Boothby***

Paintings not only represent the contemporary art but also reflect the cultural and historical background of a certain period of time. The two paintings, *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews* and *Sir Brooke Boothby*, are painted respectively around 1750 and 1781 by Thomas Gainsborough and Joseph Wright of Derby. They are both oil paintings on canvas, but one can notice significant differences when looking at them side by side.

This essay explores the differences in **three aspects: the sophistication of landscapes, the difference of character portrait, and the lighting of the backgrounds.**

First and foremost is the difference in landscapes. In *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews*, Gainsborough puts the couple on the left half of the scene rather than in the center, as is typical for a portrait. On the right half of the image, Gainsborough provides a view of rural England that is as detailed as the portraits of the couple. The view of the landscape starts from the edge of a field of wheat, to the distance where stand luminous trees and grazing sheep, to the edge of sight where lie slumbering hills as well as fleeting clouds. *Sir Brooke Boothby*, on the other hand, shows an opaquer background, a dense woodland with open country and sky colored in grey and orange in the back. Brooke Boothby, the main character, lies in the middle of the picture in a relaxed posture. The visibility of the backgrounds reflects the relation between human and nature, as *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews* presents human and nature with equal attention as if they are separate, whereas Boothby's portrait is an entailment of humans' intimacy with nature.

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Another difference is the main figures. Both Mr. and Mrs. Andrews are dressed finely, an implication of the upper class not having to work for a living. Mr. Andrews stands with a rifle under his armpit and with a hound next to him, with a nonchalant and even stiff expression on his face. His pose seems to suggest he doesn't feel comfortable standing next to his wife, yet his face **shows the possession of power in his hands, the merit of modern technology**. As for Mrs. Andrews, she wears a dress that possesses the bright colors and delicate laces of modern French works. Her dress glimmers in sunlight, **contradictory to the overcast sky**. Different from the contradictory and **rivalry between human and nature** in the first picture, Brooke Boothby opens himself up to nature by lying down in the woods. He rejects the formal manners of cultivated modern life in favor of an authentic connection with nature. If not for **his fine-tailored suit**, one will have recognized this picture as a depiction of the Golden Age. Furthermore, Boothby holds a book by Rousseau, whose works **emphasized on the "state of nature" and inspired the French Revolution**.

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已註解 [MOU4]: Yes, yes.

已註解 [MOU5]: Wonderful detail.

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Lastly, the two pictures present the background lighting in distinct ways. *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews* is a painting with bright subjects but with a contrastive, **overclouded sky**. The shadows of the clouds looming over the fields suggestively show the couple's **feeling of ruling over miles of estate**: they possess a lot of land and resources, but those can simply satisfy their material life **but never uplift their souls**, let alone returning them to nature's embrace. The background in *Sir Brooke Boothby*, however, is glowing, and the orange light suggests the sun setting over the far hills. **Though shaded, light is never gone**, and it provides a veil of quietness and peacefulness over the portrait.

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To sum up, the sophistication of landscapes, the difference of character portraits, and the lighting of the paintings renders the two paintings very different. *Mr.*

*and Mrs. Andrews* is a painting rich in color and detailed in landscape, but portrays the contradiction and conflict between human and nature and serves as an undertone for the disparity between the rich and the poor. In *Sir Brooke Boothby*, one can easily see the essence of the Romantic period, the spirit of returning to the pure, prelapsarian nature. Instead of separate entities, the painting is presented wholly, that the figure and nature are one entirely. All in all, the two paintings reflect the cultures of different periods of time.

Very impressive. Your analysis is excellent. I mark this piece 92.

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B07102024

Professor Ya-feng Wu

British Romanticism

28 September 2021

### Idealization or Domestication:

#### Humans and Nature in *Sir Brooke Boothby* and *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews*

As Industrial Revolution gradually changed the landscape of England in the mid and late eighteenth century, the relationship between humans and nature became a noteworthy theme among artworks from this period. Different ideas about how humans were related to nature can be observed from two portraits of this time, *Sir Brooke Boothby* (1781) by Joseph Wright of Derby and *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews* (1750) by Thomas Gainsborough.

