
Ecological Reading of Conflicted Self in Jewett's "A White Heron"**Raj Kumar Gurung, PhD**Associate Professor of English
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gurung.raj कुमार@gmail.com**DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/jodem.v14i1.57571>****Abstract**

This paper analyzes the nature-culture dichotomy as seen in the story "A White Heron" by Sarah Jewett. The main character of the story, the girl—Sylvia's relation to nature is reflected through her contact with Mistress Moolly and birds. Her 'self' is torn between material greed and love for nature as she plans to tell the secret of the white heron to the hunter and her final decision not to tell the secret to save the bird respectively. When she climbs up the tree, a revelation comes to her. She reflects upon the outstanding beauty she sees in nature which was beyond her imagination. Thus, I analyze the conflicted self of Sylvia and her final take towards nature by applying environmental theories, particularly, Karen Warren's value dualism, Val Plumwood's backgrounding, and other relevant theories to explore nature as the major source of literature. There has not been sufficient research on this area in Nepal. This research focuses on why people are unconcerned about plants and animals. The unemployment problem and less awareness of natural heritage in man help deteriorate the entire natural environment. The concepts of community forest and being vegetarian can resolve some problems of natural environment degradation. As a qualitative paper, I use textual analysis as a tool to draw a conclusion. Then I use an analytical interpretivist approach to interpret the data.

Keywords: awareness, conflicted self, instrumentalism, natural environment degradation, white heron

Nature-Culture Dichotomy

This paper explores the ecological reading of the conflicted self in Jewett's "White Heron". The little girl, the protagonist—Sylvia has a deep relationship with nature that is reflected through her contact with the old cow, Mistress Moolly and the birds. They are the parts of nature. Sarah Jewett has shown the nature-culture dichotomy in her story. And there is "uncrossable dualism between the natural world

and the human observer” (Clark 149). The natural world means non-humans over which human rules or exploits excessively. The white heron is representative of the natural world that is non-human. It could have easily been killed by the hunter if Sylvia had disclosed its secret. She gives the words to the hunter to tell about the secret of the white heron but when she climbs the tree that was left by the woodchopper; she sees the outstanding beauty of nature which was beyond her imagination. Then she changes her previous decision. She does not tell the secret of the white heron.

The outstanding beauty of nature and the image of the dead heron reflected in her mind so that she decided not to tell the secret of white heron to the hunter. Dead heron means symbolically dead of the beauty of nature and entire natural environment. There are two types of destroyers of nature: the hunter and the woodchopper. The hunter kills the birds for meat and the woodchopper chops the trees for firewood. The woodcutter is clearing the trees, the habitats for the birds and the hunter is decreasing the number of birds. In this way, man is the major cause of the destruction of nature or the natural environment. Human activities destroy the ecology and ecosphere as well biosphere. Sylvia is always close to the forest and she goes there daily with her cow, Mistress Moolly. This shows the integrity of nature with a little girl (woman). Both man and nature are complementary parts to each other but it is a man who exploits nature and woman.

The forest is the source of oxygen, wood and food, as well as the habitat for wild animals and birds, mammals, insects and so on. This is the direct impact as “Forests play a significant role in sequestering carbon and regulating the global carbon and energy cycles” (Bhatta et al. 52). The role of the forest is innumerable for the sake of the entire world in terms of benefitting from the ecological point of view. It can be considered the sponge, dam, lungs of the earth, air filter, Green Ocean and regulator of water and so on. Jewitt does not talk about all this detail although she just presents the beauty of the white heron in her story. The beauty of the white heron represents the whole beauty of both the ecosphere and biosphere. Sylvia’s wish of conserving the white heron means conserving nature. Conserving nature means conserving literature, as nature is the major source of literature. Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley would not have been the milestones of the Romantic age if they had not composed poems on the beauty of nature.

