



Journal of Arts & Humanities

Volume 12, Issue 06, 2023: 50-56

Article Received: 23-03-2023

Accepted: 27-08-2023

Available Online: 05-09-2023

ISSN: 2167-9045 (Print), 2167-9053 (Online)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18533/jah.v12i06.2355>

Comparative Analysis of “A White Heron” and *Border Town* from an Eco-Critical Perspective

Dongmin WANG¹

ABSTRACT

Being one of the most well-known short stories and prose created by Sarah Orne Jewett, “A White Heron” has gained a reputation for both its romantic and realism descriptions. Comparatively, SHEN Congwen's *Border Town*, also a well-known novel in China known for its romantic language and compelling writing, exhibits a similar genre: environmental literature. With a prominent eco-critic approach, both stories show a clear plot about preserving the environment and nature. However, the two stories contain some differences in addition to similarities, due to differences in the setting and ideals of each author. This study is based on the literal analysis of “A White Heron” and *Border Town*, also analysis about the two authors. While utilizing the strategy of comparative analysis, this study focuses on comparing the resemblance and distinction between how the two stories embedded its eco-critical ideal, and how the upbringing and living environment affected their minds, aiming to awake people's genuine fond of nature, call on humans to join environmental protection, raise awareness of reality while appreciating Jewett's and Shen Congwen's works, and eliminate the oppression on real-world environment.

Keywords: comparative literature; eco-criticism; environmental literature; A White Heron; Border town.

JEL classification code: Q0; Q01; Y3; Y5.

This is an open access article under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License.

1. Introduction

The study of comparative literature has a long history and has evolved over the decades with different branches and emphases, resulting in many methods of comparative research. Major research schools include empirical influence studies in France, parallel studies in the United States, and cross-cultural studies based on heterogeneity in China.² Although the three genres focus on different ways of comparing literary works, they all advocate approaching literary studies from different perspectives, combining different literary approaches, and promoting intercultural integration and mutual appreciation between cultures.

¹ Grade 12, Experimental High School Attached to Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China. Contact: +8613718151287.

Email: dongmaudreyw@gmail.com

² Fang, H. (2013). *Theory of Comparative Literature* (Vols. 1.2–1.3). Peking University Press.

Although analysis about “A White Heron” and *Border town* individually has made some progress and happens a lot, topics about the protagonist Sylvia and about feminism and violence,^{3,4} there are limited studies focusing on environmentalism and eco-criticism theory over the two works together, and to discover the reason behind the author’s writing style and different ways to approach the topic. Starting from concepts and methods, this study seeks to explore the relationship and exchange between the subject of the study and the subject of other studies.

The two books are comparable for the following reasons.

The first is about writers and their upbringing. Sarah Orne Jewett, the author of “A White Heron,” is a representative novelist of America, and is best known for her brilliant local-colored works. Mostly concerned with the relationship between humans and nature, she fills her stories with ecological concepts of nature and humanistic thoughts and metaphors about ecological criticism. Similarly, SHEN Congwen, the author of *Border Town*, is a famous Chinese pastoral novelist whose literary works mostly feature romanticism, writing about local characteristics and a sense of strength between the characters and endemic features of the place.

Moreover, although the two authors live in different countries, they actually grew up in similar environmental and social circumstances. From the late 19th century to the 20th century, both China and the United States were in a similar period of transition from the old to the new. Rapid social and industrial development took place, and human environmental awareness was extremely weak. Society’s focus has been solely on the development of productivity and the acquisition of production results. As both writers lived in the beautiful countryside and enjoyed the alluring natural scenery of their youth, they displayed the same opposition to heavy industrial pollution and people’s disregard for the harm it can do to the environment. This has led them to take a particular interest in ecological issues, which is reflected in their work.

In addition to the authors’ similar creative backgrounds, the two works share similarities in setting and protagonists, which together enhance their comparability.

