



Ecophilia: Revitalization of Nature in the Select Poems of Mary Oliver

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Abstract

Nature is an epitome of restoring and rejuvenating the affinity with the ecosystem and the living beings. Mary Oliver is an American poet who always finds solace in nature. All her works are completely laden with vivid imagery, natural elements and unadorned language. Her work titled “What do We Know: Poems and Prose Poems” serves as the best example of how nature is a consoling aspect for human beings by undergoing an introspective journey and also a reservoir of life experiences. This research article sets out to trace how nature acts as a therapy and it also delineates the psychological relationship that exists between nature and human beings from the point of view of Ecophilia.

Keywords: affinity, style, therapy, revive, nature

Nature becomes the source of existence and survival for any human beings who live on Earth. It is often known as “Mother Nature,” stressing its role in providing a sustainable life. Ecophilia is an emerging philosophy, and it is an interdisciplinary approach that highlights the significance of the connection between nature and its living beings. Human beings are just residents and dwellers of the planet.

Ecophilia is the binary opposite of Ecophobia. In the context of ecocriticism, Ecophobia reveals the irrational fear of the natural world, which makes human beings to have a destructive mentality towards it. On the other hand, Ecophilia stands as a therapy to restore and revive nature and its bond with living beings. Ecophobia is ‘Othering Nature’ whereas Ecophilia is ‘Embracing Nature’.

Mary Jane Oliver is a famous American poet, particularly known for her rhetorical and intelligible poems which explore concepts such as nature, the human condition, and love. She was born in Maple Heights, which laid a foundation for her to develop a deeper connection with nature from an early stage itself. Her career in poetry has spanned over five decades, and she has won many awards and recognitions, such as the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, the National Book Award, the Christopher Award, and so on. Her notable works are “No Voyage and Other Poems” (1963), “American Primitive” (1983), “New and Selected Poems” (1992), “What do We Know: Poems and Prose Poems” (2002), “Wild Geese” (2004), “Dogs Songs” (2013) etc., She has written almost twenty poetry collections and several prose



works. She is considered to be a lover of solitude, and she finds her inspiration in the long walks in the natural world, which she always takes. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau have had a deep influence on the life of Mary Oliver to follow the path of the Transcendentalists. Her writing style is very unique in depicting the reality in the natural world. Poems such as “Summer Poem”, “The Humming Bird”, “You are standing at the Edge of the Woods”, “Crows”, “Last Night the Rain Spoke to Me”, “A Settlement” and “Blue Iris” are taken from her work titled “What do We Know: Poems and Prose Poems” to analyse them from the perspective of Ecophilia.

“What Do We Know: Poems and Prose Poems” is a poetic collection which got published in 2002. It is a collection of forty poems that is a blend of both prose and poetic styles. This work takes the reader on a journey through nature by embracing nature’s fleeting beauty as well, and it deals with the mysteries of the existence of both human beings and other living beings on Earth. It is a clarion call for the readers to understand the significance of finding solace in nature and to have a close affinity with the simple and ordinary things in life by appreciating it whole heartedly. This poetic collection serves as a perfect example of Pantheism. From the perspective of Mary Oliver, Nature becomes the mirror of life, delving into the complexities of life and emotions such as joys and sorrows.

Ecophilia is derived from the Greek words “oikos” and “philia,” meaning abode and love. It is a concept of having a deep affinity and optimistic relationship between humans and nature. Everything in the world is interconnected. Ecophilia throws light upon concepts such as biophilia (love for nature and living beings) as well as topophilia (love for a particular place). It enhances and strengthens the relationship between human beings and nature. Human-nature interactions are considered to be very essential in the digital era and AI progressions. Ecophilia is an interdisciplinary approach that gets explored in fields such as urban planning, psychology, environmental advocacy, education, and therapy. It is a promotion towards environmental stewardship, which means integrating ecophilia into eco-pedagogy,

thereby engaging outdoor activities and fostering love for the environment and its preservation. It is very much related to eco-therapy, which is a mindfulness activity using nature as an emotional healer and towards the holistic well-being of any individual who lives on Earth. There is a paradigm shift in perspectives that encourages the importance of eco-centric thinking over anthropocentric thinking. It elucidates the quintessential aspect of developing empathy and a multi-species view of the world, which brings forth the coexistence of other living beings on Earth.

