



## Whiffing the Sense of Place: Breaking the Anthropocene Narrative through Myth in Mary Oliver's Select Works

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, we have strived to decode the sense of place in Mary Oliver's select works through the optics of primitive mythology. Primitive mythology unveils the primordial human culture and human relationship with the non-human world. It silently advocates posthumanism, immersive installation, intercorporeality, and resists the dyadic approaches of human culture as well as the model of two worlds – the human and the non-human. In the context of Oliver, we find that she has given primitive myths an apt place in her poetry and non-fictional works and has talked of how these myths connect human culture to that of nature by striking out ego-centric attitudes of Renaissance Humanism. The poet has rejected such beliefs that promulgate the schools of anthropocentrism, ego-centrism, pseudo-spiritualism/centralism and the notion of Self/Other binary. She has rather favored the concepts of posthumanism and eco-centrism, which deny any privileges given to human beings. We have used the mythological concepts of Joseph Campbell, Steven B. Harris and David Leeming in this paper.

### KEYWORDS

Mythology, sense of place, anthropocentrism, self/other

### Introduction

We have applied concepts of primitive mythology<sup>1</sup> in this paper to discuss Mary Oliver's fictional and non-fictional works, concentrating on how sense of place and nature can be felt and treated respectively by going beyond the ego-centric attitude of human beings. Mythology is a body of theories that deny the anthropocentric mindset of human beings, pseudo-spiritualism and pseudo-centralism, and propose intercorporeality through immersive installation, i.e. the dissolution of human world within nature as one primitive and porous body. This implies a hypothetical stand against any such idea that considers the human psyche as the center of all of existence. One thing that we cannot fail to notice here is that we, the human beings, cannot be separated from the influence of myth, and neither can Oliver. The influence of myth on her can be seen in her literary works which deny any hierarchical attitude of the human world.

Born in Ohio, Mary Oliver has secured many literary awards including the Pulitzer Prize in 1984 for her outstanding anthology, *American Primitive*, and the National Book Award in 1992 for *New and Selected Poems Volume 1*. Having published over thirty books, Oliver has earned an invaluable place among literary figures.

Oliver's poetry and essays expose masked facts of her private life as well as human culture. She does not draw a line between human and non-human worlds; rather she makes efforts to fill the gap between the two without any presumptive bias or prejudice. In the poem "The Chance to Love Everything" which appears in her anthology *The Truro Bear and Other Adventures*, she writes, "All summer I made friends / with the creatures nearby" (1). Oliver words uncover her psychosomatic sense of love towards the natural world. Her admiration for every object of non-human life reveals her wild connectedness with it. Maxine Kumin in the book *Women's Review of Books* writes, "She was an indefatigable guide to the natural world, particularly to its lesser-known aspects" (16).

For Oliver, the vegetal and the animal bodies are not separate entities. In her opinion, every particle of the cosmos is interconnected to each other through their porous body. In her poem "White Flowers" (anthologized in her book *New and Selected Poems, Vol. 1*), she writes,

Never in my life  
had I felt myself so near  
that porous line  
where my own body was done with  
and the roots and the stems and the flowers

<sup>1</sup> By primitive mythology, we mean the pre-Christian and non-Western mythologies which operate not on the Judeo-Christian belief of "man" having been created by God as superior to all other species. Primitive mythologies, on the other hand, deem the human as just another part of the planet (neither superior nor inferior to non-human species), and promulgate a harmonious coexistence among humans and nature. We use the terms "myth" and "mythology" here and henceforth in the article to mean "primitive mythology".

began. (59)

Everything on the Earth or beyond has its own unique and significant value in regard to each other because their existence rests on their common bonding.

In another poem, “Have You Ever Tried to Enter the Long Black Branches?” (which appears in *Devotions*), Mary Oliver has made an outstanding effort to feel the sense of place secluding her physical existence entirely from human culture. She writes,

Have You Tried to Enter the Long Black  
Branches of other lives –  
tried to imagine what the crisp fringes (245)

For her, human beings are not separate entities; instead, they are part of their outer phenomena. We have observed in the above poems good evidence of the profound influence of mythology upon the poet, wherein we find that the human and the non-human worlds are connected.

