



Removing the Slash: Man-in-Nature as a Form of Magic Realism in Mary Oliver's Poetry

Saeed A. Gazar

Lecturer of English Literature, Department of Foreign Languages,
Faculty of Education, Tanta University, Egypt

saeedgazar@gmail.com

Received: 5-9-2024 Revised: 23-9-2024 Accepted: 16-1-2025
Published: 28-1-2025

DOI: 10.21608/jssa.2025.318758.1668

Volume 26 Issue 1 (2025) Pp. 162-183

Abstract

One of the basic issues in ecocritical studies is the relationship between man and nature. It may be seen as a bidirectional discourse: man-in-nature and nature-in-man. The former that considers man just an element of the natural world makes way for several novel apprehensions of this world and the potentials it may provide for man's ontological beliefs about this long-manipulated part of human existence. One such apprehension is the magic realism view of nature as envisaged by German art historian and critic Franz Roh (1890-1965). Roh's original form of magic realism has paved the way for re-valuating the perspectives to cultural, artistic and literary criticism, for its essence is looking at things anew. The characteristics provided by Roh for the magic realism text well apply to the poetic production of American poet Mary Oliver (1935-2019) who could open her readers' eyes to the magic elements in the natural world. For five decades, Oliver, the winner of several renowned prizes such as the Pulitzer Prize (1984) and the National Book Award (1992), could highlight the benefits of being in-nature through the achievement of a form of oneness with it. This study is an attempt to explore Oliver's adoption of Roh's concept of magic realism which may change man's attitude to the natural world from one of subjugation to a form of respect and preservation. To reach her goal, she could manipulate three strategies: reversal of categories, indistinction, and defocalization.

Keywords *Man-in-nature, Magic realism, Mary Oliver, Franz Roh, defocalization*

Introduction

The catastrophic effect of human intervention in the natural world constitutes the base upon which most ecocritical studies are built (Garrard 2004, Borlik 2011, Morton 2013, Clark 2015). Tracing the interest in environmentalism, Greg Garrard (2004) agrees with Rachel Carson, whose revolutionary *Silent Spring* (2002) raised serious questions about man's impact on nature, that everything was in harmony (human and nature) when all at a sudden a "spell" afflicted the world ensuing a series of catastrophes. Although Carson hints at a "supernatural" cause of that spell, by the end of her "Fable for Tomorrow," she changes her mind when she confesses that "(N)o witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world. The people had done it themselves" (3).

The view of man's relation to Nature is twofold: nature-in-man, and man-in-nature. The former entails the fathoming of the relationship as one of power; of man's superiority over the natural world, while the latter underscores the egalitarian liaison between the two, presenting man as just an element in the natural world. According to the nature-in-man lens, one conceives nature through man's existence, needs and aspirations. Everything in the universe is created to entertain man's needs and is designed according to a might-makes-right paradigm. Man is granted the necessary power and right to exploit the natural world. Nature is there for man's interests. Its *raison d'être* is to nourish and sustain human life with all its necessities.

Such a view of man's superiority over the universe is rooted in the Greco-Roman thinking. In *On the Nature of the Gods* (1997), Cicero stresses that plants exist for the sake of animals, animals for the sake of man, and man for the worshipping of God. This had led Cicero to claim that "all things in this universe of ours have been created and prepared for us humans to enjoy" (103). Human manipulation of nature was justified by the Judeo-Christian notion that God created the world based on the hierarchical anthropocentric view that man comes on top of other creatures. One reads in Genesis (1:16-28):

Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.

The same theological right of human supremacy over, and manipulation of, all other creatures is echoed in Book 7 of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

Let us make now Man in our image, Man
In our similitude, and let them rule
Over the Fish and Fowle of Sea and Aire,
Beast of the Field, and over all the Earth,
And every creeping thing that creeps the ground. (243)

Considering these verses and lines, man is portrayed as both superior to Nature and the rightful inheritor of all its resources. The stance is given more solid proof through the writings of Francis Bacon who famously defended "the enlarging of the bounds of human empire to the effecting of all things possible" (177). The list also includes John Donne's *The Anatomy of the World* (1912) in which he confers the title "vice-emperor" on man on grounds that "in whom/ All faculties, all graces, are at home/ This man, so great, that all that is, is his" (236).

The man-in-nature attitude takes the opposite direction of thought. Man is just one element in the natural world; he has no right whatsoever to take command of this world. On the contrary, he needs to accommodate himself to its rules in order to live peacefully on earth. This attitude takes its origin from the idea of *anima mundi* which posits an intrinsic connection between all living beings, maintaining that the world is animated by a soul much like the human body. This sort of organic unity among all creatures on earth, and man is no exception, forms the point of departure for reformulating man's relation to Nature based on the man-in-nature perspective.