There is a dual role in Sylvia about telling the secret of the white heron to the hunter or not. This symbolizes that everyone is guided by this reality. Her 'self' is torn between material greed and love for nature as she plans to tell the secret of the white heron to the hunter with the hope of getting ten dollars and her final decision is not to tell the secret to save the bird respectively. She has greed for money that she needs for her daily expenses. On the other hand, she has a deep love of nature. She seems to be trapped in trouble in the lack of sufficient money although she makes a rational decision of saving the white heron suspending or postponing her material greed for the sake of the white heron, nature. As "[t]here 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 goodnight to each other in sleepy twitters" (Jewett 152). The beauty of boughs overhead which were full of little birds and beasts was beyond her imagination. It was late evening and they were saying goodnight to each other. The beauty of nature which is depicted here cannot be described in simple words.

Research Designs and Methods

This paper analyzes the conflicted self of Sylvia and her final take towards nature by applying environmental theories, particularly, Karen Warren's value dualism, and Val Plumwood's backgrounding. As a qualitative paper, the study has used textual analysis as a tool to interpret the text. The interpretivist approach, which is *based on the naturalistic approach, is the major research design to analyze the data*. The data have been interpreted from an analytical interpretivist approach. There is a problematic value dualism "culture/nature". There is a culture of exploiting nature by man. But it is a man who has been disturbing and destroying it since times immemorial.

In the nature/culture dichotomy, "Women are systematically backgrounded and instrumentalised as housewives, as nurses and secretaries (Pringle 1988), as colleagues and workmates" (qtd in Plumwood 21). The backgrounding theory is against foregrounding and something is always backgrounded or marginalized for the sake of a particular group or community. The instrumentalism principle has the way of treating women and nature as instruments. Women are backgrounded and instrumentalised as housewives, nurses, secretaries, colleagues and workmates but the males never treat them as equal as they are. "Traditionally, women are 'the environment'—they provide the environment and conditions against which male 'achievement' takes place" (Plumwood 22). In every male's achievement, women's role is mentionable but it is

never accounted for in male-dominated societies. Women provide the environment and conditions by which male achievement takes place. Similarly, nature provides the good ecological environment to all the living and nonliving things of the world.

Sylvia is always in favour of nature conservation, whereas the hunter and woodchopper seem against it. This value dualism always exists. This concern is what the study focuses on. Val Plumwood's backgrounding theory means instrumentalizing and marginalizing nature, birds or animals and women. Backgrounding is not foregrounding nature and women. All the relevant data are interpreted accordingly. The researcher used the book chapters, and journals and surfed the internet on the websites for finding the appropriate data and information to support the research during the investigation. He used keywords like value dualism, backgrounding, culture/nature, ecofeminism, conflicted self, and nature conservation to find the data and literature.

Moreover, the backgrounding theory deals with discrimination and marginalization or instrumentalization. The humans background or marginalize the non-humans. In terms of backgrounding the white heron, Sylvia has also been backgrounded/marginalized. Humans treat both women and nature as commodities. They background and marginalize these two entities mercilessly. They treat nature and women as their slaves. They do not take nature as the giver or source of several things. They also do not treat them as complementary parts though they know everything. As men are supposed to be above women, human is supposed to be above nature. This mentality works everywhere in the world. Women are a half hemisphere of human society and nature as an eternal giver for humans.

Nature determines all the five elements of life earth, water, fire, air, and space. It is none other than men who have been exploiting nature nonstop since human evolution. Men and humans consider women and nature as their helpers. "The backgrounding and instrumentalisation of nature and that of women run closely parallel" (Plumwood 21). Nature is just an instrument for humans. Similarly, women are also the instruments for them. This is how there has been always imbalance and conflict between humans and nature and between men and women. This mentality must be corrected.

In addition, the study discusses what value dualism theory is like. As Karen J. Warren opines that there are several value dualisms. "Examples include value dualisms that give higher status to that which has historically been identified as "male," "White,"

"rational / and "culture" than to that which has historically been identified as "female," "black, "emotional" and "nature""(Warren 46). Among all, culture/nature value dualism is the main concern of the study.

Jewett presents contextual problems and attempts to maintain the balance between culture and nature. This is what value dualism is.