The current body of secondary literature on Mary Oliver’s works focusses primarily on the poet’s works in connection with ecological ethics. We find this in the paper titled “‘An Attitude of Noticing’: Mary Oliver’s Ecological Ethics” by Kristin Hotelling Zona, and the convention of writing Romantic poetry in general in the paper “Mary Oliver and the Tradition of Romantic Nature Poetry” by Janet McNew. The paper “Nature, Spirit, and Imagination in the Poetry of Mary Oliver” by Douglas Burton-Christie also, to a great extent, discusses the trend of writing poetry following the Romantic tradition. “The Language of Nature in the Poetry of Mary Oliver” by Diane S. Bonds predominantly deals with the language of nature. The paper titled “Generative Tension between ‘God’ and ‘Earth’ in Mary Oliver’s ‘Thirst’” by Paul T. Corrigan deals with the religious undertone in Oliver’s poetry. The paper “To Live in This World: An Eco-feminist Study of the Poetry of Mary Oliver” by Irina Ishrat, and the research thesis *Bride of Amazement: A Buddhist Perspective on Mary Oliver’s Poetry* by G. Ulliyatt explore Oliver’s poetry from the perspectives of eco-feminism and Buddhism respectively. In this article, we, instead, have tried to look into Mary Oliver’s poetic and non-fictional works placing them under the lens of the theoretical model of mythology and related concepts like intercorporeality and immersive installation.

Mary Oliver, in this context, has attempted to negate the concepts of ego-centrism, pseudo-spiritualism/centralism and anthropocentrism in her works by giving a mythological touch to them. Through the mythical narratives, the poet has made an attempt to feel the sense of place and to bridge the rift between the human and non-human worlds.

### **Myth and the Anti-Anthropocene**

John P. Rafferty in his paper titled “Anthropocene Epoch” writes: “Anthropocene is

derived from Greek and means the ‘recent age of man’” (1). It is clear from the term that humans have put themselves into the center of the entire existence and have started treating themselves as superior to others. This attitude is seen first, and most notably, in Renaissance Humanism. This superiority of the “man” over the rest of creation fueled the ideology of egoism into humans, which later proved to be of disturbing consequence to ecological balance.

Yadvinder Malhi, in his paper titled “The Concept of the Anthropocene,” defines the anthropocene in the following words:

“The core concept that the term is trying to capture is that human activity is having a dominating presence on multiple aspects of the natural world and the functioning of the Earth system, and that this has consequences for how we view and interact with the natural world – and perceive our place in it. (78)

In Malhi’s words, human activity is governing non-human activity. This means that humans have placed themselves at the center of the Earth, and they are looking into natural resources as meant for their exclusive use. This attitude of humans towards the non-human world has brought about ecological disturbance and environmental degradation.

Eckart Ehlers and Thomas Kraft, in their edited book *Earth System Science in the Anthropocene*, define anthropocene in this way: “... the term Anthropocene has been suggested to mark an era in which the human impact on the Earth system has become a recognizable force” (3). They are also of the view that the anthropocene gives privilege to the human beings over the non-human entities. In the definition of anthropocene given above, it becomes explicit that they all talk of human-centered earth. Mythology does not favor such ideology of human beings, and goes against what the anthropocene proposes.

In this paper, we have considered mythology and the anthropocene as opposites to each other. Whereas mythology promulgates to connect the human body to the other-than human body, the anthropocene comes forward to refute such notions. The analyses of myth by the theorists we have studied in this article advocate the concept of breaking up the narrative of anthropocene by demolishing the Self/Other binary. In this article, we strive to demolish the anthropocene through the use of myth in the works of Mary Oliver.