Exploring the change of attitude from nature-in-man to man-in-nature will take the discussion back to Renaissance England when human interference had proved itself to be catastrophic *par excellence*. Since biotic egalitarianism was not adopted by anthropocentric minds at the time, the country was afflicted by natural crises: namely deforestation and coal production. Todd Borlik (2011) traces the attention given to the environment back to the 1500s when "the country (i.e. England) experienced a streak of volatile weather that led to near famine conditions in many rural areas" (3). People's response to these environmental catastrophes, Borlik contends, was more akin to present-day's sustainability. The Tudor monarchs passed laws whose major aim was to regulate the heavy industry of iron and, henceforth, inhibit environmental degradation. Alongside these practical measures, "treaties on ethics, skepticism and republican government

raised serious questions about mankind's *right* to exploit animals, and even the inanimate landscape, for human purposes" (emphasis added) (Borlik 3). E. B. White's bitter remark summarizes this environmentally aware attitude:

Our approach to nature is to beat it into submission. We would stand a better chance of survival if we accommodated ourselves to this planet and viewed it appreciatively, instead of skeptically and dictatorially. (in Carson VI)

Once decentered from his presumed position as the cynosure of the universe, man has become a mere element in this universe with an equal position to its other elements. This can be posited as a change from anthropocentrism to anthropomorphism where natural elements are presented as having human characteristics in the sense that they all possess a kind of unity. "Human flourishing," Borlik asserts, "is predicated on ecological stability, while the natural world is revealed to possess purposes aloof from human interests" (7). This shift has given way to rereading Nature and exploring the possibilities of re-evaluating man/nature relationship for the sustainability of the former and the benefit of the latter which underpins much of the ecocritical literature.

Mary Jane Oliver (1935-2019) is an American poet. She was born in 1935 in Cleveland, Ohio, and raised in nearby Maple Heights; however, she lived for most of her writing career in Provincetown, Cape Cod, Massachusetts. There, she could express an immense love for the natural world and present it in a very novel manner that had the capability of awakening her readers' awareness of Nature, necessitating their need for being immersed in its springs. She used to retreat from her home to the nearby woods, where she would marvel the beauty of Nature and write poems. Her adoration of the natural world was more important for her than her private life which she was reluctant to reveal to others. She found home in the heart of nature and used her poetry to portray a magic realism haven where one can view human existence from a different perspective. In essence, Oliver's poetry gives a true representation of Arne Naess' ecosophy which foregrounds human capacity to live in harmony with the environment, and to see the self within the landscape of a continuously growing and evolving milieu.

Oliver's poetic works amount to more than twenty books of poetry, prominent among which are *Blue Horses* (2014); *A Thousand Mornings* (2012); *Swan: Poems and Prose Poems* (2010); *Red Bird* (2008); *Thirst* (2006); *Why I Wake Early* (2004); *Owls and Other Fantasies*:

Poems and Essays (2003); *Winter Hours: Prose, Prose Poems, and Poems* (1999); *West Wind* (1997); *White Pine* (1994); *New and Selected Poems, Volume One* (1992), which won the National Book Award; *House of Light* (1990), which won the Christopher Award and the L. L. Winship/PEN New England Award; and *American Primitive* (1983), for which she won the Pulitzer Prize.

This qualitative study explores the poetry of Mary Oliver through Franz Roh's magic realism treatment of man/nature relationship. It highlights Oliver's use of the reversal of categories, indistinction, and defocalization strategies as means for ecocritically reshaping man's milieu in the natural world, showcasing her adoption of green thought that has always pointed beyond the dualism of Nature and society, through, as Jason Moore (2017) points out, negating power and profit relations that mark the capitalocene narrative (5).

Magic Realism: An Overview

The term "magic realism" represents a style of writing in which things may differ from reality or, in most cases, contradict the logical explanation of certain events. It combines both the real and the magic in one text in a way that makes the reader accept both as natural and an integral part of the human experience of the world. The concomitant product one finds in a magic realism text is, Zamora and Faris (1995) contend, "a third space which is neither real nor magical. This third liminal space gives equal credence to both worlds" (6). Anne C. Hegerfeldt (2005) perceives it as an oxymoron that defies definition. "Instead of growing more rigorously defined and restricted in application," she maintains, "the term has evaded critical demarcation and today enjoys a usage more diverse than ever" (11). Despite its apparent vagueness and contradictory connotations, which gave Roberto González Echevarría a proof that magical realism lies in "theoretical vacuum" (in Hegerfeldt 11), Frederick Jameson (1986) finds that the term "retains strange seductiveness" (302), and Tony Morrison fathoms it as "another way of knowing things" (in Bowers 81).