The poem titled “Summer Poem” is a poem of observation where the poet sees a frog and a white heron following their daily routine. She goes out to see a frog by leaving the house. This shows a typical example of how Mary Oliver finds nature as her home and not her real home where she lives. She describes the frog skin as shining green skin. The eggs of the frog are compared to a slippery veil. This comparison is to show that human beings may destruct the environment where they live and so nature is trying to protect itself from the very clear appearance. She even personifies the frog as ‘She’. This itself shows the close affinity that the poet is trying to create with the observing ecosystem. Her glances shift from the frog to the ambiance. She says that there is a pond with risen water lilies, which indicate the supreme power of nature in its aura. The shores are covered with pink flowers. This scenic view provides an aesthetic sense to the poet as well as a scene of consolation. There is notable change of time exposed in the poem. Mary Oliver continues the poem by taking the readers to the long, windless afternoon. This particular scene exhibits calmness and solemnity. The white heron, which the poet notices now, is being compared to a dropped cloud. She uses this simile to convey the readers about the colour white, which is associated with purity and peace. It is often observed in the cloud. It is also to convey to the readers that even a cloud can fall from the sky to scatter the hues on Earth.

And the white heron
like a dropped cloud
Taking a slow step (Oliver, 1)



The slow steps taken by the heron are a kind of awareness to human beings that they have always done things in haste. Nature is considered to be a great master of patience. Mary Oliver goes an extra mile to compare the movements of heron to the art of poetic creation. She says that heron has penned a soft-footed poem in the still waters, which can be viewed as advice for human beings. Like Heron, a poet should also create art only in tranquility, like Wordsworth. The ecophilic elements presented in the poem show that Mary Oliver has taken inspiration from nature.

“The Hummingbird” is an ideological example that showcases how nature works in every possible way to continue in the life cycle. The poem begins in the morning, and Mary Oliver considered herself lucky to live every day with gratitude. It is the season of spring, and so there is a symbolism of hope and revival attached to it. The poet sees the apple trees and finds a hummingbird in their branches. She is perplexed to see its green wings, and how it moves from blossom to blossom recalls the work done by a hummingbird. She personifies a hummingbird by addressing it as ‘He’. This typical interaction and empathy towards nature is the concern of the concept ‘Ecophilia’. The poet says that the hummingbird is the gatherer of honey, and ‘promise’ is embedded in the line to show that it is a spring of hope that nature carries everywhere. The poet is even jealous of the hummingbird about the qualities and appearance of the bird such as ruby throat, accuracy, single-mindedness and so on. She could even see the bird introspectively by identifying the ambition that lingers behind her eyes, that she should also go to her desk and start writing. She feels that she stands under the tree just to observe, forgetting that she also has work to complete. She feels that she lacks that single-mindedness which the hummingbird has. She needs brilliant work and a satisfying coat. This poem is an amalgamation of creating positivity and an optimistic atmosphere.

and I should go now to my desk and my pages
But I still stand under the trees, happy and desolate,
wanting for myself such a satisfying coat
and brilliant work. (Oliver, 14)

The poem titled “You are standing at the Edge of the Woods” is an elucidation of healing therapy according to the concept ecophilia. In this verse, the poet addresses the readers as ‘you’, and the readers are standing at the edge of the woods during twilight. There is a sound that is heard all of a sudden, which is a song being sung by someone. The sound is compared to a waterfall pouring down the leaves, and the poet identifies the bird as ‘Thrush’. Thrush sings in an authoritative manner, which becomes the ‘wildest red outcry’. It is a clarion call. This cry of the bird could be seen as a victory or a defeat. This song is transient because Thrush has gotten disappeared in darkness. The poet questions whether it has gone silent or it might have flown away. The atmosphere is becoming darker and darker. Nobody could distinguish the meaning of the cry of the Thrush. The moon rises without the affliction of the cry because it always remained a mystery. Through this incident, the poet advises the readers that sometimes music will ease the ears, but sometimes it will not. Sometimes in silence will sum up the rest of the life. This poem is therapeutic because it tries to empower environmental stewardship and improve the well-being through human-nature interactions. In this poem, the interaction between the readers and thrush is monumental. Nature teaches human beings about the binary opposites that should be treated equally, such as music and silence.