By now, we have seen that myth discards the notion of anthropocentrism, ego-centrism and ego-logical attitude of human beings. It denies any dyadic views of Self/Other in the context of human-nature relationship. It is one of the best and primary data for carrying out the history of the entire existence even if it has been with the human beings in the form of oral narratives. Whatever is known about our culture, our way of living and so on, it is not wrong to assume that it is mostly due to the mythological accounts we have in the form of fables, folklores and other forms of oral narration. Myth uncovers many of the untouched facts related to human culture

which are beyond the reach of historically written documents. Myth does not propose any hierarchical model in human society, which probably later became one of its major parts.

‘Myth’ is not just a simple word as we consider it today; rather it is a comprehensive term with inclusive meanings. Myth is someone else's religion. Religion signifies every activity of a community within, not secluding itself from the influence of its outer phenomenon. And to make it clear, “community” signifies not just the different human communities, but also the community of the natural world.

Myth reveals the history of the entire existence, and unveils how the whole body of the human and the non-human community is interconnected. During primordial times, there was no concept of two worlds. There was no demarcation in antiquity between them. Stevens in his book titled *Ariadne's Clue: The Symbols of Human Kind* gives an example of a story taken from Hindu mythology which supports the above statement. He writes,

The thread (sutra) is described as linking this world to the other world and all beings. The thread is both atman (self) and prana (breath) and is linked to the central point in the cosmos, the sun. It is written that the thread must in all things be followed back to its source. . . . The thread, therefore, may be understood as an archetypal symbol of the life principle stretching through time as a means of conscious orientation and a guide to understanding. (4)

The excerpt of the myth given above is one of the best examples that makes it clear that the living and non-living things on the earth or beyond are not separated. They are linked to each other in every aspect. And thus, it can be affirmed that the actions the human beings carry out affect their surroundings. They affect each other abstractly as well as physically, and in two ways. Firstly, the effect of our actions on the sense of place where we live, and on the things including the human beings themselves due to the extreme ecological disturbance and vice versa, and secondly, the effect on our inner sense of self because of the reactions supplied by the outer world, especially the world other-than-human in response to our movements. It happens not only because of our inherent relationship with the non-human world, but also because of our intense attachment with it through our spiritual inner sense of self, which demolishes the human's anthropocentric attitude towards the natural world. Myth provides this information related to the bonding between the human and the non-human kingdoms. Myth does not allow any notion of separation between the things or ‘Self’ or ‘I’ and the ‘Other.’

We know that the concept of ‘Self’ or ‘I’ entered human civilization for the first time during the period of Renaissance Humanism. During this time, human beings began to be considered superior to the others, and putting themselves at the center of the organic and inorganic world. This ‘egoism’ of the humans led to nature being considered as the ‘Other,’

which further proved to be a major cause of environmental crisis.

In this article, as we have already made it clear in the abstract, we would be using the concepts on mythology as studied by Stevens B. Harris, Joseph Campbell and David Leeming. Harris, in his paper titled “Immortality Quests in Story and Life: Cryonics, Resuscitation, Science Fiction, and Mythology,” has defined myth as follows:

Myth is not only religion, of course, but something more inclusive. Myth might broadly encompass such things as rituals and beliefs, but most especially myth is the collection of primitive stories that we tell ourselves in order to have a narrative psychological framework with which to deal with the world. (1)

Myth is, in fact, a good source of information about the primitive culture wherein we see how the human and the non-human worlds were tied to each other. Mythological stories reveal to us that human civilization is not a distinct body in itself; instead, it is a part of the whole existence. Harris talks of “narrative psychological framework” to deal with the world that clearly unveils the essence of myth, which rejects any notion of dualism between the beings. They all have a common bonding and a common sense.

Joseph Campbell, in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, writes about myth:

It would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation. Religions, philosophies, arts, the social forms of primitive and historic man, prime discoveries in science and technology, the very dreams that blister sleep, boil up from the basic, magic ring of myth. (xl)

Campbell makes it clear in his definition of myth that the human and the natural worlds are interlinked. There are no dualistic approaches between them. It can be sensed here how the human and the non-human kingdoms are merged with each other without any distinct line between them. Campbell’s statement that “myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation” makes it explicit. According to Campbell, whatever is in the human domain is because of myth: development in science and technology, the existence of different religions, philosophies, arts, and the social forms of primitive and historic man.