Franz Roh (1890-1965), a German modernist art historian and critic, is credited for coining the term "magic realism" in his 1925 book *Nach-Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten Europäischen Malerei (Post-Expressionism, Magical Realism: Problems of the latest European Painting)*. The term refers to a new form of post-impressionist painting during the Weimar Republic in Germany (1918-1933). In 1927, Italian novelist Massimo

Bontempelli (1878-1960) transferred the term from painting to modernist fiction. However, the term was soon virtually deserted to appear again, with modifications of Roh's concept, in Latin American novel. The boom of Latin American novel during the 1970s, mostly attributed to works by Gabriel García Márquez and Alejo Carpentier, has witnessed a major departure from Roh's original connotations of the term.

In her study of the origins of magic realism, Maggie Ann Bowers presents three different terms: magic realism, magical realism and marvelous reality. Although the three are used sparingly and interchangeably, they may differ in essence. The first represents the original form as viewed by Roh. It is Alejo Carpentier who preferred the term marvelous reality to magic realism, believing that marvelous reality mixes differing world views and approaches to what constitutes reality. He appreciated "the unique aspects of Latin America in its racial and cultural mixture rather than in the flora and fauna" (13). Magical realism has aspects of both magic and the marvelous. It is most notable for its matter-of-fact depiction of magical happenings. Another difference among the three terms is that magic realism uses "magic" to connote the mystery of life, while in magical realism and marvelous realism, it refers to the occurrence of extraordinary events that can be spiritual and unaccountable by rational science. A notable example in this respect is Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915) in which a man who wakes up to find that he has become an insect and continues to live with his family, adjusting his life to the new circumstances as if it were an unalterable part of reality.

Roh's magic realism embodies "calm admiration of the magic of being, of the discovery that things already have their own faces" and, thereby, represents "in an intuitive way, *the fact, the interior figure, of the exterior world*" (Roh's emphasis) (24). His main attention is given to the manners in which visible objects in the natural world express invisible meanings. Existence, for Roh, is a kind of miracle that enjoys its *imperturbable duration*: the unending miracle of eternally mobile and vibrating molecules" (22). Such a 'miracle' emerges out of the tension between the surface world and its innerness, asserting the necessity to engage with the "everyday" and "commonplace." The magic of being imparts a type of newness to ordinary objects so that they can be recreated and seen in novel and unfamiliar ways.

The impact of Roh is evident enough in Alejo Carpentier's prologue to *The Kingdom of this World* (1949) where he makes use of terms such as "alteration," "revelation" and "richness of reality," echoing Roh's the "radiation of magic," the "new space," "the interior figure," and the "vortex of depth" which is 'throbbing' (Roh 20-27) within phenomenal reality. Bontempelli, applying Roh's principles of magic realism on fiction, sought that magic realism writing would make Italian culture more international in outlook. For him, the function of literature is to create "a collective consciousness by opening new mythical and magical perspectives on reality" (Bowers 12).

This takes the discussion a step further to Bowers' distinction between ontological magical realism and epistemological magic realism. Jeanne Delbaere calls the former folklore magic realism and the latter scholarly magic realism (76). Ontological magical realism has its source material, beliefs or practices from the cultural context in which the text is set. This type of magical realism is deeply rooted in the history and culture of the text milieu. As an instance, Carpentier's *The Kingdom of this World* (1949) revolves around Mackandal who has the ability to change shape at will and even to take animal form. Mackandal is a historical figure who led the slave uprising in Haiti and upon whom the novel is based (86). Ontological magical realism has led to the rise of postcolonial magical realism novels in Latin America, Spain and some other parts of the world. Its major *raison d'être* is the author's eagerness to internationalize their country's marvelous culture which, in many ways, bears witness to extraordinary events.

Epistemological magic realism is closely related to Roh's concept of the term. It derives its inspiration from sources which do not necessarily coincide with the author's cultural context. Its sources may be the writer's point of view or intellectual reasons (Bowers 87). Through its concentration on the real object and how the author conceives it, the reader gets to grips with the natural world from a novel lens. This is the same approach adopted by Mary Oliver in her poetry.

Magic Realism in Mary Oliver's Poetry

Mary Oliver's poetry can be seen as an invitation to immerse into the natural world; one akin to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). The reader of Oliver's poetry delves into a world where nature has a beating heart, and its elements have the capabilities that have long been reserved to humans from the anthropocentric view. Oliver's is a world where plants, animals and even inanimate

objects can talk, reason and prove themselves superior to man. "Magic," suggests Zamora (2005), "inheres in the material fabric of the world, and art must embody this fact" (34). As such, Oliver provides a form of magic realism that praises nature and all its elements, and, in doing so, removes the barrier between man and nature, reshaping their relationship on egalitarian terms rather than the power and manipulation ones. Roh's characteristics of the magic realism text well apply to her poems.

Nature for Mary Oliver constitutes a self-contained world; one which is suffice for man to live and nourish. It has provided her with a haven from the brutal industrial world with all its power relations and might-makes-right dogma. She has lent herself to explore the infinite possibilities of the natural world, confessing to Krista Tippett in her interview (2015) that:

I don't like buildings. The only record I broke in school was truancy. I went to the woods a lot, with books,...listening to the world. Well, I did that, and I still do it. I did find the entire world, in looking for something. But I got saved by poetry, and I got saved by the beauty of the world.

