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NATURE: A DISCUSSION IN THE SELECTED POEMS OF MARY JANE OLIVER

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ABSTRACT

Environmental issue to this present world is a major factor for both the human beings and the other living organisms. The world in which we are inhaling is really becoming hell day by day for all the living things. For all these disasters, no one but we the humans are responsible. We have destroyed or destroying the nature rapidly. In this regard, it becomes for us, who are the culprits, very requisite to ponder over the problems which our planet and we are facing, today. So in this regard many ecologists, scientists, philosophers and also the literary figures; like, poets, essayists, novelist and dramatists age to age have made their auspicious efforts through their findings and literary works to bring out those problems before the human's eyes which are no doubt very perilous for the present as well as the future generations. The present paper, "Nature: A Discussion in the Selected Poems of Mary Jane Oliver" deals with Oliver's selected poems in the perspective of a discussion on nature with a brief outline of Eco-criticism, Romanticism, Ecology, Ecosystem, and Environment.

**Keywords:** Eco-criticism, Romanticism, Nature, Ecology, Ecosystem, Environment.

Introduction

"Eco-criticism is the study of the relationship between the literature and the physical environment."(Glotfelty xviii). And according to Lexicon, , it is "an interdisciplinary field of study that analyses how the natural world is portrayed in literature, typically in relation to modern environmental concerns." (Lexicon). From the above definitions, it is quite clear that Eco-criticism in literature studies critically those literary texts that advocate the relationship between the human and the non-human world. For the present scenario, its value becomes more worthy because the present world is critically passing through the ecological crisis.

After the publication of "*Lyrical Ballads (1798)*" by two prominent literary figures William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the age of Romanticism came into being where love for nature, its remarkable beauty, use of free verse in poetry, and the use of common people's tongue made their place in the field of literature. One of the most important elements of this age is the expression of self, as in the definition appears. "Romanticism, a literary, artistic, and philosophical movement originating in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, characterized chiefly by a reaction against emotions, and marked specially in English literature by sensibility and the use of autobiographical materials, an exaltation of the primitive and the common man, an

appreciation of external nature, a predilection for melancholy and the use in poetry of older verse forms.”(Mirriam-webster). Those elements that were in the age of Romanticism were considered by some prominent writers in the 20 and 21<sup>st</sup> century among them; one is Mary Oliver, whose poetry has touched the soul of the Romantic Age of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In the Romantic period, nature and its beauty were in the centre of every literary figures, whether it be Blake or Keats or anyone. “Nature, in the broadest sense, is the natural, physical, or material world or universe. “Nature” can refer to the phenomena of the physical world, and also to life in general. The study of nature is a large, if not the only, part of science. Although humans are part of nature, human activity is often understood as a separate category from other natural world.”(Frederic&Denis). As Fredeic and Denis put, Nature consists everything of and beyond the Earth: its rivers, seas, oceans, mountains, forests, wild lives including the man, even if he has separated himself from all these natural assets. And this partition of him has definitely brought destructions to the nature for that the persona from the different fields came together upon a dais to converse the matter not only about it, but also about the whole terminology related to the nature, such as ecology, ecosystem of the Earth, and the environment so and so on.

Ecosystem defined as “a community of living organisms in conjunction with the nonliving components of their environment, interacting as a system,”(Tansley, 1934; Molles, 1999, 482). Nature and Ecosystem are conversely alternative terms. They both talk of the relationships between the living and non-living objects. Today, the imbalance in ecosystem is a burning issue which the whole world is facing.

As in the way the world is behaving with the environment, it seems that very soon, the Earth will not be habitable. Degradation in environment which is “the surroundings or conditions in which a person, animal, or plant lives or operates (Lexicon), is a warning for it. Yes, it is true that the present world assuming the danger in future, as well as in present, has inclined towards this that has brought new stream of study, that is, Ecology. This is the “study of the relationships between plants, animals, people, and their environment, and the balances between these relationships. (Collins). The world needs today a deep and sincere study of the ecology. With the ecologists and the other intellectuals, the literary personalities are also not even one step behind. They are invoking the unconscious minds of the modern man to concern the problems through their literary productions.

Mary Jane Oliver ( 1935-2019) is a renowned American poet. She has won a lot of prestigious awards among them the most important are Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for *American Primitive (1984)* and National Book Award for Poetry for *New and Selected Poems (1992)*. She is one of the most eminent figures in the area of literature that has taken these drawbacks of the atmosphere seriously, and like Wordsworth, Frost, Blake etc., through her poetry tried her best to draw the attention of the present people’s greedy thoughts against the love for nature and its attractiveness in the 20 and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries’ highly modernized, technologized and industrialized society. In 2007 *The New York Times* described her as “far and away, this century’s best-selling poet”. (Dwight).

