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## ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS: CATALYST FOR HUMAN/ NATURE RELATIONSHIP IN “A WHITE HERON”

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### ABSTRACT

All the life forms have fundamental right to live in this universe. Human beings have duties, rights, and responsibilities towards the non-humans, and natural world. By not having a systematic and comprehensive account regarding the relationship between humans and the natural world, human beings are denying the importance of the life forms of other creatures in the world. Hence, the present research attempts to analyze the biocentric relationship of human beings with nature and its stewardship by being aware and knowledgeable of the world around them and protecting the world species. The study further argues the cooperative mechanism and symbiotic relationship between nature and human beings in this natural domain with reference to Jewett's protagonist, Sylvia, who represents the symbol of mother earth by saving White Heron from the hunter. She restricts the Hunter to mastery over it. In addition, the work 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. The Hunter who tracks the White Heron is from the city and hence stained by civilizations, sees nature is a place to exploit and desires the White Heron as another piece of his collection. In this sense, Sylvia represents herself true lover and preserver of the natural world and the Hunter is considered in complete opposition to the tranquility of the woodland.

**Keywords:** human - nature - biocentric - biosphere - harmony - anthropocentric

### INTRODUCTION

The relationship between human and nature and the relationship between humankind and natural habitats is reciprocal. However, conventional thought of the history retained the humankind in privileged

position. Human beings are rational and have moral subjects, so they can have rights to control over other creatures. They have something which other animals lack, that is reasonableness, which is the capability to realize their goals in a sensible and "evidence-based" way. This allows the human beings to apprehend their goals in a conscious, substantial manner, relying on their knowledge of the world and apply the acquired knowledge in a practical way (Zward 2015). The hunter is represented as a rational being, who is supposed to control over the other creatures to fulfil his desire of gathering specimens for his collection in *A White Heron*.

Human beings are not unique creatures. They are just one species among other wonderful creatures on earth. In this connection, Kessler (2019) suggested that "the modern rejection of the possibility of close human-nature relational experiences can be identified purely through analysis of mistakes in perception and conception that modern societies make" (p. 18). Modern people look at other species from their own cultural lenses which they have developed is biased and failed to see the closeness in human-nature relationships. The culture of modern humans is creating hierarchy between natural beings and humans, looking at the reality through anthropocentric perspectives.

Moreover, when natural beings are valued, it is possible to maintain the harmonious and mutual human-nature relationships in an anthropocentric world. According to anthropocentric principles, humans have placed at the center in the natural world (Kessler 2019, Yayli 2015). Traditionally, in the anthropocentrism, human beings are more valued than nature and animal beings. This situation is observed in the story, '*A White Heron*' when the hunter offers money to Sylvia for her temporary happiness but, in return he is going to take life of the innocent bird, Heron. Nevertheless, men should focus on the bio-centric life –centered instead of traditional anthropocentric human-centered positions. Hence, the Earth is to be divided into areas for humans and areas for wild animals (Evans 2005). In this sense, Dreese, (2002) says, "Landscape, sense of place and identity are integral in all human development" (p. 9). However, "Anthropocentrists either exclude animals altogether from any human sphere or they may assign them to a lower ontological, moral and social stratum on the Great Chain of Being" (Guenther 2020, pp. 8-9). Bio-centric approach admires the intrinsic value of beings other than humans. These beings have become subjects of ethic comprehension.

In addition to anthropo-centric and bio-centric approaches, eco-centric approach exists in an endeavor to explain environmental ethics

(Yayli 2015). Environmental ethics presents a language of relationships concerning duties, rights, and responsibilities among humans and toward the nonhuman, natural, world. It also puts forward to the language which has more to do with care, concern, reciprocity, and duties than with rights and justice (Wirth 1996). Environmental ethics is not noble venture, but a commonly shared ideal in the Western world (Groot *et al.* 2011). It provides a systematic account of the moral relations between human beings and the nature. For instance, Sylvia fulfils the moral responsibility of a human towards other creatures of the universe by saving the White Heron's life from the Hunter.

Furthermore, in environmental ethics, the biocentric outlook provides a general "map" of the natural world, delegating humans to see the present position of human beings fitting them in to the total scheme of things. It presents the dominion of nature and life as a setting for human existence (Taylor 2011). However, some hunters seem to take the hunting as a fun and reduces all objections to hunting are the rejection of any enjoyment of life as well as the paradigm of the animal conservation leads the hunters to stop the over exploitation of wildlife. (Evans 2005, Heffelfinger *et al.* 2013). In Jewett's story, Hunter is likely to exploit the wildlife for the fulfilment of his desire of collecting rare birds by killing them.