The study analyzes the nature-culture dichotomy in Jewett's story "The White Heron". Carsten Hobohm states, "The main criticism may be that the Nature-Culture Dichotomy is implicitly driving and reducing the scope of assessments and value measures to the artificial side, leaving nature amoral" (1). The scope of assessments and value measures to the artificial side, leaving nature amoral is being reduced. And "The nature-culture dichotomy has evolved into separate heritage fields and domains of expertise, there is today a growing understanding that heritage sites are not made up of isolated natural or cultural attributes split into separate realities" (Larsen & Wijesuriya 145). The nature-culture dichotomy does not get isolated and there is negligible gap that can be filled up.

Value Dualism Problem of Human Culture and Nature

This section of the research paper discusses the value dualism problem of human culture and nature in detail. Humans are always exploiting nature as it has been developed as a culture. Jewett's "A White Heron" is a representative example of how human culture dominates nature. Although Sylvia does not tell the hunter about the secret of the white heron, there are several hunters who must know this. It is not only Sylvia who knows the secret of the white heron. Now, Sylvia does not speak a word. "No, she must keep silent! What is it that suddenly forbids her and makes her dumb?" (Jewett 157). It is Sylvia's pretention or acting or a revelation. She has a deep love of the white heron, nature. Because of her deep love of nature, she decided not to tell the secret of the white heron to the hunter and to postpone her monetary problems. Although she is poor, she is not sold for ten dollars.

The ten dollars would have been the major cause of Heron's death which she postponed although this safe is not forever safe. The hunter in Jewett's story does not kill the birds for commercial purposes but some hunters kill or trap the birds massively for commercial purposes. This is more dangerous cause of the heron's extinction. Humans have exploited nature not only killing the birds and animals but also

destroying the forests, mountains, rivers, and lakes in the name of commercialization and urbanization. It is a man who destroys his own house as well as the houses of other creatures who share this earth. Because of this trend, the ecosphere of the human world has been challenging and critical.

Sylvia's value dualism is either prioritizing nature or money. Though she prioritizes nature, there is a threat to it from several sides. There are not only the hunter and woodcutter, there are other factors which threaten ecology and the environment. One of the major causes or factors is overpopulation which plays a vital role in provoking the threats. Hobohm states, "A growing world population provokes serious threats to ecosystems and species worldwide" (1). Diverse NGOs have conducted several awareness campaigns and they have already applied different methods to prevent the extinction of certain endangered species at local to international scales (1) so that the conservation of nature takes place. The major cause of the exploitation of nature is humans. Except woodcutter and hunter as Jewett presents the destroyers of nature, farmers and several national plans of the government are also responsible destroyers of nature.

Jewett presents Sylvia as a campaigner for nature conservation. The pace of destruction is faster than the pace of construction or the death of a white heron is faster than its birth. With human evolution, there have been environmental disasters. What steps can be taken for the solutions? This is the focus of the study. Having the community forest concept can control such illegal hunting and chopping the wood. Bob Neville, the Northeast Region urban and community forestry coordinator of the U.S. Forest Service's State and Private Forestry program came out with a new idea that he "was interested in developing new concepts of urban forestry that looked at the urban ecosystem as a whole and linked community forestry projects within that ecosystem" (Moote 174). If all the people conduct the concepts of urban forestry and community forestry projects strictly, the ecosystem will be much safer than ever before.

Another concept, to conserve the white heron or nature, Karen J. Warren forwards, is the idea of being a vegetarian to reduce the number of hunters and to increase the number of herons/birds as well as other wild animals. His idea of being vegetarian might reduce heron hunting. He has presented this idea in his story, "Must Everyone Be Vegetarian?" If everyone was vegetarian, there would be no hunting of birds/white herons. This shows that Jewett hates bird killing. This hampers the whole

ecosphere. Everything is the complementary part of the whole of the ecosphere, not only the white heron but also the insect that plays a vital role to contribute to the whole. Moreover, Warren presents:

Animal welfarists use distinctively Western ethical concepts and principles-consequences and rights to argue against eating animals. Animal welfarist arguments make humans and nonhuman animals similar and morally equal as well as different and morally superior to plants, rivers, mountains, and the rest of nature- by taking nonhuman animals out of nature and putting them in the moral club with humans. Animal welfarist arguments thereby keep in place the problematic value dualism "culture/nature." (135)

There are several animal welfarists or animal rightists who want to campaign against eating animals. They want to discourage the hunters. Increasing the number of vegetarians can also control the killing of wild lives. This is known as the Western ethical concepts and principles-consequences. Animal welfarists claim that there are equal rights for both animals and humans to survive on to this earth. Humans think that they are superior to plants, rivers, mountains, and the rest of nature and they exploit them either by killing them or using or destroying them for different purposes.

