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An Ecocritical Study of Mary Oliver's Poetry

A B S T R A C T

The loss of interconnectedness, unity, and harmony between nature and man has been one of the most significant consequences of the industrial revolution and technological advancement in modern times. Due to this degradation of nature, human health suffers as a result. In this context, finding an effective method to re-establish the connection between the ecosystem and humans is critical. Ecocriticism is achieving this purpose efficiently because it involves exploring the relationship between literature and the natural world. Based on the fact that poetry is an effective tool for spreading environmental awareness among people. The application of this theory will be within the framework of American poetry represented by Mary Oliver(1935-2019), using eco critical perspective, through the examination and analysis of her poetry by explaining how she finds a way in reuniting with nature.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31185/eduj.Vol50.Iss1.3454>دراسة في ضوء النظرية النقدية البيئية للشعر ماري أوليفر¹

الباحثة: *تبارك صادق علي

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الخلاصة:

يعد فقدان الترابط والوحدة والانسجام بين الطبيعة والإنسان من أهم تبعات الثورة الصناعية الحديثة والتقدم التكنولوجي. هذا الإهمال للطبيعة يؤدي إلى الإضرار بصحة الإنسان. في هذا السياق، من المهم إيجاد طريقة فعالة لإعادة بناء العلاقة بين النظام البيئي والبشر، وتحقيق النظرية البيئية هذا الهدف بشكل فعال لأنها تتضمن استكشاف العلاقة بين

الأدب والعالم الطبيعي. انطلاقاً من كون الشعر أداة فعالة لنشر الوعي البيئي بين الناس. سيكون تطبيق هذه النظرية على نموذج من الشعر الأميركي متمثلاً في ماري أوليفر (1935-2019) عن طريق تحليل شعرها وشرح كيف ان الشاعرّة تجد طريقة فعالة في التواصل والاندماج مع البيئة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النقدية البيئية ، البيئة ، النفس ، ماري أوليفر

Introduction:

Mary Oliver, who was born in Cleveland, Ohio (in 1935), and currently lives in Provincetown, Massachusetts, left college to follow her passion for writing, but she has taught or served as a writer-in-residence at a number of universities, notably Duke University and Sweet Briar College. She finds a pleasant world far from the tragic truth through writing as if it were a completely different world from the harsh reality "To keep writing was always a first priority. ... I worked probably 25 years by myself. ... Just writing and working, not trying to publish much. Not giving readings" (Ratiner, 1992).

She believes that the only way to escape the brutal reality is imagination, which allows people to live another life, emphasizing the importance of art. A person can abandon his troubles and travel to a broader horizon full of peace and comfort through art. She comments:

I believe art is utterly important. It is one of the things that could save us. We do not have to rely totally on experience if we can do things in our imagination. ... It's the only way in which you can live more lives than your own. You can escape your own time, your own sensibility, your own narrowness of vision. (Ratiner, 1992)

Oliver writes about her life's main passion i.e., nature. Her spiritual zone and church is the natural world. She possesses a rare intuitive perception that she successfully utilizes to communicate nature's wonders and their invisible healing qualities. Nature is medicine, she claims. Oliver's spiritual practice is to rest in nature. This spiritual and divine contact with the natural world and its marvels makes her a true mystic (Kelso, 2021).

The poet's real goals, according to Mary Oliver, are to change people's perceptions of nature, and to touch human's souls. So she tries to bring the awareness of the natural world among people through her poetry to reconnect human with nature. Mary's poetry is characterized by being purposeful to delight and amuse people. Her poems are full of positive energy and hope through presenting beautiful images found in nature, and reminding people of how nature was a pure and enjoyable place that brings people comfort and happiness (Shiver, 2011).

In her poetry, Mary Oliver uses nature as a place of interconnectedness². This interconnectedness, she argues, stems from a deep sense "that everything in nature has a soul and is alive". She asserts that all-natural souls, such as plants, flowers, rocks, and so on, are similar and valuable in the same way that the human spirit is (Shehab, p3, 4). In some of Oliver's poems, she adopts the persona of any natural being such as an animal, a star, or a tree

² "Interconnectedness is the state of having different parts or things connected or related to each other" (Cambridge dictionary).

which reveal her constant connection with nature (Shehab, p.5). She declares that, "All things are meltable and replaceable. Not at this moment, but soon enough, we are lambs and we are leaves, and we are stars, and the shining, mysterious pond water itself" (Oliver, 2000, p.23).

Oliver blends with nature easily and dissolves "into the totality of nature" through losing her self-boundaries and "all outward form" (Graham, 1994). Oliver considers being a part of nature is far better than being a human, implying that she reveres nature and prefers it to humanity because nature is a world devoid of misery and pain. This communion between the soul and nature is regarded as the best way for salvation, repentance, and even closeness to God, as it is an escape from the harsh world to another world that is radically different (Shehab, 2010. P.5, 7).