The guardianship of nature, which in turn is distinct from a relational image of partnership with nature and a holistic image of participation in nature. It is allied to traditional stewardship, but with more ecocentric content (Groot *et al.* 2011). Moreover, Groot *et al.* (2011) further opine as women are close in guardianship, partnership, and participation with nature. For example, in "A White Heron" nature is the symbol of peace and sensibility. Sylvia feels very well living with her grandmother on a small farm. There has been no stressful situation at all. She is very familiar with the surroundings and enjoys the singing of the birds" (Bandino & Bourseaux, n.d.).

Accordingly, Sarah Orne Jewett's story "A White Heron" promotes the importance of human instinct which can develop an environmental ethical value. In addition, Groot *et al.* (2011) analyze:

Virtue ethicists believe that moral behavior does not amount to following abstract principles or recognizing rationally justified values, but rather that morality has to be cultivated, that virtues can (only) be acquired by being introduced *within* a culture of established practices, in which certain moral meanings play a part as the presupposed (but often unconscious) purpose of much of what we do. (p. 12)

Jewett's story advocates co-operative mechanism and symbiotic relationship between nature and human being through the presentation of human respect and freedom of action in the struggle to save the nature and natural being (bird). The primary duty of human beings is to save the natural being merging other species within the human sphere and cooperating them in living life peacefully (Watkins 1998).

Human beings should have the concept of conservation of the nature and its being. Hence, the research paper attempts to explore the biocentric relationship of human beings with nature since they can develop the feelings to protect nature and life of its being. It further explores the conflicting comportment of human beings towards the nature as they fail to maintain symbiotic relationship with natural world. To achieve the goal of research objective, the researcher has analyzed the text "A White Heron" in which the main character, Sylvia brings herself up in natural community with natural wildlife and internalizes the essential relationship of nature and human beings in contrast the Hunter represents the anthropocentric world creating conflict between individuals and the nature. He seems to be against the serenity of the woods.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The qualitative research approach was applied on the basis of hermeneutics philosophy, which is the most important for literary studies. Hermeneutics understanding in the literary text is the understanding of the readers in their own world on the one hand, and the world projected by the text with its possibilities for life, on the other (Zimmermann 2015). Almost all work in this field involves in-depth analysis of texts – in this context, it usually covers novels, poems, stories or plays. By applying this method the researcher aimed to understand and explain how these elements contribute to the text's meaning through narrative perspective in a story. Textual analysis is also a qualitative method for gathering, processing, and interpreting text data. Text extraction technique was used to analyze and interpret to understand meaning. Text extraction technique is, "Rhetorical Criticism, therefore, is a systematic method for describing, analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating the persuasive force of messages embedded within texts" (Frey *et al.* 1999).

Textual analysis reconnoiters potentially involuntary connections between different texts, inquires what a text reveals about the context in which it was written, or seeks to explore a classic text in a new and

unexpected way. In this connection, Allen, (2017) opines, “Textual analysis is a methodology that involves understanding language, symbols, and/or pictures present in texts to gain information regarding how people make sense of and communicate life and life experiences” (p.1). Similarly, the present research adopted to conduct a textual analysis, considering questions like, what is the meaning of this text. Or, how does this particular text connect with the issues they have raised. In addition, Given (2008) argues textual analysis as a method of data analysis that closely examines either the content and meaning of texts or their structure and discourse. Hence, the present researcher adopted the textual analysis method to analyze the textual data of the text “A White Heron”.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND CONFLICT OF NATURE (SYLVIA) WITH CIVILIZATION (THE HUNTER)**

Jewett's "A White Heron" explores the idea that one should respect the nature to live a harmonious life with. The significant relationship between human (Sylvia) and bird, a part of nature created a type of ethical sense of harmony in the biosphere. Moreover, all creatures of this universe should be treated equally as their importance. As Sylvia has balanced nature, animals and her life in peace and harmony, she makes the bird fly away to save its life from the hunter. She has a conflict in her mind whatever she does for saving White Heron. At this point, Jewett narrates, “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” (680). Sylvia’s affinity of saving for natural living things is viewed as the appropriate objects of the attitude of respect – entities possessing inherent worth. She has taken the natural world as an organic system what Taylor (2003) explains:

As far as the well- being of wild animals and plants concerned, this ecological equilibrium must not be destroyed. The same holds true of the wellbeing of humans. When one views the realm of nature from perspective of the biocentric outlook, one never gets that in the long run the integrity of the entire sphere of our planet is essential to the realization the good of its constituent communities of life, in human and nonhuman. (p. 78)

For the wellbeing of wild animals and planets the ecological equilibrium must not be destroyed. This holistic view of the earth’s ecological system is a factual aspect of biological reality. Its significance for

the humans is the same as its significance for non-humans. Jewett exhibits Sylvia as a nature lover, she says, “. . . but their feet were familiar with the path, and it was on matter whether their eyes could see I or not” (675). This expression proves that she is intimated in nature in fact she becomes a part of natural environment and has felt home as a ‘beautiful place.’