David Leeming, in his book titled *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology*, defines myth in the following words:

Myths are for the most part religious narratives that transcend the possibilities of common experience and that express any given culture’s literal or metaphorical understanding of various aspects of reality. . . . mythic narratives are the sacred stories that are central to cultural identity because, for the cultures to



which they belong, these religious myths convey some significant truth about the relationship between human beings and the source of being. (xi)

Leeming, in this definition, has observed of the myths that they are the source of cultural identities of different cultures, and these myths according to him convey those truths, which are beyond the reach of historically documented documents, as even these documents are because of these myths. These myths tell us that the human and the non-human worlds are not a separate existence; instead, they are one body of the entire existence.

Observing the definitions or the opinions on myth proposed by the above scholars, we find it common in all of them that myth reveals our primitive relations with the non-human world, that myth unveils our past history, that myth expresses any given culture's literal or metaphorical understanding of various aspects of reality, and that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation.

Mary Oliver throughout her works has tried to bring the human consciousness close to the non-human life by adopting mythology in her poetry and non-fictional works. She has not demarcated any boundary between these two kingdoms. Rather, she has proposed that they should be treated as one by undermining any dyadic ideologies in the human culture against the world other-than human.

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### Critiquing Mary Oliver's Poetry through Myth

In contrast to the pseudo-spiritual involvement of the human beings with the non-human life, Oliver is very much inclined spiritually to it. She is, of course, a divine soul in her physical body. In the poem "Six Recognitions of the Lord," which is one of the best poems of her book *Devotions*, she writes, "Lord God, mercy is in your hands, pour / me a little" (125-128). She has never distinguished herself as superior to "Other". Instead, she has found herself invisible "in the family of things" (110). She writes this in the poem "Wild Geese," which has appeared in *New and Selected Poems, Vol. 1*. She admits that the human beings by birth are an integral part of their surroundings. There is an intrinsic relationship of the human beings with the place where they reside. In the same poem, she writes,

You only have to let the soft animal  
of your body  
love what it loves (110).

Oliver had spent most part of her life with the natural world. The world other-than-human was for her a place for getting mental peace and developing a spiritual sense of self for the place wherever in the natural world she moves to. Her spiritual adherence to the sense of place is explicit in the poem "Yes! No!" that has appeared in *Devotions*. She writes, "To pay attention,

this is our endless and proper work” (264).

Mary Oliver mocks the current structure of the present world and the steps taken by it against the other-than-human life. She denies the human-centered culture as well as the self/other binary. She endorses the ideology of immersive installation and intercorporeality (immersive installation represents an image of the non-human kingdom wherein the human finds entirely dissolved with it without any demarcation between them, and intercorporeality has the concept of being one in the entire organic and non-organic whole through the permeability of the human bodies).

Maxine Kumin, in the book *Women’s Review of Books*, says that Oliver is an “indefatigable guide to the natural world” (16). Oliver’s dissolution with the natural world tirelessly goes beyond the ego-centric mindset of the human beings. She does not favor pseudo-spiritualism that she has found in human society. Oliver is not like those persons who treat nature and its entities as resources for their use. Rather, she looks into them as the primary source of the entire existence.

In the poem “Black Oaks,” which is one of the best poems of her anthology *Devotions*, Oliver writes, “I don’t want to sell my life for money” (253). This reveals the poet’s spiritual attitude and rejection of worldly desires. She is spiritually connected with the other-than human world, as the mythological stories of different cultures expose how and in what way the primitive human system breathed with nature in harmony in antiquity. For Oliver, nature resides in her heart. This character of the poet we can find in the poem titled “The Mangroves” (in her anthology *Blue Horse*), wherein she writes, “The black oaks and pines / of my northern home are in my heart” (35).