These words form Oliver's manifesto. She did feel the magic in the objects jamming the natural world around her. Once she got enchanted by "the beauty of the world," she decided on a life mission to present this beauty in poems that delineate Roh's concept of magic realism.

The initial trait of her magic realism is the intensive observation of minute details in the natural world. It is through observation that one can discover "the mystery" of the "palpitating world." Roh considered the mystery of life and complexities of human inner-life to be perceivable through this close observation of objects. It allows for a celebration of the return to realism, ridding oneself of the shackles of abstraction. In "The Way of the World" (*A Thousand Mornings*), the poet moves in and out of the contemplative mood to comment on man's position in this world. The poem starts from a very biological point of view; the food chain in which chickens eat the crickets, and the foxes eat the chickens. However, amidst all this eternal natural process, the poet recounts when:

This morning a friend hauled his
boat to shore and gave me the most
wondrous fish. In its silver scales

it seemed dressed for a wedding.
The gills were pulsing, just above
where shoulders would be, if it had
had shoulders. The eyes were still
looking around, I don't know what
they were thinking.

Striking enough in these lines is the verisimilitude the poet finds in the natural world: the fisherman gave the speaker "the most wonderful fish" that is "dressed for a wedding," with pulsing gills, shoulders and "thinking" rolling eyes. The poet asserts her need to "know" what is going on in this rich world. She describes the incident from a man-in-nature attitude. That is to say, the fisherman and the poet are in nature; they are part of a greater whole and governed by its laws. This accounts for the final line: "I ate the fish," after repeating the first two lines of the food chain in what seems like a refrain, intensifying the sense of being in-nature.

Keen observation of nature and its elements adds to the magic realism of the poems. The discovery of a new form of life due to being in-nature gives objects what Zamora (2005) calls new objectivity and new thing-ness (29). While realism requires objects to represent only themselves, in magic realism texts, they also represent "the potential for some kind of alternative reality, some kind of 'magic'" (30). Oliver's poems testify for this new objectivity of the natural world elements. Her celebration of the mundane endows it with new significance, as Roh believes. With full attention to the details of everyday life amidst the natural world, the poet gets out of her house, standing with her "notebook open," penning down her interesting observations about this mystery.

The outcome of this immersion in nature is a type of reversal or exchange of the human and non-human behaviors. In "White Night" (*American Primitive*), one finds:

All night
I float
in the shallow ponds
while the moon wanders
burning,
bone white,
among the milky stems.

Here, as well as in many other poems, Oliver depicts the human (i.e. speaker) as floating in "the shallow ponds," and the moon "wander(ing)" with transparent "white bones" so that the reader can readily sense in it her matter-of-fact approach. The moon receives a novel form of objectivity that reflects its innate magic in the sense used by Roh. Similarly, in "Blossom," the ponds "open," the moon "swims," and frogs are "shouting" their desire. This gives Hatem Salama (2013) ample evidence to suggest that Oliver's connection to the natural world is "non-physical" as it is "rising from the skillful interplay of sight, hearing and touch" (513).

Oliver's treatment of the natural world elements from a new objectivity point of view negates continental Europe's approach to nature that has long been based on control. Oliver assures the readiness of anyone to identify with nature, glorifying Ursula Heise's notion of ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between "the experiencing body and the experienced environment" (512). Oliver's identification process with nature leads to unity and a feeling of completeness. For Arne Naess (1912-2009), the Norwegian philosopher who coined the term "deep ecology," identification with nature is necessary for humans in order that they get "a gestalt character" and attain "wholeness" (173). For both Naess and Oliver, identification with nature makes room enough for the reevaluation of man's relation to nature and the establishment of an egalitarian form of co-existence. For both, too, all nature matters and deserves equal consideration. In "The Fish" (*American Primitive*), the poet declares this complete identification, or better, transformation, when she eats the fish:

Now the sea
is in me: I am the fish, the fish
glitters in me; we are
risen, tangled together, certain to fall
back to the sea. Out of pain,
and pain, and more pain
we feed this feverish plot, we are nourished
by the mystery.

The "we" of the lines intensifies the poet's sense of self-realization which is a concomitant of identification. "Nourished by the mystery" of being one with nature, the slash separating the human and the non-human is now removed, and the power relations and man's so-called right to use nature become groundless. Man-in-nature, according to Oliver, feels the same as other natural elements. Both may feel the pain and the joy of mere existence.

Identification and self-realization result in another trait of the magic realism text: the ability to transform into another entity. In Oliver's case, the natural elements may transform at will into other elements, and humans may transform into other non-human bodies. Salama suggests that Oliver's main access to dissolution into the natural world, and hence the metamorphosis, is through consuming parts of nature. This, for Salama, presents the idea of sharing, and conjures up the image of sameness between humans and the natural world (504).