The essence of this research work is to advocate nature conservation. For support, the study incorporates Warren's idea of treating both women and animals not as commodities or as consumable objects. He opines, "Conceptually, when one conceives of animals or women as meat, one reinforces Up-Down hierarchical thinking and value dualisms (e.g. culture/nature), which reduce animals and women to inferior status as consumable objects" (139). Neither the animals nor the women are inferior, it is a poor and selfish human mentality. This up-down hierarchical thinking and value dualism are man-made discourses for one-sided benefits. Because of this value dualism, humans have exploited nature as the inferior status. Similarly, men have exploited women as the inferior status. Man uses other man, especially women, is a never-ending process or problem. And "human uses of animals and animal products" (Dear 51) process is also a never-ending process. Killing the bird by the hunter is the use of the animal. There are several animal products like skins, wool, for which the hunters kill the animals/birds.

This principle can work for the betterment of the alarming situation as the appalling hunting activities are still going on. In addition, David W. Orr claims,

“Hunter-gatherers drove many species to extinction, and early farmers left behind a legacy of deforestation, soil erosion, and land degradation” (15). Similarly, there is a chance of the heron to extinction. Unlike hunters, there are farmers who are responsible for deforestation, soil erosion and land degradation. Or farmers are also responsible for exploiting nature. Orr further clarifies, “We have always modified our environments to one degree or another, but the level of ecological damage has increased with the level of civilization” (15). Modern civilization is responsible for ecological damage. It is not only the hunter. William R. Uttal goes back to human evolution and reads the history, “Prior to the Paleolithic-Neolithic boundary, humans were primarily hunter-gatherers” (64). Anyway, primarily, humans were hunter-gatherers as it was their obligation and occupation but now it is for fun and business, not for survival. Some tourists hunt wild sheep in Dhorpatan of Baglung, Nepal, by paying some mentionable fees to the Nepal government. It has to be stopped. Uttal further says, “[V]illages or communities of hunter-gatherers occurred 2,000 years before plants and animals were domesticated” (67). Or it means there was hunting for survival. Now, hunting is for otherwise.

The study focuses on the nature conservation and investigates how human culture exploits nature. “Even the concept of nature in this material definition is problematic as it perpetuates the dualism between nature and culture which is deeply embedded in Western ideology, even though this dualism is ultimately “self-defeating”” (qtd. in Höing 31). Everything cannot be materialized and defined in words. The concept of nature and its dualism between nature and culture is abstract. Nature has its nature and it wants to go on its route in the same way as it began. But there is a culture of human nature to rule over nature though ultimately it is a self-defeating game. Killing the heron means killing himself. Man can never get victory over nature but he pretends that he has been ruling or killing nature, as the hunter is killing the white heron. This is the human culture. Thus, human culture is responsible to destroy nature.

Culture-Nature Conflict

The white heron and Sylvia’s cow are nature but they are never treated as they were. The old cow, Mistress Moolly is always under the control of Sylvia, and the white heron is under the control of the hunter. The white heron’s life is under the hunter’s wish. He has not discovered the white heron’s nest because Sylvia has not told him the secret of the white heron. But it does not mean that he can never find it, and it

is not only Sylvia who knows the secret of the white heron. Several hunters might have a better idea of how to locate the secret of birds though the Jewett's story presents differently. In a real sense, "Capen's prodigious and exhaustive volume *Oology of New England*, published in the same year as Jewett's story (Boston: Alfred Mudge and Sons), records the existence of the nests of great blue herons, green herons, and night herons, but no white herons of any kind" (Joseph 82). This shows that there are no white herons around the place where Jewett lives. She likes the white heron the best. So, she seems to be looking for this beautiful bird.