Mary Oliver loves equally all the things that exist in the physical world. To her, nothing is superior or inferior. In “Hum” (from her anthology *Devotions*), she writes, “I think there isn’t anything in this world I don’t admire. / If there is, I don’t know what it is” (145).

Going beyond the modern practice of the human community of overlooking nature, Oliver has excellently touched and felt the emotions of the natural world with her spiritually conscious mind and heart. She has been to a great extent able to feel the sense of place with her primitive mind. For her, the houses decorated and filled with modern equipment do not supply spiritual satisfaction and perpetual harmony to the mind and the body. In its place, she admits that they give her psychological pain. In the poem “The World I Live in” that has appeared in *Devotions*, Oliver unveils her inner disappointments against the modern pace of living. She writes,

I have refused to live  
locked in the orderly house of



reasons and profits. (5)

Mary Oliver transcends the ideology of Self/Other, and brings humans' souls nearer to the souls of vegetal and animal body. Her eco-spiritual sense of self exposes this ideology, and allows the human to immerse entirely with the non-human world transcending the Self/Other binary. Oliver talks of immersive installation with the other-than-human inhabitants. In the poem "When Death Comes" (collected in *Devotions*), she writes,

When it's over, I want to say: all my life

I was a bride married to amazement.

I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms. (285-86)

Oliver has observed life in everything. She treats the non-human inhabitants not as others but as one of the important parts of her life. Her body, she acknowledges, is not a separate object. It is a part of a bigger whole. She puts it in the same poem, "When Death Comes." She writes, "And therefore I look upon everything / as a brotherhood and sisterhood" (285-86).

In the poem "The Fish" (part of her collection of poems *American Primitive*), Oliver has dissolved herself completely in the sea, and her becoming fish in this poem reveals the poet's departure from the human world to the world of nature. She has removed the notion of the Self and the Other. She writes,

Now the sea

is in me: I am the fish, the fish

glitters in me

tangled together. (56)

The non-humans are not speechless or dead, as we perceive them. They are, in fact, living organisms. Mary Oliver, through her fictional and non-fictional works, has proved it. In her opinion, non-humans feel the pathos and pleasures in the specific codes of their language, even if we can decipher it or not. But as a poet, she has gained this ability to decode the codes of their language. She can communicate with them in her own poetic way. In "Aunt Leaf" which appears in *Devotion*, she says that the non-humans "whisper in a language only the two of us knew" (421).

In Mary Oliver's view, human beings have demolished their primordial and spiritual relationship with the other-than-human world, and created a rift between the two worlds because of the development in science and technology. This destruction of the relation of the two worlds led to anthropocentrism. Oliver writes in the poem "Lines Written in the Days of Growing Darkness,"

Every year we have been

witness to it: how the

world descends  
 into a rich mash, in order that  
 it may resume. (*Devotions* 49)

Oliver, in her works, has discarded the ideology of “Self” or “I” in order to propagate the posthumanistic and eco-centric thoughts to the human culture that incite the readers to consider nature not as Other, but as an integral part of their social structure. It rejects the humanist approach and appraises posthumanism that promulgates for the elimination of any such notion from the social discourse which comes in support of anthropocentric and ego-centric mindset of humans. Ankit Raj and Nagendra Kumar, in their paper titled “Dissecting the Doubtful Darwin: Kurt Vonnegut’s Humanist Posthumanism in *Galapagos*,” observe this about posthumanism: “Among the many ideologies seeking to refute and replace humanist thought for good, posthumanism has emerged as the most comprehensive and inclusive” (79). They are clear and certain to propose that posthumanism is the most “comprehensive and inclusive” ideology that can see the two worlds coming at a place for their immersion. And the poet, Mary Oliver, can be seen following the same posthumanistic doctrines. She is trying to be part of the non-human life in the poem “It was Early,” included in her anthology *Devotions*. She writes, “Little mink let me watch you. / Little mice, run and run” (71-72).