At the outset of "Happiness" (*American Primitive*), the poet observes a she-bear who is "looking / for the secret bin of sweetness - / honey that the bees store /in the trees' soft caves." The effect of eating the honey, and being mystified, is transformation. The she-bear turns from a honey consumer into a honey producer (i.e. a bee). It steps into the body of another creature. The she-bear:

began to hum and sway.
I saw her let go of the branches,
I saw her lift her honeyed muzzle
into the leaves, and her thick arms,
as though she would fly -
an enormous bee

The poet accounts for this transformation as one of the "perfections" she finds in nature: honeysuckle, rose and clover. The message is clear: perfection can only be attained through being in-nature.

Another case of natural metamorphosis is found in "Swan" (*Devotions*). The bird is portrayed in its flight as:

an armful of white blossoms,
a perfect commotion of silk and linen as it leaned
into the bondage of its wings: a snowbank, a bank of lilies,
biting the air with its black beak

The poem is set in a series of questions posed by the poet to all humans. They culminate to the main issue: "Have you changed your life?" The poet opens the reader's eyes wide to the magic in nature, laid overtly everywhere. The reader is left to contemplate the essence of this desired change. They may find an answer in "The Plum Tree" (*American Primitive*) where:

....Disorder and astonishment

rattle your thoughts and your heart

cries for rest but don't

succumb, there's nothing

so sensible as sensual inundation.

The poem describes what goes on in every human mind: a constant state of disorientation and need to find intellectual and spiritual rest. Oliver preaches the solution in the form of "inundation" with all natural elements. Salama maintains that "The Plum Tree" is a battlefield where the mind and the body clash. Yet, the ultimate victory is for the latter since "time lies shattered," allowing the transformation of any subject into another body (517). Oliver puts it simply:

...Joy

is a taste before

it's anything else, and the body

can lounge for hours devouring
the important moments. Listen,

the only way

to tempt happiness into your mind is by taking it

into the body first, like small
wild plums.

Nature, Oliver asserts, is not a thing to oppress; it is, rather, a teacher to learn from, and a magic experience that unfolds before the contemplating eyes and pure hearts.

Human transformation into other natural elements testifies Oliver's view of the power of magic realism. She provides cases of adopting the lessons given by Nature. Two cases have already been mentioned in "White Night" and "The Fish." Likewise, in "Clapps Pond" (*American Primitive*), the speaker transforms at will into a moment in time, removing any barrier between place and time:

How sometimes everything

closes up, a painted fan, landscapes and moments

flowing together until the sense of distance - - -

say, between Clapp's Pond and me - - -

vanishes, edges slide together

like the feathers of a wing, everything

touches everything.

Sitting in the wood at night, by fire, the speaker notices the disappearance of place, and takes the reader, in a moment of timelessness, into a journey where everything is possible: "everything touches everything." This magic realism atmosphere intertwines both place and time in one crucible.

To give the act of transformation a sense of accepted reality, Oliver addresses her readers as if the uncanny experience is a type of shared knowledge. While Amaryll Chanady assures the same point, believing that "the supernatural in magical realism does not disconcert the reader" (24), Bowers makes it a condition that a text cannot be categorized as magical realism "unless the magical aspects are accepted as part of everyday reality" (25). In "Humpbacks" (*Devotions*), Oliver uses "you know what I mean" as a statement of shared knowledge between the speaker and the addressee. The poem enlists a number of natural phenomena in such a manner that the reader is well prepared for the turn of thought later in the poem when she uses the first-person pronoun "we" to include the humpbacks, the speaker and the addressee:

like the myth of the fifth morning galloping
out of darkness, pouring
heavenward, spinning; then
they crash back under those black silks
and we all fall back
together into that wet fire, you
know what I mean.

Both speaker and listener transform from humans into humpbacks in their return to the sea. A similar case of transformation is echoed in "Blossom" where the poet asserts that we are more than blood; we belong to the moon. In this sense, Oliver seems to agree with Naess' non-hierarchical view of human relation to nature. She renounces, in complete self-effacement, humanity and declares being part of the whole cosmos.

The ultimate feature of a magic realism world where, according to Roh, accurate detailing of the natural world is presented, supported by a photograph-like clarity of the picture and the representation of the non-material aspects of reality, is the sense of euphoria that stamps all creatures in the natural world, and humans are

not an exception. In many poems, Oliver declares this sense of joy originating from her mere existence in-nature. In "The Honey Tree" (*American Primitive*), for instance, the reader discovers that the goal of human metamorphosis into a bear is the desire to experience the type of joy inherent in the natural world. Salama maintains that the speaker's transformation into a bear is so miraculous that she can even eat "chucks of light" (508). She declares it once more:

Oh, anyone can see
how I love myself at last!
how I love the world! climbing
by day or night
in the wind, in the leaves, kneeling
at the secret rip, the cords
of my body stretching
and singing in the
heaven of appetite.