First is the strong connection between the protagonist and nature in both works. In “A White Heron,” the main character, Sylvia, jointly bonds with the forest and nature. First of all, the name Sylvia, which in Latin means “forest” or “tree of the forest” (*Silva*). The prose also contains several direct comparisons between her and flowers, such as “She thought often with wistful compassion of a wretched geranium that belonged to a town neighbor.” In *Border Town*, Cuicui is repeatedly compared to the innocent small mountain animals. There are lines like “Cuicui was raised in the wind and sun, her skin became black, her eyes were clear as crystal, as she grew beside green hills and water.”

The background settings of the two works are also relatively similar. In “A White Heron,” the main story line is that a young girl who lives in the forest meets a hunter from the human society in the city; in *Border Town*, the story is about a young girl who lives in the bamboo forest on the other side of the river with her grandfather meeting the family of boatmen from the downtown area. Holistically speaking, they are both stories that occur when nature comes across human society.

2. Analysis of ecological ideas based on the text

2.1 Eco-critical theory

The definition of eco-criticism is an earth-centered approach to the study of literature that examines the relationship between literature and the natural environment from an ecological perspective, focusing on ecological phenomena related to literature, not only on literature or ecology itself, but also on the relationship between the two and their joint role and impact on humanity. This theory is an effort to improve the contemporary environmental situation and to examine the diverse ways in which the subject of nature is treated in literature.

Currently, there are a large number of works based on eco-critical theory. For example, in Ogaga Okuyade (2013)⁵, the author discusses the relationship between the human and natural world, reflecting the importance of the symbiotic bond and how these formed the story; in Harkal Vasant

3 Held, G. (1982). Heart to Heart with Nature: Ways of Looking at "A White Heron". *Colby Quarterly*, 18(1), 7.

4 Ammons, E. (1986). The Shape of Violence in Jewett's "A White Heron". *Colby Quarterly*, 22(1), 3.

5 Ogaga Okuyade. (2013). *Eco-critical literature : regreening African landscapes*. African Heritage Press.

Nagorao (2013)⁶, the author focuses on the language and plot of the selected work, analyses the eco-critical approach in the work based on the formation of environmental literature. In this study, I shall approach the analysis in a similar way, also generating my conclusions on the basis of setting, linguistic style, theme, and portrayal of the characters.

2.2 Eco-critical Ideas in The White Heron

In “A White Heron,” the environmental thoughts are mainly illustrated in the contrast between the roles played by the hunter and Sylvia toward the forest. Both the whistling described in the original prose, “Not a bird’s-whistle, which would have a sort of friendliness, but a boy’s whistle, determined, and somewhat aggressive.” The hunter presents an image of an “intruder,” from both the shotgun slang over his shoulder or his habitual hobby of specimen-making. He had always shown a selfish indifference to the forest and to the animals. All he cared about was money, symbols of status and power, and the universal value in human society that money brings everything. So he would ask Sylvia, in exchange for money, for the location of the white heron.

Sylvia’s image is closer to that of a “guardian.” Compared to the “intruder” character the hunter plays, she is more like a part of the forest. It also shows her inextricable connection with nature. The prose 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 had never been alive at all before she came to live at the farm.” Previous memories of the city are more like something she tries to forget, such as “the somewhat aggressive whistling of boys” and “the chasing of big boys.” Her real freedom comes from living in the forest and from the time she spends with her grandmother, the cows and the birds. This includes the description in the prose, the sense of freedom and pleasure she gains when she stands at the highest point at the top of the tree, as the lines goes: “Sylvia’s face was like a pale star, if one had seen it from the ground, when the last thorny bough was past, and she stood trembling and tired but wholly triumphant, high in the tree-top.” “Their (two hawks) gray feathers were as soft as moths; they seemed only a little way from the tree, and Sylvia felt as if she too could go flying away among the clouds.” This, too, lays the emotional foundation of her guardianship of the forest. Facing the animals and the forest, just like facing her old friends, there is no doubt that of the hunter’s proposal “Sylvia cannot speak; she cannot tell the heron’s secret and give its life away.”

Also, the controversy money and nature formed for humans is also used in illustrating eco-criticism ideas. For humans living in a modern society, money seems like a “better” option because it can bring people a “happier” life in the common social sense. As described by the hunter, if Sylvia tells him the information she knows about the white heron, which is quite an easy task for her-- because she knows the forest too well, she and her grandmother can live a good life from then on, just because of the ten dollars the hunter gives to them. “No amount of thought, that night, could decide how many wished-for treasures the ten dollars, so lightly spoken of, would buy.” Ten dollars meant a great deal more in the society of those days than it does now.

