



Sylvia's Self-realization in Sarah Orne Jewett's *A White Heron* From the Perspective of Deep Ecology

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Abstract: In her short novel *A white Heron*, the famous American regional writer Sarah Orne Jewett pays attention to ecological problems. The novella is about a little girl named Sylvia who is trapped in a dilemma, to help a hunter man from city find the white heron or to protect the bird from being hunted. Jewett condemns the ill behaviors of human beings in killing animals and destroying nature. This paper tries to give a detailed analysis on the heroine's self changes by application of deep ecology theory proposed by Aren Naess. For Sylvia, the most important thing is that the white heron family can continue to live in the woods. By living in the wood and befriending animals, she also changes from the stage of ego to social self and finally to ecological self. This process of Self-realization is a possible approach to a better relationship between human and nature. The author indicates that the White heron has equal rights as other living things to survive and the rights can not be deprived by human beings. With the help of her novel *A white heron*, Jewett hopes that she can wake up the ecological consciousness of mankind.

Keywords: *A white Heron* Deep Ecology Self-realization

Introduction

Global ecological crises have become a hot topic in recent years. How to solve ecological problems and live harmoniously with nature has been considered as a crucial urgency that human has to face. Sarah Orne Jewett, an American ecological writer, probes such issues in her writings, and many of her works deal with the environment and the communities of southern Maine.

Jewett lived in a time when the United States experienced major historical changes: the civil war ended with the victory of the north, and industrial capitalism gradually rose. The rapid development of industrial civilization led to the rise of cities, the proliferation of factories and the development of material civilization. "Jewett's text focuses primarily on the animal encounters that Sylvia participates in throughout the short story, but by including a young hunter naturalist, also makes a larger statement about the external, rapidly industrializing world."^[1] At the same time, people lost their pursuit of spiritual goals and increasingly turned their life goals to chase material interests, money and enjoyment. In the great social changes, Jewett's hometown, Maine, also changed with society. The previously developed agriculture, shipbuilding, logging and fishing industries had gradually been replaced by the new modern machine industries. The continuous construction of factories, as well as the weak environmental awareness of the public, had led to air pollution, water pollution and chemical pollution. In addition, in order to ensure a large number of raw materials needed for industrial development, large areas of primitive forests had been cut down and destroyed, and a large number of wild animals had been ruthlessly pursued and hunted.

Sarah Orne Jewett was born sept.3, 1849. When she was young, she often visited fishermen and farmers with her father because she liked the way they lived. In writing, she often creates her characters who live and deeply attach to nature. Sarah Orne Jewett is one of writers who pays much attention to the relationship between nature and human. She is good at describing the beautiful nature in her works.

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A white Heron is recognized as one of Sarah Orne Jewett's finest stories. Jewett blends her care about country land and environment into this work. The *White Heron* tells readers about the dilemma of Sylvia, the little heroine in the novella. Sylvia goes to her grandmother's rural cottage after her unhappy life in a busy industrial town. Her story begins with a happy walk in the woods, but she is frightened by the unexpected breaks in her pathway. A young hunter wants Sylvia to help him to catch an exotic bird. As Sylvia has seen this white heron before, and she likes this young man, so she decides to find out the nest of the white heron. But after she climbs on a pine tree and sees the beautiful image of nature, Sylvia changes her idea. The climax of her climb is a process for her change from social self to ecological self. A conflict between standing by nature or following human beings' desire is presented by the author which becomes a harassment to the heroine. A decision is waiting for her to make.

Deep Ecology

Arne Naess first proposed "deep ecology" in 1970. Deep ecology is put forward to against the "shallow ecology". Shallow ecology solves the environmental problems for human profits.^[2] However, deep ecology is anti-anthropocentrism. The core of deep ecology is "Ecosophy T", which is a kind of ultimate philosophy. "Ecosophy T" includes two levels, which are Biocentric Equalitarianism and Self-realization. In *The Ecology of Wisdom: Writing by Arne Naess*, the Biocentric Equalitarianism refers to that "every creature in the biosphere has the right to survive and to achieve Self-realization, and to show its individual existence in a broader space"^[3] Therefore, Biocentric Equalitarianism is the foundation to realize Self-realization.