Out of this ecstatic joy, the speaker's body becomes both a musical instrument and a singer. Rejoicing this achievement, the speaker in "White Flowers" (*New and Selected Poems*) recounts the many advantages of becoming a flower which is "so plush" and "so slippery." The poet would prefer to immerse into the natural world than think about death, albeit the latter's being a major issue that preoccupies all humans. The result is a form of euphoria the speaker never felt before:

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

Paola Loreto (2022) justifies Oliver's ecstasy in that she could reverse the traditional hierarchical relations of humanism. Oliver can express admiration for the non-human, Loreto suggests, owing to "their lack of fear, ambition, and disregard of reason." Such matters bring in humans "only foolish questions" (341).

Another source of euphoria in Oliver's magic realism world is her realization that death is not an end of life. For her, death is a mere step in an endless form of life; it is not a feature of annihilation. As such, Oliver's vision of the egalitarian relationship between man and nature entails the adoption of this non-human logic according to which life and death are not perceived as opposites, but, rather, death is unreal from the perspective of the ecosystem's ongoing life. In "Skunk Cabbage" (*Devotions*), one reads:

...these are the woods you love,
where the secret name
of every death is life again - a miracle
wrought surely not of mere turning
but of dense and scalding reenactment

Strategies of Enchantment in Mary Oliver's Poetry

Mary Oliver has manipulated some strategies to equip her readers in their journey in the magic realism world. Three prominent strategies are to be discussed: reversal of categories, indistinction, and defocalization. In a magic realism text, looking at objects from a different perspective (new-thingness) necessitates that all natural elements, including humans, undergo a process of reversal of categories. This connotes that magic realism is inherently transgressive and subversive. Bowers points out that it alternates between the real and the magical using the same narrative voice. The transgressive power of a magic realism text can be seen as a means "to attack the assumptions of the dominant culture and the notion of scientifically and logically determined truth" (64-65). Mary Oliver attacks human acclaimed right to use the natural world which has resulted in various catastrophes. It has led to the climate change problems and, more importantly, detached man from Nature.

In Oliver's poetry, a reversal of categories has taken place, for the natural world, which has been perceived by many eco-critics as powerless and brutally manipulated by humans, becomes a teacher for mankind. The title given to her interview with Tippett, "I Got Saved by the Beauty of the World," underscores Nature as a savior. In "Spring Azures" (*New and Selected Poems*), the poet confesses her desire to give up her humanity and become a blue azure. Her justification is that "...all the tricks my body knows / don't seem enough to carry me through this world." The tricks of human body, contrary to those of the natural world, are "the opposable thumbs, the kneecaps / and the mind clicking and

clicking." She is ready to sacrifice what has long been a distinctive feature of mankind: the ability to reason. For her, natural elements have far better features:

how I would like
to have wings—
blue ones—
ribbons of flame.
How I would like to open them, and rise
from the black rain water.

Realizing the challenge, she opts, like William Blake, for the power of imagination.

To overcome man's detachment from nature, Loreto assures that Oliver's earth-others form a world entirely total and self-contained which is envisaged in a profoundly philosophical and posthuman perspective. Posthumanism holds the idea that we, as humans, have no inherent barriers to making our physical and mental functionality much more efficient or powerful. Loreto contends that Oliver's goal is to "question the centrality of the human subject" (335). For example, in "The Other Kingdoms" (*Devotions*), the poet goes on her glorification of the mystery in the natural world. The kingdoms of the poem are those of the different species in Nature such as trees and other creatures. The poet highlights their similarity to the human kingdom in an attempt to raise the egalitarian issue once and again. They, like humans, enjoy an "infallible sense of what their lives / are meant to be." Only when humans look at the natural world "from the other side," to use Roh's words, are they capable of re-establishing their relationship with Nature on equal bases.

Additionally, Loreto's contention is that Oliver succeeded in providing her readers with a "newly conceived world" where "values are actions, or better *intra-actions*, thus they are constantly negotiated on necessarily equal terms, and not imposed by a predetermined, arbitrary, hierarchical system that is running towards its own destruction" (336). Consequently, anything can happen in Oliver's natural world. Vicki Graham (1994) pinpoints that, in Oliver "we can become bear, fish, whale, and Pan. We can run with fox, fly with owl, dig with the mole, and finally, losing all outward form, dissolve into the totality of nature" (352). The reader's sense of magic and awe culminates into a reinvestigation of man's relationship with all elements of the natural world, pioneering egalitarianism over human profit.

