

# Forest as a Therapeutic Space in Sarah Orne Jewett's “A White Heron”: A Deep Ecological Perspective

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<https://doi.org/10.3126/haimaprabha.v1i22.56532>

## Abstract

*This paper seeks to analyze as to how forest has healing power in Jewett's "A White Heron" that helps the protagonist, Sylvia, take a positive decision— not to show the nest of the white heron to the hunter, who otherwise would love to collect the birds and stuff them. This paper argues that earlier decision of Sylvia to help the hunter out by showing the nest of the beautiful white heron changes when her greater sense of involvement to the forest through the cow touches her consciousness. The root cause of this change is the therapeutic impact of the forest (Nature) to the protagonist. This study takes recourse to ecocritical stance, more particularly Barry Commoner's four laws of ecology and Aldo Leopold's ideas of "land community", and "land ethics" to analyze the mentioned text as to how it advocates for biocentric world view that places emphasis on equal status of each and every organisms on this planet and hence, they must be equally treated and protected to maintain the stronghold of human-nature relationship. Aside from that, executing the idea of deep ecology, more specifically advanced by Fritjof Capra, which gives the utmost importance to the idea that humans are a part of nature but not apart and everything in the nature is interdependent and interconnected for the healthy operation of the whole system, this paper also argues that the mentioned story is a faithful literary text, which, by exhibiting the pitfalls of citified life, appeals the entire humanity to safeguard the nature to get its therapeutic effect for healthy and holistic life.*

**Keywords:** forest, deep ecology, biocentrism, ecocriticism, interdependent

## Introduction

There has been a growing concern about the impacts of human enterprises on natural world, more specifically in the existing ecosystem around the globe. The earlier notion of anthropocentric world view, that claims humans at the center of the universe, has been changed into biocentric world view, which affirms that humans are simply a part of the nature but not apart. Having seen the perils and pitfalls of the so-called anthropocentric world view for ecological equilibrium, there is an urgency to take the idea of interdependence between humanity and the entire biosphere into consideration,

and act accordingly. I have selected this text as it implicitly unveils this immediate need for healthy and wholesome relationship between nature and civilization.

“A White Heron” is a story written by an American poet and short story writer, Sarah Orne Jewet. It is a story of a nine-year-old girl, Sylvia, who comes to live in the serene environment of the countryside with her grandmother and gets absorbed with a life amidst the companionship of animals, birds and beautiful forest (Nature). Her exciting experiences in hanging out in the forest, grazing cows and having friendship with forest birds and other creatures, is interrupted one day by her encounter with a hunter who is searching for white herons to shoot, stuff and add to his collection. In the beginning, the hunter persuades to spot the nest of the herons in return, he will offer her money. Sylvia, however, finally decides not to disclose him the nests and loves to protect them at all cost. For Sylvia, beautiful nature matters over the money, and her romantic human connection with the hunter in the beginning tilts towards her love for the nature and its creatures. This paper argues that by showing the protagonist of the story in overwhelming connection with the natural world and her aspiration to protect the nature and animals therein, the writer is not only valorizing the woodland for its therapeutic effect but equally veering around to show the nature-culture connectivity. Sylvia is happier in the countryside and her being in the vicinity of the forest provokes her to take a positive decision to protect and preserve the woodland and its creatures disregarding the money offered by the hunter.

The past studies of this story have given a dim attention regarding the deep ecological dimension to this story in relation to the therapeutic power of forest (Nature). In this connection, Held (1982) notes that “[T]his tale of nine-year-old Sylvia's encounter with a young male ornithologist reverberates with meaning for such issues as the socialization of girls, the balance of power between the sexes, and the need for a woman to be true to her nature” (p. 55). However, the critic does not focus on how Sylvia's affinity with forest drives her to take right action that contributes to maintain a harmonious relationship between the humanity and the biosphere. Similarly, Yurui and Haiqing (2022) analyze this story as protagonist's three stages of transformation. As they observe, this story is about Sylvia's transformation “from the stage of ego to social self and finally to ecological self” (p. 118). Here also, the critics are oblivious regarding the role of the forest for positive transformation of the main character. Their reading also falls short from deep ecological perspective.