Naess believes people have three stages to realize Self-realization: from ego to social self, and from social self to ecological self. Ego, according to Freud, reconciles the instinctual impulse and moral constraints. Social self means that people realize that they are a part of society, and the development of society is closely related to themselves. They observe social norms and care about others. The ecological self is that people are concerned about all lives in the ecosystem. In the process of Self-realization, the meaning of "Self" is wider than "ego".^[4] Ego looks for one's economic interest and the economic value of nature, but the Self tries to protect nature for the sake of human. The interest of nature and the interest of human are closely linked.

Human can achieve the ecological self through respect for nature, and not only human can achieve the ecological self but also all lives in nature can realize the ecological self. All members of nature have the right to live in the world and human have no right to override nonhuman. The realization of the ecological self means that human need to reduce their greed and desire and to consider nature (including human and nonhuman) as a whole and take this unity into consideration. In Naess's Ecosophy T system, Self-realization is different from the modern western "self-realization". Self-realization in deep ecology refers to more than individualism sense. It refers to the organic wholeness^[5] which means taking all the overall interests of the ecosystem as the highest value. Holism will help human understand the dependency that people have on others, society, and the biosphere. Human must grow empathy for other species if they want to gain Self-realization. People should have the awareness that human is just a member of the ecosystem on earth. In *A White Heron*, Sylvia knows the white heron has the right to live just like herself. With her empathy towards the white heron, Sylvia uses her unusual act against the hunter and anthropocentrism. In the journey of her finding the white heron, she finds that the white heron and herself are trapped in a similar condition, both of whom are put in a weaker position in nature. At last, Sylvia decides to protect the white heron and to give up her own desire for money and human love. She achieves the process from ego to social self and finally to ecological self.

Crises of Sylvia's Ego in City

In a fast-paced industrial society, Sylvia faces the crises of loneliness in both body and soul. Sylvia is lonely in the city because she has no partner to talk to and play with so that she loses the ability to communicate with others. In her eight years living in a crowded manufacturing town, the only thing she cares about is a wretched geranium. "She thought often with wistful compassion of a wretched geranium that belonged to a town neighbor."^[6]¹⁴ *A white Heron* was written in 1886 when people believed that city was more civilized than countryside which represented dirty and backwardness. Many people in the countryside would like to work in the city. Sylvia's mother went to California to look for her dream life, so Sylvia was born in the city. Barely connected with the rural areas, Sylvia is trapped in the city and is unaccustomed to life in the city. In the city, A red-faced boy, who is a representative of city, often chases and frightens her. The city is noisy, while Sylvia likes being quiet. She is unable to make friends with any peers in the city and she feels lonely. What's more, she is unable to embrace society. Her horror-stricken hearing of a clear whistle shows that she fears all strangers.

Sylvia also lacks love in the city because her mother has a houseful of children to take care of. Her parents are busy making a living. Sylvia's sense of inferiority comes from her unhappy childhood. She is afraid of strangers. She is not daring to speak what she wants. Even when she comes to the country, her grandmother Mrs. Tilley likes her but she is still afraid to be blamed by her grandmother. "'Afraid of folks', old Mrs. Tilley said to herself, with a smile, after she had made the unlikely choice of Sylvia from her daughter's houseful of children, and was returning to the farm."^[4] So when Sylvia meets the man in the woods, she wants to become a friend of his. She is eager to get love from him. What Sylvia wants from the young man is romantic love not just friendship or affection.

Loneliness and lack of love lead to Sylvia's alienation from Self. For Sylvia, it seems as if she has never been alive in the crowded manufacturing town. She loses the sense of her essence of being herself.

What's more, human are alienated from nature when living in the city. In the era of industrialization, the city is developing faster and faster. The high-rise buildings make the city look more regular and tidy, but the cold cement environment also separates people from the natural landscape. The relationship between people and nature is becoming more and more estranged, and the senses people have to nature are becoming more and more numb while the relatively simple countryside can provide a little psychological comfort to senseless people. However, with the rapid development of science and technology, the city dwellers seem to live in the "concrete forest". They completely lose their connection with nature, so they become numb to the life in city. Even when they have the opportunity to be close to nature, they have the feeling that they are the owner of nature and they have the ability to manipulate nature. Sylvia, when living in the city, far from nature, having no friends, is alienated from nature, with her heart turning into a wasteland.