Once when Sylvia did not see her lovely cow, Mistress Moolly that might have been grazing somewhere in the forest, she became restless. In one hand, she is controlling the cow, on the other hand, she is restless when she cannot see it. This is also Sylvia's culture-nature conflict. Though she loves it, she controls it; she uses it. There is love but there is use. In one way or other, human uses the animals or rules them. Therefore, love and use are conflicted here.

Anyway, there has been massive destruction of several birds like herons so Sylvia seems to protect it. With the aim of conservation of birds or nature, she did not tell the secret of the white heron to the hunter. The "newly formed American Ornithologists' Union, alarmed by the mass destruction of heron rookeries in the south and tern and gull rookeries along the Atlantic coast, established a bird protection committee in 1884 to confront the problem" (Joseph 83). The newly formed American Ornithologists were worried by the mass destruction of heron rookeries in the south and tern and gull rookeries along the Atlantic coast. So, they established a bird protection committee to confront the problem of bird hunting. It is a kind of over-exploitation of nature by man.

Conclusion

This paper was carried out to analyze the nature-culture dichotomy as seen in Sarah Jewett's story "A White Heron". Although nature and culture seem to be two different things, Sylvia played the role of catalyst to shorten the gap between them and make them as close as possible. The story showed that Sylvia's relation to nature is reflected through her contact with Mistress Moolly and birds. Her 'self' was torn between material greed and love for nature as she planned to tell the secret of the white heron to the hunter for ten dollars the hunter had promised her to give her. But she did not do what she had promised. It was for the sake of nature conservation. Thus, this

paper analyses Sylvia's conflicted self and her final take towards nature by applying environmental theories, particularly, Warren's value dualism and Plumwood's backgrounding to explore nature as a major source of literature and several innumerable things. As a qualitative paper, textual analysis was used as a tool to interpret the text, and an analytical interpretivist approach was used to interpret the data.

By nature, the study seemed to be explanatory research as there are causes, effects and solutions patterns. The selfish mentality of common people over nature and women is the cause of the extinction of natural entities. Global warming and respiratory problems as such are the effects, whereas the concepts of community forest and being vegetarian are the solutions of the study. The study came to conclusion that the humans treated the non-humans like animals and plants as commodities. It means the humans backgrounded the non-humans as the man backgrounded/marginalized/instrumentalized the woman. This research paper advocated in favour of nature conservation investigating and analyzing the data. The article showed that human activities are the major causes of nature extinction. In the story, the hunter and woodcutter are the most responsible representative figures of nature extinction.

As a nature saviour, Sylvia's love for Mistress Moolly and birds is conserving the nature. Nature is both teacher, mother, and savior not only the source of literature, beauty and food. Jewett does full justice to the white heron by making Sylvia change her decision of telling the secret of the heron. A revelation came to her as she reflected upon when she saw an outstanding beauty in nature. Sylvia plays the dual role of telling the secret of the white heron to the hunter or not, as it is the theory of value dualism. She climbed the pine tree and saw the outstanding beauty of nature which symbolizes her maturity in understanding the value of nature.

The findings of the study showed that humans have been exploiting nature as men have been ruling women for ages. The overexploitation of nature by humans and over-domination of women by men should be controlled by the government. Those who violate the rules should be heavily fined. The hunters, woodcutters or poachers should be discouraged by creating alternatives to their activities. There should be alternate job opportunities for them. Only a few people's attempt to control the destruction of the natural environment is not sufficient, the entire mass should be aware of such an environmental decline and extinction. The white heron is no more around the place where Sara Jewett lives. She loves seeing the white herons. They are on the

verge of extinction because of human activities. Anyway, this paper has only analyzed the Jewett's story from the perspectives of nature conservation, natural beauty, as nature is the major source of literature. Although I wanted to analyze the symbolic meanings and beauty and its related meanings, I cannot have done it. The researchers can work on this site, too.

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