Likewise, focusing on the clash between nature and civilization, Chaulagain (2020) scrutinizes this story, which according to her “encompasses the conflict of nature with civilization by portraying the relationship of Sylvia, who preserves nature, from a foreigner, the Hunter who is concomitant with the danger of civilization” (p. 161). In her

critical reading, the role of forest or nature to motivate Sylvia lacks. In the same way, A S (2015) reads this story as a strong bond between women and the nature. As she observes, this story is about “the awakening of female consciousness in a patriarchal society where female becomes the preserver of nature” (p. 1). However, the role of forest and deep ecological perspectives fall short in her reading. Another critic, Heller (1990) sheds light on the execution of the rhetoric of communion between the narrator, the reader and the nature by the writer by arguing that there is “the composite narrative voice of this story, where we readers may all be united for a moment at least in our imaginations-with the wholeness of being that includes both nature and human will, both the feminine and the masculine, both seeing and doing” (p. 193). In his line of criticism also, the role of forest does not come to the fore and how thinking behavior of Sylvia changes gets no space as such.

Similarly, Ismael and Ali (2022) examine this story as Sylvia’s oneness with the nature which “has been attained by her refusal to divulge the nesting place of the white heron, though she finds its hiding place near the sea from her perch on the tree.” (p. 422). Here also, the role of forest for refusal to divulge the nest of white heron does not come into discussion. By the same token, Donovan (1980) interprets the story as “the clash between women’s loyalty to community versus the male will to destroy and isolate” (p. 368). However, the critic, here too, does not give premium to deep ecological perspective and the role of the forest to take positive action. In the same way, According to Sheri (1995), in “A White Heron” modern readers, “could hardly avoid associating the fictional bird with the well-publicized plight of such birds at the hands of the fashion industry” (p. 83). Here, the critic does not bring the issue of deep ecology and environmental stewardship, which lurks in the text. Similarly, focusing on the use of language in the story, Orr (1991) reflects that “[T]he language in the story reflects the change, as it moves from a bargaining dialectic to a conversation /communion between those who have shared needs” (p. 51). However, the critic does not give emphasis on the therapeutic effect of the forest to drive the main character to conserve and preserve non-human creatures of the nature.

As discussed above, the reviews on the story escape and fail to focus on deep ecological perspective and the idea of land ethics too, does not get space. This study seeks to bridge this critical gap by analyzing the story from the lens of deep ecological and land ethics, which help bring in the idea that maintaining healthy, holistic and wholesome relation between nature and civilization is only the ultimate solution to mitigate the environmental crisis of the present world.

## Methodology

This paper executes qualitative research method for the textual analysis of the selected primary text. It also uses published books, research journals, research articles, and reviews on the selected topic as resources to serve as the secondary data for the research purpose.

## Theoretical Framework

This study uses a close discursive analytical style by drawing upon the critical idea “deep ecology” as a new paradigm advanced by Fritjof Capra and Aldo Leopold’s ideas of “land community” and “land ethics.” Part of the theoretical framework also comes from Barry Commoner’s idea of “first law of ecology.” Fritjof Capra argues that there is an intrinsic value of each and every organism in the nature. Similarly, Leopold’s idea of land ethics and land community hold the view that there should be interconnected caring relationship among all the parts of this planet that include humans, non-human animals, soils, waters, plants, etc. for mutual benefit. Barry Commoner’s first law of ecology, in the same way, brings forth the idea that in nature everything is connected to everything else and all of them have their distinct value. This paper uses the mentioned critical ideas to examine, analyze and interpret the selected primary text.