In contrast, nature seems to be a more “primitive” option that cannot bring much material satisfaction to humans, except for the sense of spiritual abundance. Even Sylvia, who had always lived in the forest, and her grandmother, had not gained much from their close contact with nature. Although the forest afforded Sylvia a spiritual refuge with healing effects, it was only able to provide them with spiritual values and a subsistence life, and did not directly correspond to a certain value like the ten dollars. Sylvia’s decision, therefore, is so worthy of respect.

In conclusion, Jewett expresses her critique of the role of the intruder and her disapproval of the human behavior of carelessness and destruction of the environment represented behind the role of the intruder the hunter plays in “A White Heron.” Through Sylvia’s integration with nature and her attitude towards the intruder, Jewett not only expresses the redemption she felt in the fields as a child, but also conveys her hope and appeal for human behavior to protect the environment.

6 Harkal Vasant Nagorao. (2013). An Eco critical Study of the Select Fiction of Margaret Atwood and Mahasweta Devi. Handle.net, 03. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/392668>

2.3 The eco-critical Ideas in *Border Town*

Similarly, the ecological ideas are reflected in *Border Town*. Cuicui, as a projection of the natural ecology on human beings, shows a very different psychological activity and emotional attitude on this bank of the river, a familiar environment closer to the original ecology, than in the more "modern" human society, which is unfamiliar to her, the mountain town Chadong. Many of the descriptions of her stay in the mountain town show her nervousness, restlessness, and fear. One example is the distance she keeps from the crowd when watching a boat race. By contrast, when she stays close to her familiar bamboo grove, she displays a free and relaxed attitude. "Nature had reared and educated her, so that she was pure and vivacious, and in every way like a little animal. She is so well behaved, just like a little mountain muntjac." Growing up under the nourishment of nature, she is as lively and pure as a small animal. Such a contrast makes the collapse of the White Tower, the drifting of the boat caused by the storm, and the emotional unhappiness later in the story seem all the more brutal for the double blow of the environment she is in and her state of mind.

3. Common points between "A White Heron" and *Border Town*

3.1 The close connection between the protagonist and nature

As mentioned above, the protagonists in both works are closely connected to their natural environments. The Latin meaning of Sylvia's name in "A White Heron" is "trees of the forest"; Sylvia is also depicted several times in the text as: "The good woman suspected that Sylvia loitered occasionally on her own account; there never was such a child for straying about out-of-doors since the world was made! 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." The association of her name with the forest, the reflection of her character in the geranium, and the character-building role the forest played in her life, are all good indications of her bond with nature.

The character of Cuicui in *Border Town* also reflects the ecological environment, as the lines mentioned before: "Cuicui was raised in the wind and sun, her skin became black, her eyes were clear as crystal, as she grew between green hills and water. Nature had reared and educated her, so that she was pure and vivacious, and in every way like a little animal. She is so well behaved, just like a little mountain muntjac." She has eyes as clear as the ocean, and character like an innocent animal.

3.2 Oppression from the society to which the protagonist is subjected

At the same time, both Sylvia and Cuicui are oppressed by stereotypes generated from patriarchal society. Through the author's descriptions, albeit in only a few strokes, it is clear that Sylvia suffered from bullying from her peers. "She was just thinking how long it seemed since she first came to the farm a year ago, and wondering if everything went on in the noisy town just the same as when she was there, the thought of the great red-faced boy who used to chase and frighten her made her hurry along the path to escape from the shadow of the trees. Suddenly, this 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." The mental trauma slowly subsided as she spent more time in the forest, but the memory still came back to her like a nightmare when she encountered similar scenarios. However, the detrimental effect even lasts after the hunter left, like the prose said: "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." At this point, when the memory comes back to her, though in a different form, still demonic, Sylvia empathizes with the environment and birds, as if she, too, has been hurt by the hunter's cruelty to nature. The crash of the sparrows, the broken song of the birds, and the blood-stained feathers bore a striking resemblance to the state of mind in which she had been when pursued and terrorized by the big boys. Her sympathies can be explained by the theory of eco-feminism, which states that the position women hold in society actually resembles the relationship between humans and nature, in which both women and nature have a passive role, receiving harm from the other robust party - in the case of women, men; in the case of nature, humans. Cuicui suffers