During her city life, Sylvia is in the first stage of Self-realization: ego. At this stage, Sylvia is alienated from self, society, and nature.

Development of Sylvia's Social Self in woods

The second stage of Self-realization is to care for others in society. People can't avoid the influence of society. Maine, where the story happens, is known as the state of pine trees, and pine cones are its state flowers. In history, it once enjoyed a prominent position because of its developed shipbuilding industry, fishing industry and important production place of wood. As a state tree, pine trees have promoted local economic development and played a decisive role in local history. It can be said that pine trees symbolize Maine's once glorious history and it represents Maine's once developed shipbuilding industry and the mainstream culture centered on male values. The woods provides not only economic support for the local people but also spiritual support for Sylvia.

After she comes to live with her grandmother, Sylvia often goes to the woods and she does not feel lonely anymore because she is happy with the lives in the woods. She plays with an old cow who hides among the huckleberry bushes. Sylvia regards the cow's prank as an intelligent attempt to play hide and seek. On the way home, she enjoys listening to the thrushes with a heart that beat fast with pleasure. Life in the woods is relaxed and colorful. Wild creatures regard her as a friend such as squeals would like to eat food in her hands. All kinds of birds would like to spend time with Sylvia. She likes staying with animals in the woods for a long time. Nature turns Sylvia into a vibrant girl. Life in the countryside and in the wild is completely different from the life in the city. Sylvia is not even aware of the passing of time in the countryside, and she is totally worry-free in the woods. She just knows that it is time to go home when the woods are full of shadows. She is not constrained by the artificially set concept of time.

She also gains love from nature. The environment in the woods gives Sylvia a sense of security. Sylvia loves the environment of the woods. She feels she has become a part of the gray shadows and moving leaves when she goes home very late. The air in the woods is soft and sweet. Sylvia puts her bare feet to cool them in the shoal water. Sylvia gets love from her grandmother who lives in the woods. She is always waiting for Sylvia to go home. The relaxed life in the woods and the care from her grandmother give her the opportunity to experience nature and society. She feels she is natural in the woods and she has more confidence to contact more people than before.

In the woods, it's the second stage of Sylvia's Self-realization: from ego to social self. She has to learn something from society. The young man from city, as a society representative, has exerted an impact on her growth. She has to communicate with the young man, the hunter who comes to the woods to find birds for his collection, and tries to figure out the relationship between her and the young man. The social self makes her ignore her true emotions and care about the requirement of the young man. The young man comes from city, and his viewpoint of the countryside represents some city dwellers' opinions

towards nature. City people care only their own interest and profits. "The young man had known the horrors of its most primitive housekeeping, and the dreary squalor of that level of society which does not rebel at the companionship of hens"^{[6]8}. Sylvia is happy in nature, and nature keeps her away from loneliness in physical and in spirit though she doesn't realize the importance of nature. Meanwhile, Sylvia desires love from a man, from society, after all she is a human being.

Awakening of Sylvia's Ecological Self on the Tree

The third stage of Self-realization is to care about all lives in the ecosystem. Sylvia perfects her virtue in nature. She has spiritual growth in the woods. Self-realization can inspire good morals in human. People who realize Self-realization will understand that nature exists for its own sake.

Sylvia finds love and freedom in the wood which is the dream life that she wants. But a man's coming puts her in a dilemma. The man, who comes to the woods in order to collect rare birds is rich and handsome, which makes Sylvia desire to befriend him.

The young man is an abuser who treats nature violently. The young man is sure that Sylvia would help him find out the place of the white heron for money. "With his appeal and his declaration of the tantalizing award of ten dollars for a found heron, Sylvia suddenly cannot see the needs of the small creature that she was so closely observing."^[7] Although Sylvia likes nature, she hesitates when she faces the choice between human beings and nature. Nature provides Sylvia calm, safe and colorful life while the young man may bring her money and romantic love. The heroine is too young to decide which side, nature or man, to stand by. She has to climb to the top of the highest great pine tree to find the final answer.