The portrait of Sir Brooke Boothby presents the gentleman lying comfortably on the ground in a wild forest. The reclining figure of Sir Brooke Boothby occupies the foreground of the painting with a flowing stream right in front of him. While he is well dressed in a suit, a muslin cravat, a big black hat, and yellow gloves, he seems to be at ease with his natural surroundings, propping his head with his right hand rested on a leaf-covered rock, and his feet are likewise surrounded by leaves and covered by shade. His left hand is holding a book, and his contemplating expression suggests that he is brooding over some transcendental thoughts. The middle ground of the painting is composed of a luxuriant woodland whose crossing branches form a dense canopy that blocks the daylight, giving an overall dusky tone to the whole picture. From the small opening in the middle, a part of the distant mountains and the evening sky in the background can be seen. Overall, nature is an untamed wilderness in this painting, and the human is in harmony with nature while engaging in sublime intellectual activities. [I like your competent description of this painting.]

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已註解 [MOU2]: Really?

The picture of Mr. and Mrs. Andrews, on the other hand, depicts the couple in an idyllic English countryside. The couple is on the left-hand side of the foreground with their farmland spreading beside them. Mr. Andrews is dressed in a classy outfit, standing casually with a gun next to his wife, who is wearing a blue dress and sitting in an upright manner on a sumptuous bench in front of a big oak tree. Mr. Andrew's gun and the collared dog at his feet suggest that he might just come back from hunting, and his somewhat patronizing demeanor shows his status as a landowner. By the same token, Mrs. Andrews's expression reveals her complacency about their estate. The row of crop sheaves on the right-hand side of the foreground extends with the sprawling land to the middle ground of the painting where there is a pasture enclosed by fences with livestock in it, indicating the wide span of their homestead and large-scale agricultural practices supposedly brought by the technological advances in the mid eighteenth century. The broad view of the landscape around Mr. and Mrs. Andrews presents the order and arrangement they enforce on their farmland. Beyond the woods encircling their field, distant hills and small villages are visible in the background beneath the cloudy sky. In general, nature shown in this picture is agricultural land cultivated by humans using new techniques, and the configuration of the whole picture discloses nature to be the property owned and controlled by humans.

Comparing the two portraits, we can see different modes of relationship between humans and nature judging from the ways the figures interact with their surroundings: while nature is idealized by humans in *Sir Brooke Boothby*, it is domesticated as property in *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews*. In the former, nature is an ideal place for humans to undertake elevated pursuits. Sir Brooke Boothby's book and contemplation, emblematic of the working of human mind, are foregrounded within the grandeur of pure nature, and the original, uncultivated state of nature echoes the unbridled potentials of human intellect and imagination. By contrast, in *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews*, nature is merely a means of production

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utilized by humans. The pastoral landscape is governed by human artefacts like fences and the row of sheaves, even animals, including the dog and the livestock, are at the disposal of humans. The gun that Mr. Andrews holds and the bench that Mrs. Andrews sits on further imply humans' control and domination over nature. Humans as landholders are portrayed to be superior to nature, which is subject to the cultivation and exploitation of its owners. All in all, the domestication of nature in *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews* affirms humans' superiority and progress, whereas the idealization of nature in *Sir Brooke Boothby* reflects the Romantic ideal of the sublime, transcendental nature.

I really appreciate your subtle and sharp reading and capable "translation" from picture to words.

I mark this piece 90.

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已註解 [MOU5]: But I would say this is another mode of "domestication" of nature for he seems to feel at home in nature.

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Professor: ~~Prof.~~ Wu

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Nature is truly subtle. Human beings can take advantage of her by defining her with ~~non-~~natural values; human beings can also benefit from her by appreciating her with natural perceptions. Advantages taken through unnatural values, like the distorted perspectives themselves, can easily perish through time, while the treasures gifted to natural minds from nature will flourish and carry on endlessly.