from a similar sense of oppression in feudal society, which is reflected in her choice of marriage, which is “silenced” by the outside world. The long-standing stereotypes and social images of women's roles in feudal society have created a character that is shy and afraid of expressing her true opinions, which is reflected in her observation of the delicate makeup and dress of girls of her own age and her secret envy when she is ferrying. When facing the marriage issue with Shunshun, she was even more so, hesitant to express her thoughts, as written in the book, “Cuicui did not make a sound, only wanted to cry, but there is no reason to cry. When grandfather said more, it led to the dead mother. The old man spoke for a while and fell silent. Cuicui quietly put her head down some, grandfather’s eyes were already filled with tears.” Her silence contributed to the final tragic ending.

4. Differences between “A White Heron” and Border Town

Although the two works share many similar ideas and main themes, they also have many differences.

First, the eco-critical and naturalistic views expressed in Jewett's and Shen's essays come from different sources, which also lead to different descriptions of the relationship between humans and nature and the divergent ways of modeling the natural environment in their literary works. Jewett's philosophy was heavily influenced by the 19th century Romantic movement's idea that “nature symbolizes freedom” and, although she herself was an atheist, her friendship stimulated unconventional religious beliefs from teachings of Emanuel Swedenborg, who believed that the Divine “was present in innumerable, joined forms.”^[3] At the same time, Jewett's childhood experiences led her to hold a particular notion of nature's salvation. As she had suffered from rheumatoid arthritis, she developed a love of nature by taking long walks in the open air as a means of treatment. Therefore, Jewett's works are abundant with vivid descriptions of natural landscapes and jungle creatures, making her description of the relationship between man and nature more inclined to show an eagerness that “man wants to be saved, so he needs to protect nature.”

Shen Congwen's attitude towards nature was influenced by the Taoist concept of “the unity of heaven and humanity,” and he believed that human beings are part of nature and therefore need to protect nature. Meanwhile, nature and the countryside have served as Shen's nurturers since he grew up in a small mountain village in western Hunan province. Consequently, Shen's feelings toward nature are more nostalgic than Jewett's love. The tone of feeling, therefore, is different.

Due to the different social backgrounds, the two female protagonists, Sylvia and Cuicui, show different personalities and images. Sylvia's character is relatively extrovert and she shows a more proactive and decisive attitude when facing choices. When she is determined, nothing can stop her, just as the paragraph that describes her feelings before going out to find the white heron shows: “What a spirit of adventure, what wild ambition! What fancied triumph and delight and glory for the later morning when she could make known the secret! It was almost too real and too great for the childish heart to bear. All night, the door of the little house stood open and the whippoorwills came and sang upon the very step. The young sportsman and his old hostess were sound asleep, but Sylvia's great design kept her broad awake and watching. She forgot to think of sleep. 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.” Unsure whether to tell the hunters about the white heron, Sylvia simply sneaks out of the house at night to test out her presumptions, which leads her to a more positive, sanguine ending.

Cuicui, on the other hand, limited by the time, is more introverted, and exhibits a more passive, irresolute behavior toward choices. Whenever her grandfather asks her about marriage, Cuicui kept trying to pass the question off by doing something else. This, too, led to an even more tragic end for her. The two sons of the Shun family are also unable to push the marriage forward due to the delay in Cuicui's showing her attitude. After the death of the eldest son, the Shun family gradually grow cold toward Cuicui and her grandfather. The father forces the second son to accept a match from a rich family, but the second son, remembering his brother's death and hoping that Cuicui will say yes to him, leaves home in a state of insubordination. Coupled with the death of her grandfather, Cuicui cries all night after getting things straightened out.