The second strategy is indistinction. Oliver adopts the notion of "zones of indistinction" coined by Matthew Calarco (2015). For Calarco, there are areas which represent crucial experiences we share with animals such as suffering,

happiness, life, and death. "Indistinction theorists and activists," Calarco maintains, "explore some of the surprising ways in which human beings find themselves to be like animals..., while also examining the varied ways in which animals demonstrate their own forms of agency, creativity, and potential" (5). For such theorists, it is not a matter of how animals seem like us; it is how we seem like them through certain areas of common experience. Oliver adopts the same pathetic fallacy approach when she attributes human emotions to inanimate objects, nature or animals. However, her use of pathetic fallacy seems bidirectional. On the one hand, she dismantles the delusion of pathetic fallacy, highlighting the idea that non-human objects have their own ecosystem and laws of living which may be challenging to fathom. In "The Lilies Break Open over the Dark Water" (*House of Light*), the "wild and slippery" lilies are described as "devoid of meaning" attributed to them by humans. They are "simply doing, / from the deepest / spurs of their being / what they are impelled to do." On the other hand, Oliver's use of pathetic fallacy is ironic and purposeful. In this case, it is the non-human which is watching the human and commenting on their limitations. "The Turtle" (*Dream Work*) delineates how the turtle enjoys "patience, fortitude, and determination." Gazing to the turtle's behavior, Oliver admits that the reader will "realize a greater thing," which is that the very turtle:

...doesn't dream,
she knows
she is a part of the pond she lives in,
the tall trees are her children,
the birds that swim above her
are tied to her by an unbreakable string.

Through this indistinctness, Oliver managed to change the angle from which man views nature and starts to adopt new vistas to deal with it.

The third strategy is defocalization which Wendy Faris (2004) includes in her list of characteristics of a magical realism work of art. Focalization refers to the perspective from which events are presented. In magical realism, Faris suggests, focalization is indeterminate. The kinds of perceptions it presents are indefinable and the origins of those perceptions are unlocatable (43). This results from the conflicting kinds of perceptions in a magical realism work. Magical events and

images are not empirically verifiable, whereas the narrative simultaneously includes empirical events. Defocalization serves as a tool through which the poet can create a narrative space of the ineffable where events are only to be experienced rather than explained (46). This attitude is prevalent in most of the poems explored in this study. Oliver shifts the angle through which events are recounted: sometimes it is the snake's, in others it is the observer's.

Conclusion

Mary Oliver's poetry is dealt with as a representation of eco-critical theories, paying homage to the natural world and its role in the sustainability of human existence on earth. This study extends this academic effort through the examination of the idea of man-in-nature and the magic realism world she creates in the poems. Oliver seems in harmony with Franz Roh's form of magic realism that tries to see the objects in reality from the other side, granting it a type of new objectivity or new-thingness. The study has investigated a number of the characteristics designated by Roh, prominent among which are the need for intense observation of the natural world, the metamorphosis of both human and non-human objects, and the sense of euphoria one is gifted due to the belief in the interconnectedness between man and Nature. This magic realism world as presented in Oliver's poetry would not have been possible but for her manipulation of three major strategies: the reverse of categories, indistinctness, and defocalization. Such strategies abound in the limitless potential the poet experienced in the natural world. The main consequence of this is removing the slash that has long separated man from nature, effecting a shift in human perspective towards it: from might-makes-right to a strong liaison based on non-hierarchical egalitarianism.

References

- Bacon, Francis (1999) *Three Early Modern Utopias: Thomas More Utopia, Francis Bacon New Atlantis, Henry Neville The Isle of Pines*, in Susan Bruce (ed), New York: Oxford University Press.
- Borlik, Todd (2011) *Ecocriticism and Early Modern English Literature*. New York: Routledge.
- Bowers, Maggie Ann (2005) *Magic(al) Realism: The New Critical Idiom*. Londo and New York: Routledge.
- Burton-Christie, Douglass (1996) "Nature, Spirit and Imagination in the Poetry of Mary Oliver," *Cross Currents*, Spring, 46 (1), Research Library Core, 77-87.
- Calarco, Matthew (2015) *Thinking Through Animals: Identity, Difference, Indistinction*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Carpentier, Alejo (1989) *The Kingdom of this World*. trans. Harriet de Onis. New York: The Noonday Press.
- Carson, Rachel (2002) *Silent Spring*. Boston and New York: Marine Books.
- Chanady, Amaryll Beatrice (1985) *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved versus Unresolved Antimony*. New York: Garland.
- Cicero (1997) *On the Nature of the Gods*, trans. P. G. Walsh. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Delbaere, Jeanne (1992) "Magic Realism: The Energy of the Margins," *Postmodern Fiction in Canada*, eds. Theo D'Haen and Hans Bertens. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Donne, John (1912) *The Poems of John Donne*, ed. Herbert Grierson. London: Oxford University Press.
- Faris, Wendy (2004) *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.