Sylvia is shocked by the beauty of nature when she climbs on the old pine. She sees the sea with the dawning sun making a golden dazzle over it, the woodlands and farms. The world is vast and awesome when she stands on the tree top. The tree Sylvia climbs lengthens itself out as she goes up. Plants in woods also love Sylvia. The old pine steads the least twigs to advantage Sylvia's climb. The tree protects the little girl just as friends. After that, her ecological self wakes up. At the moment of the beautiful scene in her eyes, her insular egoism is gone.

On the tree, Sylvia thinks and recalls a lot. Animals have special language systems that are different from human language, and they are as smart as human. The cow Moolly knows how to play with her young master to make her happy. And Moolly understands that as long as she stands perfectly still the loud bell she wore would not ring. So the cow Molly has the intelligence to get along well with human. Sylvia's uncle has tamed a crow that seems very smart. Sylvia's grandmother praises the smartness of a crow. The white herons knowing where to locate her nest would be safer. The animals in Jewett's novel have shown their language, intelligence and friendliness, so all forms of life have equal rights to achieve Self-realization.

She loves the white heron. She realizes that the white heron and herself have something in common. First, they both like a place of quiet. The white heron doesn't like the noisy shouting birds coming, and Sylvia doesn't like the noisy city. Second, they both have dangerous conditions in the world. The white heron is chased by the young man while Sylvia is asked to find out the location of the white heron's nest and she is chased by a red-face boy in the city.

After seeing the beauty of the white heron, she begins to have empathy for them. Her strong emotions toward the white heron exceed the emotions she has toward the young man. The white heron is mysterious and precious to human who wants to catch it. Sylvia chooses not to disturb the life of the white heron and thinks for them seriously. At that moment, her inner conflict forces her to consider the relationship between human and nature.

Both Sylvia and the young man like birds. The young man likes birds for their economic value. He makes these birds into lifeless specimens. Sylvia likes birds for they are real life living in the wood and they are companion to her. The young man gives money to lure the girl to tell out the location of the white heron's nest. If she tells, he will kill them. Finally, this little girl makes up her mind to keep the secret and protect the beautiful white heron.

It's the third stage of Self-realization after she decides to save the white heron: from social self to ecological self. It's the highest level of Self-realization. The journey of Sylvia's finding birds is a process to find Self-realization. Her choice shows her respectful attitude toward nature. Nature can help people return to good human-nature relationship. Man is weak in nature. Sylvia realizes the sublime of nature. "Sylvia could see the white sails of ships out at sea, and the clouds that were purple and rose-colored and yellow at first began to fade away"^{[6]18}. Nature is powerful. Everyone should respect nature. Nature will punish

those who destroy nature at their will. The living environment of birds is becoming worse and worse because of men's behaviors. The young man doesn't realize the equal rights of animals. In the contrast, Sylvia identifies herself with the poor white heron and decides to help the white heron. This is the achievement of the ecological Self of Sylvia, which is accompanied by environmental restoration.

Conclusion

A white Heron conveys the writer's wishes that the relationship between human beings and nature is harmonious. Sylvia has ego crises in the city and she becomes healthy in the country. This novel fully reflects Sylvia's development from a narrow ego to a broader social self, and finally to the greater self that extends to the entire biosphere which is the ecological self. The woods become a place to cure human spirit and body crises. The harmony between man and society, man and nature can only be realized by people who realize Self-realization and regard themselves as a part of the whole of nature, closely linking their interests with those of the ecosystem and other species. We must know that human are just a member of nature. The infinity and permanence of the universe and nature always possess a sense of mystery in front of human beings, and human beings have to keep in awe of this unknown and mystery. Through the analysis of deep ecology in *A White Heron*, this paper provides a new perspective for the study of Jewett's short stories. Finally, the author intends to arouse readers' respect toward nature and animals. It has positive practical significance to build a harmonious world when we think about the relationship between human and other non-human life forms.

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