Accordingly, Sylvia believes that humans are a part of society as well as other living creatures, which includes plants and animals. She has a partnership with nature. Sylvia’s visit in the nature helps her to come closer to it. Hence, her love for the outdoors is also apparent when she states that she would like to stay outside of home rather than indoors because of its beauty and peacefulness. Jewett admits, “This was a beautiful place to live in, and she never should wish to go home” (p. 676). It is obvious that Sylvia is happier outdoors in nature, rather than in stuffy house. She also likes to watch the animals in their natural environment as Leopold (2003) has said, “In the biotic community, a parallel situation exists to” (p. 39). Parallelisms exist in biocentric world as Sylvia’s life with nature in the country.

Similarly, Palmer (2003) has stated, “The biotic community to be an organism . . . humans “must and should” manage it, and that ultimately as parts of the biotic organism, human and biotic interests would coincide” (p. 24). Human beings can see the whole natural biosphere as a complex but unified web of interconnected organism. The balance of nature motivates the people to respect it. However human beings always forget to conserve and respect the natural beings though it is necessarily inevitable for them. Everyone should play the important role in conservation of nature (Tylor, 2003). The story "A White Heron" tries to show Sylvia as a means of nature lover as well as saver through the imperative relationship among her and other natural beings.

Furthermore, Sylvia has sense of respecting other creatures as human beings. In fact, she has developed a feeling of love and intimacy with natural beings, which leads her to devolve a type of consciousness about the importance of nature in her life. Sylvia accepting the biocentric world exposes the relationship among all the creatures in the earth. In this sense, Sylvia is an integrated girl in the jungle. Jewett narrates:

Sylvia stood satin and waited, letting her bare feet cool themselves in the shoat water while the great twilight moths struck softy 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. (p. 676)

It alludes Sylvia's closest affinity with the birds that foreshadows the ending of the story where she has chosen their privacy over her human desires. She is fully satisfied with the shadows and the moving leaves now since she is connected to the woods, white birds, water and other wild animals. As, "Everything is connected to everything else" (Commoner 1972, p.54). In similar way, Jewett's story evokes that the human beings and natural beings are interrelated, their identity is not possible in one's absence.

Jewett's great assertion of Sylvia's great understanding of the outdoors and animals come from her fondness of nature and its creatures. She knows a lot about many different types of birds and loves them. But an 'enemy' (p. 676) broke the blushful solitude of Sylvia with her animal friends. This motive word is used to describe the other human force. Jewett emphasizes, "Suddenly this little world's girl is horror stricken to hear a clear whistle not very far away. Not a birds whistle 'the enemy had discovered her, and called out in a very cheerful and persuasive tone, 'Hallod, little girl, how far is it to the road'" (p. 676). The enemy's polite voice motivates her to speak something. So, she answered "a good ways the man who came with a gun over his shoulder" (p. 676). The hunter (enemy) is carrying a gun, instantly symbolizes his focus on destruction. In addition, White (2003) analyzes, "formally man has seen part of nature, now he is the exploiter of nature" (p. 147). Similarly, hunter seems to be anthropocentric who has placed himself in center and showed his love to nature by controlling over it for his personal benefit. Anthropocentrism in its original implication in environmental ethics is believed that the value is human-centered, and all other beings are means to human ends (Kopnina *et al.* 2018). In this sense, the hunter is heard instead of seen in the story as, "whistling in a determined, and somewhat aggressive" (p. 676) signifies that he is the man without name, representatives of all human beings who want to take advantage of nature instead of enjoying it for its beauty. The hunter outlooks wildlife as a source to be used for his own purposes and personal advantage.

Additionally, the hunter proclaims that he is an ornithologist and has come to the rural land to hunt, kill and stuff birds (white heron) for his pleasure. It is proved with his dialogue as, "Dozens and dozens of them. And I have shorter shared everyone myself" (p. 678). Now he has known the Sylvia's affinity with nature for his own distractive ends. "The wild creatures counts her one o' themselves' 'so Sylvia knows all about birds, does she?" (p. 678). Two contrasting lifestyle of the people could be seen

clearly through the characterization of the hunter with gun and Sylvia with woods. The hunter who pursues the White Heron is from the city and portrayed civilization by abusing the nature for his man's instinctual desire. On the other hand, Sylvia is startling and being silent, and surprised why the hunter shows his affinity with nature by killing the innocent birds. Jewett argues, "she 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" (p. 679). To highlight this issue, Arsen (2013) asserts, "Pinnacle of creation", "the mastery of the world", "nature's wise partner's" or simply "one species among others" (p. 24). In reality, humankind cannot avoid defining itself in relation to nature within the new circumstances resulting from its interaction with nature.