- Garrard, Greg (2004) *Eco-criticism: The New Critical Idiom*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Graham, Vicki (1994) "Into the Body of Another: Mary Oliver and the Poetics of Becoming Other," *Papers on Language and Literature*, 30 (4) Fall, 352-372.
- Hegerfeldt, Anne C. (2005) *Lies that Tell the Truth: Magic Realism Seen through Contemporary Fiction from Britain*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi
- Heise, Ursula (2006) "The Emergence of Ecocriticism," *The Hitchhiker's Guide to Ecocriticism*. PMLA Publications of the Modern Language Association of America, 121 (2), 503-516.
- Jameson, Frederick (1986) "On Magic Realism in Film", *Critical Inquiry*, XII (2), 301-25.
- Loreto, Paola (2022) "The Posthuman 'Othering' of the World in Mary Oliver's Poetry" *Iperstoria*. 19, Spring-Summer, 334-345.
- Milton, John (1909) *The Complete Poems of John Milton*, ed. Charles Eliot. New York: PF Collier and Son.
- Moore, Jason (2017) "The Capitalocene, Part I: On the Nature and Origins of our Ecological Crisis" *The Journal of Peasant Studie*, 1-37.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2016.1235036>
- Naess, Arne (1989) *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy*, trans. David Rothenberg, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Oliver, Mary (1983) *American Primitive*. Boston: Little.
- (1986) *Dream Work*. New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press.
- (1990) *House of Light*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- (1992) *Mary Oliver: New and Selected Poems*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- (2012) *A Thousand Mornings*. Canada: Penguin Books.
- (2017) *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver*. New York: Penguin Press.

- Roh, Franz (1995) "Magical Realism: Post-Expressionism" *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. eds. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy Faris. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 15-31.
- Salama, Hatem (2013) "Dissolution into the Natural World: An Ecocritical Study of Mary Oliver's *American Primitive*," *Annals of the Faculty of Arts, Ain Shams University* (41) January-March, 497-525.
- Tippett, Krista (2015) "Mary Oliver: I Got Saved by the Beauty of the World," <https://onbeing.org/programs/mary-oliver-i-got-saved-by-the-beauty-of-the-world/> accessed 26/8/2024
- Zamora, Lois Parkinson and Wendy B. Faris, (1995) *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- (2005) "Swords and Silver Rings: Magical Objects in the Work of Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez," *A Companion to Magical Realism*. eds. Stephen Hart and Wen-chin Ouyang. Woodbridge: Tamesis, 28-45.

إذابة الفواصل: الإنسان جزء من الطبيعة كتجسيد للواقعية السحرية في شعر ماري أوليفر

سعيد أحمد جزر

مدرس بقسم اللغات الأجنبية، كلية التربية، جامعة طنطا، جمهورية مصر العربية.

saeedgazar@gmail.com

المستخلص:

انطلاقاً من اهتمام الدراسات البيئية بالعلاقة الراسخة بين الإنسان وعناصر الطبيعة من حوله، ومن النظرة الحديثة الدونية لهذه العناصر بوصفها أقل من الإنسان قيمة، وبأحقيته في استغلالها لصالحه، ترمي العديد من الدراسات إلى تغيير هذه النظرة واستبدالها بمنطلقات فكرية أكثر إنصافاً للبيئة، باعتبارها كل متكامل يجب التعايش معه، لذا تتناول الدراسة الحالية أعمال الشاعرة الأمريكية ماري أوليفر (1935-2019) التي تعلي من شأن الطبيعة، بل وتصوّر الإنسان وكأنه يطمح لأن يكون أحد عناصرها. ولكي تُحدث الشاعرة هذا التغيير الجذري في علاقة الإنسان بالطبيعة، تبنت موقفاً يسمّى "الإنسان-في-الطبيعة" الذي يحيل علاقتهما إلى نوع من التكامل والازدهار، وليس الفناء واليوار. وفي سبيل ذلك تعرض أشعار ماري أوليفر عالمًا واقعيًا سحريًا تتجلى فيه الخصائص التي وضعها المؤرخ الفني والناقد الألماني فرانز رو (1890-1965) الذي يؤكد على ضرورة تغيير المنظور الذي نتعامل من خلاله مع عناصر العالم الطبيعي من حولنا، لنتلمس ملامح الواقعية السحرية فيها، وأثرها في إحداث تغيير مرغوب مماثل تذوب فيه كافة الفواصل التي تشكلت بين الإنسان والبيئة، ولذلك تتوسل الشاعرة باستراتيجيات ثلاثة هي: عكس الفئات التصنيفية الفارقة بين الإنسان والطبيعة، وعدم التمييز بين عناصرها المختلفة، وإلغاء التمركز المركزي للإنسان كمصدر لأي منظور أنطولوجي للبيئة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الإنسان في الطبيعة، ماري أوليفر، فرانز رو، الواقعية السحرية، عدم التمركز