## Textual Analysis/ Discussion

Published in an anthology, *A White Heron and Other Stories* (1886) “A White Heron” is written by one of the noted 19<sup>th</sup> century American writers, Sarah Orne Jewett. This is a story about a nine-year old girl, who after living in the town, for eight years, goes to live in the country side with her grandmother. The girl appreciates the country life wherein she makes nature as her true companion. The narrative goes:

Everybody said that it was a good change for a little maid who had tried to grow for eight years in a crowded manufacturing town, but, as for Sylvia herself, it seemed as if she never had been alive at all before she came to live at the farm. She thought often with wistful compassion of a wretched dry geranium that belonged to a town neighbor. (Charters, 1975, p. 675)

Sylvia, the protagonist of the story feels refreshed in the countryside which is far beautiful and peaceful unlike “a crowded manufacturing town” (Charters, 1975, p. 675). Sylvia’s fascination to country life becomes clear here, that offer her an ample opportunity to establish the strong affinity with beautiful forest (nature). The writer here implicitly valorizes country life due to its affinity with the nature.

The act of grazing cow in the forest drives Sylvia more close to the nature rather than home or society. She expresses her wish to be in the nature and unwillingness to go

home. The narrative below shows her delightfulness in the company of cows and other creatures in the nature thus:

The companions followed the shady wood-road, the cow taking slow steps and the child very fast ones. The cow stopped long at the brook to drink, as if the pasture were not half a swamp, and Sylvia stood still and waited, letting her bare feet cool themselves in the shoal water, while the great twilight moths struck softly against her. She waded on through the brook as the cow moved away, and listened to the thrushes with a heart that beat fast with pleasure. There was a stirring in the great boughs overhead. They were full of little birds and beasts that seemed to be wide awake, and going about their world, or else saying good-night to each other in sleepy twitters. Sylvia herself felt sleepy as she walked along. (Charters, 1975, p. 676)

Sylvia is in the blissful world of the nature, which is the composite whole of water, soil, animals, humans and host of different organisms. The exhibition of perfect happiness of Sylvia amidst composite whole of the nature is reflected here. The true happiness of humanity lies in the holistic ties with other creatures. Shallow ecology, according to Frito Capra (1987) “is anthropocentric” which “views humans as above or outside of nature, as the source of all value, and ascribe only instrumental or use value of nature” (p. 27). Deep ecology, on the other hand, “does not separate humans from the natural environment, nor does it separate anything else from it. It does not see the world as a collection of isolated objects but rather as a network of phenomena that is fundamentally interconnected” (p. 27).

The one-to-one relationship with each and every creature in the nature is a source of holistic and wholesome life which makes this planet a better place for all life forces. Sylvia finds her happiness in the forest only due to the presence of water, birds, cows and other animals. However, suddenly, something intervenes such a beautiful and delightful moment in the forest. It is due the entry of the bird hunter. The “little woods-girl is horror-stricken to hear a clear whistle not very far away. Not a bird’s-whistle, which would have a sort of friendliness, but a boy’s whistle, determined, and somewhat aggressive” (Charters, 1975, p. 676). The characterization of the hunter, as an “aggressive” and an “enemy” (Charters, 1975, p. 676) is very suggestive here. His nature is in contrast with the nature of the girl, who loves peace and beauty in the forest.

The girl comes out of the bush when the hunter discovers her and calls her. However, she moves on along with her cows while the hunter keeps following her. She does not dare to “look boldly at the tall young man, who carried a gun over his shoulder” (Charters, 1975, p. 676). He is searching for rare birds, and gets no way in the forest. So,

he is asking her the clear way to go from there. As the conversation proceeds, she unintentionally leads him to her grandmother's farm. There he gets a warm hospitality. "You might fare better if you went out to the main road a mile or so, but you're welcome to what we've got. I'll milk right off, and you make yourself at home" (Charters, 1975, p. 677) is a great sense of hospitality by country people to town people.