Correspondingly, Sylvia advocates that we, humans must not set ourselves above nature, but have to work together with it. What Palmer (2003) illustrates that in location there would be an intrinsic value where everything is a living being and there should be balance and diversity. Sylvia remarks, "I can't think of anything I should like so much as to find that heron's nest" (p. 678). It means she is not ready to show the nest of bird rather she tries to save it from the hunter's gun. However, Jewett represents the attraction of the nature lover towards commodity. As Sylvia seems to be determined to find out the nest of the white heron for ten dollars, which is offered by the hunter, "I would give ten dollars to anybody who could show it to me" (p. 678). He turned again to intent look at Sylvia with the hope of finding that the rare bird was one of her acquaintances. But, "Sylvia was watching a hop toad in the narrow footpath" (p. 678). She still has more regard for her animal companions than this new things she could buy if she gets the money. For a while she is totally commodified and is ready to show the destination of the birds. Sylvia is willing to sacrifice her love for nature to satisfy her desire for money. Eventually she realizes that "we must not set ourselves above nature, but must work together with it" (Groot 2011, p. 4). She further thinks that she should save the Heron, bravely climbs a white oak tree and great pine tree in order to make the bird fly. The situation denotes her true intimation with natural beings (bird, trees) in the natural habitation.

In the similar way, Sylvia sees an unparalleled view of the forest while climbing a tree adopting bird like qualities as indicated by the following simile "with her bare feet and fingers that incited and held like

bird's claws to the monstrous ladder" (p. 680). The tree seems to be a bird of prey, restraining Sylvia from reaching the top of the tree, 'the sharp' dry twigs caught and held her and scratched her like 'angry talons.' Now she united her surroundings, creating parallels to the nature what Taylor (2013) explores, ". . . in which we can help make it possible. For wild species populations to achieve and maintain a healthy existence in a natural state" (p. 74). Jewett narrates, "More than all the hawks, and bats, and moths, and even the sweet voiced thrushes, was the brave, healing heart of the solitary gray-eyed child" (p. 680). The grey color is symbolic of Sylvia's blurring between the world of innocence white, and the world of excellence-black. The grey eyes of Sylvia also closely identified her to the birds with "her grey feathers as soft as moths' and further bind her to the natural world. She sees the hawks flying around the tree, and has an instant connection with them, Sylvia felt as if she too could go flying away among the clouds" (p. 681).

"When the great world for the first time puts out a hand to her, must she thrust it aside for a bird's sake?"(681). Sylvia decides to protect innocent Heron instead of gaining the approval of the young man, which she had grown fond of it as Palmer ascertains that everyone should give opportunity to the living and non-living things to live life in their horizon. No one has a right to kill the animals as all living and non-living things are the same creatures of the world, they have right to share the biosphere (Palmer, 2003). Subsequently, Jewett's heroine finally gets victory over the money and an artificial life. In this regard, Rueckert (2003) indicates to an urgency to protect birds and animals, "Each individual has a responsibility for the entire biosphere and is required to engage in creative and co-operative activities" (p. 114). Hence, she is more cooperative to the wild life. Ruckert (2003) further explores, "preservation (wilderness and wild life) must be protected from human incursion because they have inherent spiritual and aesthetic value" (p. 37). Sylvia is supposed to understand aesthetic value of nature so she refuses to allow the hunter, representative of civilization to infringe upon it. In this sense, she has developed a systemic and comprehensive understanding regarding the relationship between humans and the natural world.

## CONCLUSIONS

The struggle Jewett depicts in the story is related in every person's life. People have reciprocal relation to nature, and Jewett's emphasis of Sylvia's connection helps someone sees how strongly this young girl is

standing in favor of nature in a way people have troubled with. Every individual who has a self-consciousness obviously prefer to save the nature for the future. In “A White Heron” the bird is known as the reference of entire natural beings because killing the bird means finishing the generation of the bird, and hampering the nature. In this sense, the contribution of Sylvia in saving the species of White Heron from hunter signifies that she is a great human being, who gives life to the bird as well as protects the animal beings to maintain harmony in the world. Sylvia finds the treasures which could be lost by her decision, are minute compare to treasures of nature. The experience of Sylvia with the heron provides her strength to stay loyal and true towards nature. Finally, she loves birds and nature (woods) more than the human beings (hunter). The result shows, Sylvia is totally living her life in harmony, maintaining symbiotic relationship with nature. She is not anthropocentric rather she is in favor of biocentric world.

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