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The first painting "Mr. and Mrs. Andrews" portrays nature in a way that the goods exploited from it outshine its essence. The figures take up nearly one-half of the painting, indicating that they are the main characters of the artwork. By making the foreground the brightest part, Gainsborough once again highlights the significance of his sitters. Furthermore, as the artwork was composed from a slightly low angle, one will instinctively look up to search for the figures' faces at first sight when looking at the painting. Thus, the artist thrice emphasizes the prominent status of Mr. and Mrs. Andrews through this design, insinuating how paltry nature is compared to the other aspects of the couple's world. Then, the posture and clothing of Mr. and Mrs. Andrews, observed in close-up, radiates a quintessential image of a bourgeois lifestyle. Mrs. Andrews dressed in a Rococo style gown has her panniers spread on the exquisite bench she elegantly sits on, contrasting greatly with the natural scenery

已註解 [MOU1]: Curious.

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已註解 [MOU3]: I would not use this word, which is not right for the time.

behind, while Mr. Andrews in full attire with a shotgun clutched in his arm stands by his lady as a patriarchal figure. Interestingly, although this is a portrait capturing the joyful day of their marriage, the facial expressions of Mr. and Mrs. Andrews somehow lack the joy of a newlywed. Love does not seem to be what they need or should indulge in—the vast and rich “nature” behind them may rather be the core of the union.

已註解 [MOU4]: Yes.

Nature in this work serves not only as Mr. and Mrs. Andrews’s “natural setting” but also as their source of fortune and as proof of their assets and ownership. In the foreground are neatly harvested and stacked crops and Mr. and Mrs. Andrews is obviously not the provider of labor. Fences are seen in the middleground, but the livestock moving around in it are so trivial that they appear to be just a drop in the ocean of the couple’s property. Lush acres in the background stretch to the horizon but being the possessions of human beings makes it only an ordinary piece of enclosed land. Mr. and Mrs. Andrews in this work hardly show any intimacy towards nature, for it is understandable that human beings seldom devote their love to their possessions.

已註解 [MOU5]: Yes.

已註解 [MOU6]: Yes. Please give sources to this very specific information.

In the second painting “Sir Brooke Boothby,” nature and human beings together compose a splendid harmony. The figure in this painting, similar to the previous one, takes up a notable portion of the painting. What makes the two different, however, is

that Sir Brooke Boothby, unlike Mr. and Mrs. Andrews, has one side of his body fully contacting the ground, emanating the intimate relationship between human beings and nature. Additionally, Sir Brooke Boothby's cuffs and waistcoat are casually unbuttoned, and his breeches are slightly wet because of the stream in front of him but that does not seem to bother him at all. Moreover, instead of looking straightforward and being concentrated, his eyes are delineated as he was musing upon Rousseau's ideas and enjoying the moment of tranquility that nature kindly granted him.

Like a mother, the shady trees on both sides correspond to the palms of two hands holding Sir Brooke Boothby, resembling human beings being protected in the embrace of nature, quietly and peacefully. The composition of the foreground is subtly circular. Thus, as the two rows of trees in the middleground also extend in an embracing manner, the whole painting forms a horizontal cylinder, or a tunnel, which guides the viewers to look towards the end of the road and reach the glimmer of light in the background. The delicate depiction implies that through the long and dull path contemplating on nature, human beings will be able to relish the fruit of sheer bliss and enlightenment eventually. Meanwhile, by sharing an eye-level angle with the figure, it creates a feeling as if one were lying down like Sir Brooke Boothby and experiencing the splendor of nature with him while viewing the painting.

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已註解 [MOU9]: Great.

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Speaking of the human-nature relationship, drastic changes were found in artworks before and after the age of Romanticism. Nevertheless, instead of framing the cornerstone of the masterpieces “rebellion against conventions,” I prefer to call it **“reflection on the power and wisdom of nature”** which Romantic artists emphatically attempted to convey. Therefore, through the delicate and skillful hands of the two renowned painters above, we are fortunate to grasp their explicit messages on the relationship between human beings and nature.

I mark this piece 90. Your skills at describing and analyzing are impressive.