The friendship between Sylvia and the hunter keeps growing and there is a long conversation between them. She tells him many things about the birds. The hunter wants to know whereabouts of white herons from Sylvia. The hunter will not cage them but stuff them and preserve. "Oh no, they're stuffed and preserved, dozens and dozens of them," said the ornithologist, "and I have shot or snared every one myself" (Charters, 1975, p. 678) reflects true nature of the hunter, who simply wants to add to his collection. He even offers money to the people who happen to show the nest of herons to him. "I would give ten dollars to anybody who could show it to me," (Charters, 1975, p. 678) shows the growing tendency of humanity to destroy the species of birds to satisfy their so-called interest to collect and stuff rare birds without thinking its potential risk. The conversation with the hunter somewhat begins to strike Sylvia's heart.

Unlike first impression towards the hunter, Sylvia now begins to admire him. The narrative portion "Sylvia still watched the young man with loving admiration. She had never seen anybody so charming and delightful; the woman's heart, asleep in the child, was vaguely thrilled by a dream of love" (Charters, 1975, p. 679). Her admiration to the man makes the readers suspicious that she will show the nest of herons to the hunter. This suspicion of the readers further consolidates when the narrative goes "Sylvia would have liked him vastly better without his gun; she could not understand why he killed the very birds he seemed to like so much" (Charters, 1975, p. 679). This reflection of her about the hunter shows her affinity with herons and the forest, which she is, concerned much with.

Since Sylvia is close to nature and its creatures, she has an overwhelming impression with them. In the second part of the story, we see Sylvia very much concerned with the rare birds. She thinks of going to the forest to have a look to the nest of white herons. The narrative description of the surrounding goes thus:

The short summer night seemed as long as the winter darkness, and at last when the whippoorwills ceased, and she was afraid the morning would after all come too soon, she stole out of the house and followed the pasture path through the woods, hastening toward the open ground beyond, listening with a sense of comfort and companionship to the drowsy twitter of a half-awakened bird, whose perch she had jarred in passing. Alas, if the great wave of human interest which flooded for the first time this dull little life should sweep away the satisfactions of an existence heart to heart with nature and the dumb life of the forest! There was

the huge tree asleep yet in the paling moonlight, and small and silly Sylvia began with utmost bravery to mount to the top of it. (Charters, 1975, p.680)

She goes to the forest in the darkness while her grandmother and the hunter are having a sound sleep. Sylvia climbs the pine tree with great difficulty and finally reaches the top. She is mesmerized looking the aerial view of the countryside and her excitement finds no bound spotting the nest of the white herons. More than that, the areas around the forest is so beautiful due to the presence of diverse creatures, which the narrative describes thus:

The tree seemed to lengthen itself out as she went up, and to reach farther and farther upward. It was like a great main-mast to the voyaging earth; it must truly have been amazed that morning through all its ponderous frame as it felt this determined spark of human spirit wending its way from higher branch to branch. Who knows how steadily the least twigs held themselves to advantage this light, weak creature on her way! The old pine must have loved his new dependent. More than all the hawks, and bats, and moths, and even the sweet voiced thrushes, was the brave, beating heart of the solitary gray-eyed child. And the tree stood still and frowned away the winds that June morning while the dawn grew bright in the east. (Charters, 1975, p. 680)

The writer through these lines exhibits the perfect harmony between nature and civilization. The surrounding environment of the forest is breathtaking only because of the presence of other creatures including humans— indispensable parts of the whole ecosystem.

Leopold 's land ethics “ regard man and nature as a unitary whole and ask people to expand the scope of the moral community, change the original idea of anthropocentrism and let people change their roles, that is to say, people must shift from the leader and conqueror to an ordinary member of a biological system, so as to make the entire ecosystem runs well” (as cited in Zhao, 2016). Having seen the spots of white herons in the beautiful surrounding, Sylvia comes back to farmhouse. She comes home “paler than ever, and her worn old frock is torn and tattered, and smeared with pine pitch” (Charters, 1975, p. 681). She is hesitant to talk to her grandmother and the hunter guest. Although the hunter “can make them rich with money, he has promised it, and they are poor now” (Charters, 1975, p. 682), she remembers the delightful moments in the forest that she shared with the birds and dismisses her promise to disclose. What makes her dismiss her previous idea is clear from these lines:

No, she must keep silence! What is it that suddenly forbids her and makes her dumb? Has she been nine years growing and now, when the great world for the

first time puts out a hand to her, must she thrust it aside for a bird's sake? The murmur of the pine's green branches is in her ears, she remembers how the white heron came flying through the golden air and how they watched the sea and the morning together, and Sylvia cannot speak; she cannot tell the heron's secret and give its life away. (Charters, 1975, p. 682)

The protagonist of the story being totally involved into the forest and its natural environment begins to think about its importance. Disregarding her personal benefits, she begins to think about all living beings associated with the nature.

She internalizes the secret charm of the forest. Being fascinated by the nature and its immense beauty, she denies to share about white herons. The forest has a therapeutic effect on Sylvia which helps her forget her personal pain. As the narrative moves:

Many a night Sylvia heard the echo of his whistle haunting the pasture path as she came home with the loitering cow. She forgot even her sorrow at the sharp report of his gun and the sight of thrushes and sparrows dropping silent to the ground, their songs hushed and their pretty feathers stained and wet with blood. Were the birds better friends than their hunter might have been,—who can tell? Whatever treasures were lost to her, woodlands and summer-time, remember! Bring your gifts and graces and tell your secrets to this lonely country child! (Charters, 1975, p. 682)

The lonely country child is happier now than when she was in the company of the man, the hunter. She might have lost her personal treasure but her friendships with the birds, the woodland beauty amidst different insects and creatures outweigh than her life in the town and her personal happiness.

By showing her protagonist taking a positive decision at the end of the story, the writer is trying to propagate that idea that everything has distinct value in the nature that contributes to establish a perfect harmony among all living beings. Barry Commoner, one of the deep ecologists furthers his idea of interconnectedness and the interdependence of humans with non-human world of nature in his four ecological laws "Everything is connected with everything else"(33), "Everything must go somewhere"(39), "Nature knows the best"(41) and "There is no such thing as free lunch"(45). These ideas bring home the readers that maintaining co-existence among all creatures of the nature is a true passport for ecological balance and betterment. Barry Commoner's first law of ecology states that "Everything is connected to everything else." This law means that all parts of an ecosystem are interconnected, and a change in one part of the system can have a ripple effect on the others. In other words, any action we take, no matter how small, can have a significant impact on the environment and the ecosystem as a whole. This law highlights



the importance of understanding the complexity of nature and the need for us to take responsible actions to protect the environment.

### Conclusion

“A White Heron” thus, is a faithful literary text, which regards forest as having healing power to drive the protagonist not only to take positive decision regarding not to disclose the spot of white herons to the hunter but also understand the magical power of the forest (nature) in her personal life. The cow becomes an agency in Sylvia’s life to connect her with the forest. Due to her strong sense of involvement in the forest, she receives positive impacts. She begins to enjoy the company of birds, animals, water and the whole surrounding in the forest. Her friendship with nature provokes her to love all forms of life in the nature. She does not like any of the species in the nature killed either for consumption or for fun as such. The earlier decision of Sylvia to help the hunter out by showing the beautiful white heron changes when affinity to nature touches her consciousness. The root cause of this change is the therapeutic effect of the forest (Nature) to the protagonist. The strong sense of interdependence and interconnectedness with all living organisms in the nature and her involvement and observation with them motivates Sylvia to protect nature and its inhabitants— both humans and non-humans. In this sense, this text has preemptive effect on the readers through its power to bring about change with the insight that to enjoy healthy, holistic and wholesome life on this planet, nature and its all forms of life must be protected.

### Acknowledgements

This paper owes its existence to my respected gurus, Prof. Dr. Amma Raj Joshi and Prof. Dr. Jib Lal Sapkota, who taught me about the fundamentals of ecocriticism and its application in literary texts. I am grateful to those, who reviewed this paper with their constructive suggestions and feedback. Special thank also goes to the editorial team members of this journal.

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