Oliver’s poetry is against the worldly comforts brought about by the new technologies that have awarded human beings more mental predicaments than happiness in life. She denies these momentary pleasures. In the poem “With Thanks to the Field Sparrow, Whose Voice is So Delicate and Humble” (from *Devotions*), she writes “I do not live happily or comfortably / with the cleverness of our times” (73). She makes an argument over the development in science and technology and reveals her disappointments along with the disastrous outcomes of the former. In the same poem she writes, “The talk is all about computers, / the news is all about bombs and blood” (73).

Oliver dislikes skyscrapers and highways, which the humans think are symbols of power and progress. According to her, skyscrapers and highways are nothing but the deception of our minds that give way to the dualistic approach of Self/Other along with ecological disturbance. The poet affirms that these objects have fueled the human-centered ideology and destroyed the tranquility of human minds. One of her poems, titled “The World I Live in” (anthologized in *Devotions*), discloses Oliver’s distaste over all these things. She writes, “The World I live in and believe in / is wider than that” (5).

“The Bleeding Heart” (anthologized in *New and Selected Poems, Volume 2*) divulges Oliver’s psychology that shows her divine mindset towards the other-than-human world where she looks into the pains of the natural world through her own. She compares herself in the poem

to a bleeding-heart plant, which reveals many things about her inner sense of self as well as the outer world. This metaphor also uncovers her sad childhood days.

“A bleeding-heart plant” exposes the bitter grief that she had experienced as a child. This “plant” is not anyone else but the poet herself. Autobiographical in nature, the poem tells how Oliver had devoted all her life into the lap of nature in search of redemption and enlightenment. And beyond doubt, she finds these later in her life when she makes the whole world of nature her friend. In “In Black Water Woods” (*Devotions*), she hails the natural world “[w]hose other side / is salvation” (389-90).

Oliver never missed experiencing the spring. She was much dedicated to it, as is quoted in the poem “The Bleeding Heart”: “For sixty years if not more, and has never / Missed a spring” (61). Moreover, She, in this poem, speaks also about the cycle of life and death when she wishes to be like her grandmother in her long life. Long life here is a metaphor for rebirth. In fact, Mary Oliver wants in her every birth to be like her grandmother: “And more than / once, in my long life, I have wished to be her” (61). The influence of myth and nature over Oliver’s inner sense of self is quite explicit in this poem. With the help of nature’s divine beauty, she is able to come over the twinges of her life given not only by her family, but also by the outer materialistic world.

In “Of What Surrounds Me” (*New and Selected Poems, Volume 2*), Oliver uncovers the humans helplessness to utter anything without the aid of nature. This is clear in the following lines:

Whatever it is I am saying, I always  
need a leaf or a flower, if not an  
entire field. (33)

This shows her deep connectedness with the non-human world, which strengthens her belief of denying the Self/Other binary.

‘Water’, ‘a creek,’ ‘well,’ ‘river’ or ‘an ocean’ help bring ideas of her inner spirituality that transcends the ideology of Self/Other. All these elements of nature indicate Oliver to be a wild lover of the world other-than-human. She writes, “[f]or the heart to be there” and “[f]or the idea to come” (33).

The way Mary Oliver has opted for transcending the concept of Self/Other is remarkably astonishing. This is overt from her fictional and non-fictional works. The natural world has influenced the poet so much that she is unable to set herself aside from it even for a short moment. If by chance it happens to her, it begins to enter into her dream. It shows how widely she had merged with it. In “The Faces of Deer,” she writes,

When for too long I don’t go deep enough

into the woods to see them, they begin to  
enter my dreams. (44)

“Them” in the lines signifies all the living and non-living organisms of nature. Oliver has portrayed a live picture of the natural world where nothing is wrong, and where there is always movement. She has entirely devoted her life to the service of observing and touching nature’s mysterious divine beauty. She writes in the same poem: “Each hoof of each / animal makes the sign of a heart” (44).