Oliver takes the experience of merging with nature because it provides her with enjoyment, peace, and a sense of completion. She is immersed in this experience through her senses, which serve as the gate to it. Her capacity to blend in with the "natural other," as well as her understanding of nature's language, demonstrates her strong interrelation and connection with nature. By doing so, she is putting ecocriticism's earth-centered worldview into practice (Rosa, 2013, p.124).

Oliver consistently accumulates a body of works since the release of her first collection of poems, *No Voyager*, 1936, whose tone and the theme is distinguished by an ongoing desire for the union of material and spiritual, for a deeper movement into oneself and eventually of outward fusion with the wider world (Wilson, 2019, p.38). As an example, Oliver's "sleeping in the forest" from *New and Selected Poems*(2023) in which she expresses her experiences of indulging with nature and becoming one being. She finds her relief in the laps of nature. In this poem, Oliver wants to deliver the idea that humanity can construct a harmonious relationship with nature that provides them with a secure and better state (Wilson, 2019, p.51).

In the poem's first lines, Oliver wrote "I thought the earth remembered me/ she took me back so tenderly"(ll.1-3) in which she celebrates the idea of dissolution into nature and unification with it by returning back to the earth as she was born of it (Ishrat, 2018, p.28). As a result, she becomes a natural element that represents the best version of herself. Vicki Graham (1994) stated that the immersion in the natural world is not death for Oliver, rather it is a transformation into something better "To merge with the nonhuman is to acknowledge the self's mutability and multiplicity, not to lose subjectivity" (p.353).

Oliver has fed up with of the rational world and its problems, so she escapes to the natural world, which is a soul-healing zone. Though her thoughts stood as a barrier in the way of complete integration with nature, soon all these boundaries vanishes and she succeeds in the emerging process. Oliver writes:

I slept
 as never before, a stone
 on the riverbed, nothing
 between me and the white fire of the stars
 but my thoughts, and they floated
 light as moths among the branches
 of the perfect trees. (ll. 5-11)

While escaping from the harsh reality of the rational world, Oliver confronts the inner conflict between her mind and her body. Her body strives to become another while her mind (thoughts) resists the body's impulse and brings her back to self-consciousness. But at last, the body gains its desire, allowing Oliver to reconnect with nature (Graham, 1994).

By morning
 I had vanished at least a dozen times
 into something better. (ll. 16-18)

She vanishes at least a dozen times into something better, implying that she abandoned herself into nature which is the best place to lay dormant and forget everything about exotic life. This emerging process brings her to the purest place within herself that gains her a greater understanding of her own world (Wood).

In the act of writing poetry, Oliver comments that: "I want every poem to 'rest' in intensity, I want it to be rich with pictures of the world." She wants "the poem to ask something and, at its best moments, I want the question to remain unanswered". Oliver wants her poems to drag the attentions of readers to specific questions that actually have no answers just for focusing on their significance or their content as in her poem "Some Questions You Might Ask" from *House of Light* (2012). In this poem, Oliver offers a series of questions that are connected and leads to the same idea concerning the soul and its nature. She asks whether the soul is "sold", or "tender and breakable", then she questions "who has it, and who doesn't?"(4). She continues inquiring about the soul's physical qualities and existence:

Does it have a shape? Like an iceberg?
 like the eye of a hummingbird?
 Does it have one lung, like the snake and the scallop?
 Why should I have it, and not the anteater
 who loves her children?
 why should I have it, and not the camel? (ll.11-16)

Seay Allison (2019) stated that the questions in this poem "are asked in a posture of awe, in recognition of the sublime, rather than asked in eagerness or some desire for mere information" (p.2). In this regard, Oliver encourages her readers to think about the answers to her connected questions that resulted in another question "one question leads to another". By doing so, readers can make connections and get a better understanding of what the soul is, where does it exist and why does it occupy certain entities but not others?(Altman, 2015, p.39).

All organisms, according to Oliver, have the same soul, and no soul is more valuable than the others. She guarantees that all creatures have the same soul as humans, including ant testers, camels, trees, stones, roses, lemons, leaves, and grass. Through the poem, Oliver offers a new perspective of the world, she invites readers to think differently concerning the existence of the soul in another species(Esiri, 2020). As Robert J Fourie (2010) proclaimed that this poem "is an ode to the complexity and confusion wrought by examining our modern-day assumptions about what the soul is and who has one."