Sometimes with the ease of music, and
sometimes in silence
for the rest of your life. (Oliver,23)

Mary Oliver’s “Crows” is a poem that deals with a universal idea about crows and their lifestyle, which she compares to hers. The poem begins with references to countries like Japan, Seattle, and Indonesia. Everywhere, the crows are the same in their manners, such as loud, hungry, crossing a field, sitting above the traffic, walking like a landlord, and so on. The poet wonders about crows, how they are not jealous of the tiger, the emperor, and the philosopher. The poet rhetorically asks the readers, “Why should they?”. She calls the wind the friend of crows, and small trees will be their houses. She keenly observes



how the crows are eating anything without much thought. She says that no one can tell whether it is a brag about a crow or a prayer of deeper thanks. Crows have become an incarnation of saints, thieves, and an example of success. From the point of view of Ecophilia, the poet finds a line of demarcation between her and the crows. Mary Oliver undergoes a journey in nature to have a better comprehension of it. She indulges in comparison, whether she has lived a simple life like crows by following the wind. She concludes the poem saying that crows manage all the situations that she could not because of narrow-mindedness, which loses flexibility and brightness. It is a poem of meditation and an answer to the unanswered questions.

Should I have led a more simple life?
Have my ambitions been worthy?
Has the wind, for years, been talking to me as well? (Oliver, 34)

The poem titled “Settlement” is an instance of a concept called eco-therapy, where the ecosystem provides a harmonic relationship with human beings. Mary Oliver pens this poem in a persuasive tone, such as “Look, it’s spring”. This poem is a promotion of the physical, mental, and psychological well-being of an individual. The poet calls spring hope by highlighting the willingness of nature to continue the life cycle in a better way. She notices the trembling wind-flowers, pale bodies of the brackens and thrushes carrying various emotions such as mystery, sorrow, happiness, music and ambition. She takes up a solitary walk in her mind without any task, and she turns the pages after pages about nature in her mind. Like the return of the spring, she also prepares her mentality to forgive and forget. Her constant affinity with nature has provided solutions to the problems created by human beings. She has an interconnection towards nature.

Therefore, dark past,
I’m about to do it.
I’m about to forgive you
for everything. (Oliver, 45)

Mary Oliver’s “Blue Iris” serves as the best example for a poem of meditation with nature. She begins the poem with a question of her own identity in this world, ‘Who am I?’. She puts forth this question to the world, yet nature answers it crucially. She says that she cannot fly, run and the only things she can do are a slow walk and reading books. Nature listens to her in all possible ways, affirming an optimistic relationship with other living beings. Her thoughts are interrupted by a green-headed fly, which questions Mary Oliver as

“What’s that you’re doing?” (Oliver, 53)

She becomes very quiet and closes the book. She replies, saying that she could write down words in a soft manner. Once again, the wind questions her with the same question. She replies, quoting that writing is not an abrupt process. Wind doubts her words. This is the interaction that ecophilia deals with. Wind’s rhetorical question, “Doesn’t it?” brings a revelation to the poet with the release of the blue iris. Blue iris is a symbol of faith, wisdom, hope, and courage. The poet is astonished to see this revelation, and she becomes the witness for the pure and speechless receptacle.

“Doesn’t it” says the wind, and breaks open,
releasing
Distillation of blue iris.
And my heart panics not to be, as I long to be,
The empty, waiting, pure, speechless receptacle.
(Oliver, 53)

“What Do We Know: Poems and Prose Poems” is a powerful integration of simple observation and an immense reflection of nature. As an insightful collection of poems, Mary Oliver examines the relationship between nature and human experience. Ecological consciousness is very much evident in this poetic collection. Oliver has dealt with the minute details in nature. Nature portrayed in “What do We Know: Poems and Prose Poems” is a teacher and a canvas. It provides layers of meaning along with human emotions and experiences. It has offered a holistic perspective that helps them find meaning and beauty in the world around them. Mary Oliver invites



readers to reconnect with the sacredness of nature from the perspective of ecophilia.

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