For Mary Oliver, the natural world is like a heaven where everything is arranged in the proper way. For her, nature is a priceless medicine for all kinds of sorrows and distress. We can come over them, as the poet indicates in this prose poem, if we open our spiritual and divine eyes for accumulating the fragrance of the natural world she has found, and so, she has released all her sorrows, and everything which would disturb her. She has found salvation in nature. In “Of What Surrounds Me” (in *New and Selected Poems, Volume 2*), she writes: “Unless you / believe that heaven is very near,” and “to swim away through the door of the world” (33). Oliver’s closeness with the non-human world has molded her inner sense of self deeply, and felt pleasures in nature. She has been able to get over all her personal calamities when closer to the natural world.

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#### **Oliver’s Non-fiction in Relation to the Posthuman**

Mary Oliver has represented vegetative and animal bodies in her non-fictional works in an appropriate manner breaking up the convention of looking at them as commodities for human use. Without any prejudices, the poet has opened the door of her heart for all non-human entities. In this way she has presented a good example of the primitive human culture. “Bird” is one of her best essays (in *Upstream: Selected Essays*) which is based on her subterranean inclination towards the non-human world. The essay tells the story of a young injured black-backed gull, and how with Mr. M., Mary Oliver brought the injured bird back to health. Mary Oliver had found the innocent bird lying wounded on the sea beach. Surprisingly, the gull does not make protest when she comes close to lift her: “[...] it made no protest when I picked it up, the eyes were half shut, the body so starved it seemed to hold nothing but air” (127).

The actions being performed by these two people indicate their eco-centric mindset going beyond the psyche of human culture. In this essay, Oliver has crossed the limit of the humans’ almost statutory convention of becoming cruel to the animal world. She has demolished the wall and filled the rift between the human and non-human kingdoms with her deep compassion. She brings the gull home and looks after it extensively. She provides it a bathtub. She treats it in accordance with the level of her medical knowledge. Later she finds some improvements in the gull. She writes: “But the next morning, its eyes were open and it sat, though clumsily, erect. It

lifted its head and drank from a cup of water, little sips” (127). In this way, we can affirm that her benevolent attitude towards the helpless natural world brings the poet very close to the characters of the mythical tales.

The treatment of nature as ‘Other’ by the human beings due to their egoistic sense of self that separated them from the rest of the world and created a binary of Self/Other surely hurts her too much. In her view, not only has it separated humans from the vegetative and animal bodies, but also brought about an anthropocentric attitude into the humans’ unconscious mind.

“Upstream” is another of her essays, included in *Upstream: Selected Essays*, and it presents a true picture of nature and the live bustle of living organisms. In Oliver’s opinion, nature has power to cure a person’s abstract distress as well as physical calamities. She acknowledges that the remedy for this type of difficulty lies in nature, not in the medical sciences. She believes that nature has the capacity to make one happy and healthy. She has put an example of a “fierce-furred bear” in this essay. She adds that when the bear becomes sick, he “travels the mountainsides and the fields, searching for certain grasses, flowers, leaves and herbs that hold within themselves the power of healing. He eats, he grows stronger” (4).

Mary Oliver resists dogmas that prevent human beings from being a part of the outer world. She rejects the materialistic comforts which she thinks are nothing but the illusion of the human minds. In her view, these comforts cannot equate with those provided by the other-than-human world. She takes a deep dive into the world of nature and finds herself satisfied and full of joy. She likes playing with the natural world, so she has detached herself entirely from the modern human culture. In “Upstream,” she gives a short but beautiful account of her conversation with the bear. She writes: “Could you, oh clever one, do this? Do you know anything about where you live, what it offers?” (6).

In “Waste Land: An Elegy,” (in *Long Life*), Oliver describes a waste land taking shape into the sewage of her town. She wants to talk about flowers, rejecting the city life, which is supposed to be full of joys and comforts. She does not favor this development that harms the non-human system. She writes:

On the few acres of land, and more, will be established the heartland of our town’s sewage, where the buried pipes will converge with the waste of our lives. What a sad hilarity! I want to talk about flowers, but the necessity has become, for our visitor-rich town, how to deal with the daily sewage of, it may be, sixty thousand souls. (36)

Mary Oliver further adds that she is distressed by this transformation because she is worried about the lives that live there. She apologizes to the lives whom the system has driven from their abodes. She writes: “I apologize to the hummingbird. I hope the snakes have found a new

home” (40).