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B08102046 Connie Yang

Professor Ya-Feng Wu

English Romanticism

Reflection 1

Comparison of *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews* by Thomas Gainsborough and *Sir Brooke*

*Boothby* by Joseph Wright of Derby

The two paintings, *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews* by Thomas Gainsborough and *Sir Brooke Boothby* by Joseph Wright of Derby, are different in many aspects, such as the composition, the use of color, and the portrayal of characters. From these characteristics of the paintings, we observe the relationship between humans and nature and how humankind in those periods regarded themselves in the world.

The two artworks have one thing in common—the triangular composition of the main structure, a widely used technique in paintings to make the whole picture dynamic while maintaining their steadiness. The tree behind Mr. and Mrs. Andrews supports the vertex angle; then, the triangle's legs relatively extend from Mr. Andrews' arm to the hound and from the arm of the bench to the ground. As for the other painting, the hypotenuse of the right-angle triangle starts from the tree where Sir Brooke Boothby is reclining, gently following the latter's body till it reaches the ground. However, these two triangles are composed of different elements and emotions.

The humans are rather alienated from nature in *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews*. First, they are isolated from the ground by standing or sitting straight on a chair. The lack of contact with the earth shows their effort to claim their superiority as human beings, while their deliberately upright posture distinct them from other animals. There are also symbols of power like the gun, the collared hound, and the bench situated around humans. Gainsborough emphasized people on the left side, which is the whole piece's

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focus. The newly wed, dressed in, their best are posing for the portrait in front of a sturdy tree; the husband is standing while the wife, sitting on a bench.

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If we look close enough, we find that the people in the picture are asserting their dominance over nature from the husband's and the bench's feet on the root of the enormous tree. The hierarchy becomes crystal clear with heights in the picture; men in the highest position above women and humans above the animals and nature.

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Furthermore, the scene is depicted panoramically as if trying to display the properties they claim to own with this portrait. The nature portrayed here is also regulated with artificial construction in this painting: the wheat fields, church-like buildings, and farms with domestic animals on the horizon. That is to say, they regard the purpose of nature as to serve humans. Another point worthy of notice is how the painter lighted the whole picture. He sets the source of light on the right, guiding the viewer's attention to the couple and emphasizing the root, the quintessential part of a tree, under Mr. Andrews' feet again.

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已註解 [吳雅鳳3]: Yes!

In contrast, *Sir Brooke Boothby* demonstrated a relatively harmonious human-nature relationship. The figure reclines to the tree, lying full-length on the ground with a large portion of his body contacting the earth directly, almost becoming part of the tree roots. There are fallen leaves scatter on the ground like a natural bed; the branches of the trees are also seemingly lower to embrace him. Boothby seems to feel so at home with where he is that he unbuttoned his waistcoat and sleeves, suggesting his comfort of the surroundings. His content is shown by the hand propping the head and the relaxed posture of his body, without the deliberate gesture to outstand himself from the ground. Thus, it is fair to say that he is merging with nature in this picture.

已註解 [吳雅鳳4]: Yes.

Furthermore, the visual field is limited by the dense woods instead of looking like a panoramic picture; we can see no intention to show off his land. In the background, there isn't any artificial construction nor aggressive measures adopted to

control nature—only a vellum-bound volume presents the mark of civilization by Rousseau in the figure's hand. In addition, Wright uses the same earth-tone colors on both the human and nature in the background, without emphasizing any particular side's importance in this painting. Therefore, the artist strikes a different atmosphere between humans and nature from *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews*.

*Mr. and Mrs. Andrews* and *Sir Brooke Boothby* suggest different kinds of relationships between humans and nature in correspondent times. The former depicts the boasting attitude toward what people claim to gain from nature, while the latter, the expectation to live in harmony with nature. The spirits of Neo-classicism and its rebel, Romanticism, shine through these two paintings in terms of composition techniques and elements, enabling us to find the traces of contemporary thoughts from them.

[I mark this piece 90. You certainly have learned some art history.](#)

[I would love to know more about your English travel.](#)

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