The relationship between the protagonist and nature is also different in the two works. In "A White Heron," the relationship between the environment and Sylvia is like mutual assistance. The environment cultivates Sylvia's character, prevents her from being damaged by peer boys, and Sylvia, in turn, protects nature from being harmed by humans. While explaining why she did not tell the hunter where the white heron is, there is a direct manifestation of this: "No, she must keep silent! What is it that suddenly forbids her and makes her dumb? Has she been nine years old 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."

In *Border Town*, the relationship between Cuicui and nature is more like "sharing a common destiny", which is also in line with Shen Congwen's Taoist views, as reflected in the collapse of the White Pagoda at the end of the story.

5. Conclusion

By using comparative literary analysis, this study compares and contrasts the different identities and states of mind of the protagonists in these two literary works, *The White Heron* and *The Border City*, which are cultivated in different cultural backgrounds, when they are facing the environments, and analyzes the common sense of eco-literary and eco-critical inclination expressed by the interactions between characters and psychological and linguistic depictions in the works.

Jewett and Shen, literary figures who both lived in societies devoid of ecological concerns and subject to industrial oppression, embodied not only their love of the environment as nature-born and self-reared individuals, but also their dissatisfaction and criticism of those who cared only for industrial production. Thus, although the protagonists in their works speak different languages and live in very different social situations, they share the same pure love of nature.

The different ways in which Jewett and Shen presented eco-critical ideas in their essays are due to the different environments in which the authors grew up, and also fundamentally to the different social and cultural environments in China and the United States at the time. Jewett's ecological ideas were largely overshadowed by the invasion of the Industrial Revolution, which upset the balance between man and nature in the Western world at the time. Having lived in nature since childhood and drawing healing power from nature, Jewett became dissatisfied with the status quo after seeing the once lush landscape replaced by industrialized machinery, and thus created literary works based on ecocritical ideas, which were also influenced to a large extent by Pandeism, i.e., "God exists in all things in the world." Shen Congwen's ecological thinking, on the other hand, mainly originated from the oppression of Chinese society by both capitalist and feudal influence at that time, as well as the impoverishment of spiritual civilization and the aggravation of ecological problems, which led him to hold a more pessimistic attitude toward society, human beings, and culture; and the idea that influenced him more was Taoism. To be specific, the concept of "the unity of heaven and man" was his major influence. As a result, the endings of the main characters in the two works are different.

In today's society, the ecological environment has also been relentlessly damaged by people: ozone holes, melting glaciers, soil erosion, deforestation... Many environmental problems caused by previous negligence are emerging from the water and coming into people's view. While their impact on most human lives is currently imperceptible, they are already widespread and their practical effects are catastrophic. According to eco-critics, due to the co-existence of man and nature in the world, only protecting the environment and achieving sustainable development can contribute to a viable path towards perpetuity.

References

- Ammons, E. (1986). The Shape of Violence in Jewett's "A White Heron". *Colby Quarterly*, 22(1), 3.
- Amstutz, A. (2000). "Jewett, Sarah Orne," *American National Biography Online*.
- Fang, H. (2013). *Theory of Comparative Literature (Vols. 1.2–1.3)*. Peking University Press.

- Harkal Vasant Nagorao. (2013). An Eco critical Study of the Select Fiction of Margaret Atwood and Mahasweta Devi. Handle.net, 03. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/392668>
- Held, G. (1982). Heart to Heart with Nature: Ways of Looking at "A White Heron". *Colby Quarterly*, 18(1), 7.
- Long, H. (2020). 生态批评视角下沈从文与哈代比较研究(A comparative study of Shen Congwen and Hardy from the perspective of ecocriticism) (p. 77) [M.A. Thesis]
- Luo, T., & Xie, P. (2004). 生态女性主义与文学批评 (Eco-feminism and Literary Criticism). *Seeker*, 4, 176–180. Chinese Citation Database. <https://doi.org/10.16059/j.cnki.cn43-1008/c.2004.04.065>
- Matzko, R.(1979). "The Religious Attitudes of Sarah Orne Jewett, M. A. thesis.
- Ogaga Okuyade. (2013). *Eco-critical literature: regreening African landscapes*. African Heritage Press.