“Staying Alive,” which appears in *Upstream: Selected Poems*, narrates her life’s story in brief. She likes writing and the natural world. For her, these are the ways of redemption. For her, these are the ways to remove all her worldly and internal pains. Oliver makes it clear that she has got over her troubles through her engrossment in the natural world, and with her writings based on her vivid experiences with it. She writes in this essay: “I quickly found for myself two such blessings – the natural world, and the world of writing: literature. These were the gates through which I vanished from a difficult place” (14). The difficult place for her is the non-human world, which she undoubtedly wants to escape. She wants to merge herself with the other-than-human inhabitants. And to a great extent she had been successful. The poet’s profound proclivity towards the natural world is very clear from the consequent lines when she, by hiding herself from her parents, used to go to the woods by day or darkness: “I thought about perfectibility, and deism, and adjectives, and clouds, and the foxes. I locked my door, from the inside, and leaped from the roof and went to the woods, by day or darkness” (15).

Mary Oliver had been a very kind and generous person since her childhood. She felt the torture and blow of an unspeakable life. She tells a story in this essay about her childhood days when she was only twelve or thirteen years old, and went to her cousins’ house where she sees a fox chained. Oliver feels the fox’s helplessness and pains, and becomes much disappointed. She narrates: A summer day – I was twelve or thirteen- at my cousins’ house, in the country. They had a fox, collared and on a chain, in a little yard beside the house. All afternoon all afternoon all afternoon [...] it kept running back and forth, trembling and chattering (17).

She was an unfortunate child and had met with nothing but calamities in life. Her father did not like her much. It is explicit when she narrates an incident when she was left alone intentionally by him on an ice-skating trip:

Once my father took me ice-skating, then forgot me, and went home. He was of course reminded that I had been with him, and sent back, but this was hours later. I had been found wandering over the ice and taken to the home of a kind, young woman, who knew my family slightly; she had phoned them to say where I was. When my father came through the door. [...] He had simply, he said, forgotten that I existed. (17-18)

Mary Oliver in this essay has drawn a picture of the mourning of her past days. She has not only done this, but has also tried to show us how she had been able to come to terms with her distress with the help of her extreme connectedness and experiences with divine nature, and writing them in her prose and poetry. Oliver’s interview with Krista Tippett is a fine example of how she acknowledges the power of healing in nature: “[A]nd I got saved by the beauty of the



world” (“Mary Oliver: Listening to the World”).

Kumin in *Women’s Review of Books* has noted that Oliver “stands quite comfortably on the margins of things, on the line between earth and sky” (19). This is a good statement observed by Kumin on Oliver’s personality that denies any boundary between the two worlds – the human and the non-human.

Mary Oliver denies human-centered concept of today’s world. She admits it in one of her interviews with Maria Shriver.

Mary Oliver: Probably walking in the woods, because I do feel like vanish and become part of the natural world, which for whatever reason has always self safe to me. (“Shriver Interviews the Poet Mary Oliver”)

### Conclusion

Through the optics of the mythological paradigm applied to this paper, we observe that Mary Oliver has rejected the concept of the existence of two separate worlds – the human and the non-human. She has not demarcated any boundary between them. She has, instead, talked of the significance of the world other-than human that we often find in most of the primitive mythological narratives. The poet has transcended the belief of any dyadic thoughts prevailing in the human society by bringing out thoughts of posthumanism and eco-centrism. She has moved backward to look into the primordial structure of human culture wherein the entire existence was one in the organic and inorganic whole without any dividing line between. She has searched for redemption and enlightenment in nature by overcoming all her miseries and calamities awarded by the present world. During the discussion, we have found that she has not considered nature as Other. Instead, she unquestionably has demanded a built-in value in nature and a return to a monistic, primal recognition of humans and the ecosphere. She has called for the shift from a human-centered to a nature-centered system.

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