Most of her poetry collection books give light to the nature and its importance for the present world. All her poems are great and widely read. The following selected poems by her are here for discussions on nature in the light of ecological, environmental, atmospheric perspectives.

- I Worried
- Ocean
- Starlings in Winter

### I Worried

For Oliver, it is a matter of great surprise that the man knows the consequences of his actions which he has brought into the untouched world, yet he is denying it broadly. She knows the catastrophes that a modern man is facing, today. Oliver throughout this poem is in an extreme dilemma. She is surely apprehensive to see the climatic change around her. Her anxiety for the whole ecosystem of the Earth in this short poem, but

having a lot of meanings puts Oliver before the society like a benevolent soul that is born here to observe the nature and its significance, and bring her findings for the welfare of all humankind.

I worried a lot. Will the garden grow, will the rivers  
flow in the right direction, will the earth turn  
as it was taught, and if not how shall  
I correct it?

Her uncertainties for the world whether it will survive or just taste the premature death are overt in the above excerpt. "I worried a lot. Will the garden grow, will the rivers / flow in the right direction," through these lines, the poet, at somewhere does go into a deep contemplation. On symbolizing the garden as the society, or the whole entities of the world, Mary Oliver speculates its devastation.

As in the way for the greed of money and wealth, the world is striding ahead, she putting herself into the centre of the entire existence says "Was I right, was I wrong, will I be forgiven, / can I do better?" That means, she is feeling sorrow over her actions performed by herself against the ecosystem of the Earth. She is in doubt whether she can do better, or just she will return.

### Ocean

For her, these technological and industrial developments across the world are not satisfactory. For her, the complete satisfaction is lying in the lap of the nature, and its splendid beauty. In this fast growing world where nobody has time to spend their experiences with their friends, or families, to talk of mutual love or help or fraternity seems ridiculous.

I am in love with ocean  
lifting her thousands of white hats  
in the chop of the storm,  
or lying smooth and blue, the  
loveliest bed in the world.  
in the personal life, there is

always grief more than enough,  
a heart-load for each of us  
on the dusty road.

Ocean is for her is "the loveliest bed in the world." This reveals her inner and depth love for the natural world which is quite opposite of the rest. "The dusty road," is all about the materialistic society which she does not like at all. Her grief to see the turning of the society contradictory to the primitive world becomes sometimes intolerable for her, and so she leaves "the dusty road," here it is not literal but symbolical, to rest on the sea bed. Her inner voice preaches to feel affection for the every aspect of the nature, and its mysterious activity.

### Starlings in Winter

Like other poems, "Starlings and Winters" also portrays the materialistic society of the world where the abode of a non-human organisms is disappearing and is being destroyed, and that is the clue to the climatic disorder of the environment, of the ecosystem of the Earth. Through starlings that are jumping from telephone wire to the building, Oliver elucidates their troubled life inside the system of the present world. Like starlings, she herself breathes the contaminated air under the artificial framework of the society.

Chunky and noisy,  
but with stars in their black feathers,  
they spring from the telephone wire  
and instantly

they are acrobats in the freezing wind.  
 And now, in the theatre of air,  
 They swing over buildings,  
 dipping and rising:

From the eco-critical points of view, "Starlings in Winter" fits exactly true. With the beauty of nature, she uncovers the dark side of it. Growing pollution in the atmosphere is explicit here when she talks of the ashy city. Symbolically, the ashy city discloses the wrong behaviors of the modern man against the nature.

Ah, world, what lessons you prepare for us,  
 even in the leafless winter,  
 even in the ashy city.  
 I am thinking now  
 of grief, and of getting past it;

I feel my boots  
 trying to leave the ground,  
 I feel my heart  
 pumping hard.

Over all, the poem is a finest instance by her hand to look into the quandary which this highly developed society, however it is not so, is struggling with.

### Conclusion

Having multiple themes in the poems talked above in simple and intelligible language, Oliver argues the problems in relation to the degrading ecosystem, and the environment of the Earth. She knows the activity of the modern man who has set aside himself too far from the nature is not proper at all. The greed and extreme will for the wealth and money neglecting the damages in the ecosystem, this materialistic and highly technologized society knowing everything is still deranging them which is at any cost not ethical for the present, as well as the future. Without any question, Oliver's contribution through her literary texts, to make conscious a sleeping mind for the importance of the nature is worthy for both the human and the non-human world.

The poems, "I Worried," "Ocean," and "Starlings in Winter" are truly her remarkable literary productions that have all the ecological elements which throw overt evidence for the poet to be a person keeping a deep affection towards the natural world and its mysterious, auspicious attractiveness.

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