Stephen H. Buhner (2002) declared that " children are taught that thinking defines their value, that Earth is dead, that other lifeforms intrinsically possess less value, and the more they are separated from regular contact with wild nature, the less biophilia³ occurs" (p.53). In this sense Oliver wants to restore the lost connection with the wild nature and to remind her readers that the other life forms have the same soul of a man so they deserve to be valued and cared for. A poem *From American Primitive* (1983), would provide the same idea of integrating into the body of another. In the poem "White Knight" for instance, Oliver delves deeply into nature and discovers it extensively, as she expresses her overwhelming desire to merge with nature by crossing all the limits of the self, as she wants to escape into the laps of Mother Nature with her body and her senses (Wood). She says:

I want to flow out
across the mother
of all waters, (ll. 27-29)

Oliver here "feminized nature as a caring mother" since it is spreading its passion and care over growing beings (Jamal, 2020, p.142).

Oliver can perceive nature primarily through her senses, and instead of relying on her mind (thoughts), she uses her body as a language to communicate and understand the other (Graham, 1994).In this sense, she longs to abandon the self and the world of thoughts "I don't want to argue anymore/about all the things / I thought I could not live without!"(ll.13-16), and to lose herself and become the other " I want to lose myself/ on the black/ and silky currents" (ll.30-32). By doing so, she explores her desires as well as what it means to be herself, free of constraints and limitations (Wood).

In "The Fish" poem, from the same collection, Oliver makes contact with one component of nature, the fish, by engaging in physical activity that results in the capture and consumption of

³Biophilia : "a deep fondness for, connection to, and love for life forms living things"(Buhner,2002 and,p.54).

the fish. She communicates with nature through her body and sensations. First, she interacts with the fish by engaging in bodily actions such as catching and eating it.

The first fish
 I ever caught...
 Later
 I opened his body and separated
 the flesh from the bones
 And eat him. (ll.1, 2, 10-13)

Then, she uses her senses to contact and experience the other. This sensuous contact makes it possible for Olive and fish to exchange energy, leading to the identification and eventually merging (Graham, 1994). Concluding that Oliver's senses serve as a gateway to connecting with the natural other (Rosa, 2013, p.122). Oliver states:

Now the sea
 is in me: I am the fish, the fish
 glitters in me; we are
 risen, tangled together, (ll. 13-16)

Robert Reid in his book *casting into Mystery* (2020) declares that "As the poem unfolds the narrator becomes water, becomes fish, finally recognizing that humans are sustained by the mystery with which fishing is imbued". By eating the fish, Oliver becomes not only the fish but the sea as well (Graham, 1994). Liza Wieland (2019) stated that "For Oliver, eating the fish is obviously a kind of communion and resurrection ."

Oliver highlights the word pain in the last lines, possibly implying that all of the agonies she has experienced throughout her life, as well as the other's pain, will vanish simply because they merge and become one force and one body as if she had given life back to a fish by integrating with it (Wieland, 2019). This unification and reconnection between man, as represented by Oliver, and nature may be the key to ending human suffering and ensuring the environment's survival.

Out of pain ,
 and pain, and more pain
 we feed this feverish plot, we are nourished
 by the mystery. (ll.17-20)

In her poem "Vultures", Oliver explicitly mentions this process of eating and turning death into life. She depicts the vultures who consume the dead bodies and produce a "miracle" afterward (Mann, 2004, p.36). Those birds do "the wise doctrine" which is to eat "death" and turn it into life (Altman, 2015, p.35) .This "resurrection" procedure is similar to what Oliver

performed in her poem "The Fish." She resurrected the fish by eating it and uniting with it. In this case, as well the vultures' death-eating turned into life.

for death,
to eat it,
to make it vanish,
to make of it the miracle:
resurrection... (ll.5-9)

Oliver clarifies her theme in this poem, which claims that all creatures go through the cycle of life and that our bodies' flesh serves as food for other beings (Ishrat, 2018, p.26). She elevates the natural world's experience to offer a sense of deep connection to the life-death cycle (Meryl, 2013).

Oliver's integration with nature was achieved when she stopped thinking and liberated her senses. As a result, she is perfectly immersed in the body of other. She becomes an animal rather than a human being, and her body accepts its new state and welcomes this identification (Graham, 1994).

Mary Oliver is, therefore, regarded as a nature poet, and her poetry serves as a guide to the natural world. Being in nature, for Oliver, is like being in her utopian world, where she is free of all the horrible thoughts that exist in the actual world. Her poetry is regarded as one of the most influential works of Ecocritical theory because it depicts man as a creature equal to all other species in the ecosystem. She promotes nature as the best remedy to human issues in her poetry. Oliver demonstrates how she constantly merges with natural elements, as she is a bear, a fish, and a vulture and so on. Nature for Oliver is a remedy to a variety of issues. She communicates with nature through her body and sensation. Her merging with nature has multiple meanings that tell people's daily stories and solves the problem of disconnection with nature. For Oliver, blending with nature can serve as an escape from the daily stress and a cure for her spirit.

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