

THE INTERDEPENDENCE BETWEEN HUMAN AND NATURE IN CRAIGHEAD JEAN GEORGE'S *MY SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN*

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Abstract

(Title: *The Interdependence Between Human and Nature in Craighead Jean George's "My Side of The Mountain"*). Centering from the belief that literature is an important media to remind people about the significant role of the environment and to stimulate awareness about its critical condition, this study explores ecological discourse in Jean Craighead George's *My Side of the Mountain*. It aims to reveal an interdependence between people and nature. Applying qualitative content analysis, this study shows that the interdependence between people and nature is different in degree. People have a strong dependence on nature, whereas nature is an independent entity and scarcely needs people to support their life. Sam in *My Side of the Mountain* has been nurtured by nature. It provides him food, shelter, and protection from any inconvenient weather. However, Sam is careless and ignorant. He focuses on fulfilling his needs and neglecting his surroundings. In the novel, nature is dominated and positioned as the object to fulfill humans' needs and desires.

Keywords: literature, nature, human, interdependence

INTRODUCTION

The earth has been seriously degraded and slowly turned into an inconvenient place to live for humans and almost all living organisms. High levels of air and water pollution are unstoppable as manufacture and transportation using fossil fuels continue to exist. Extreme heats, drought, the flood also happen quite often than they were before. The temperature has increased every day, and Watts (2019) explains that it "increases to 1C from its initial temperature before the industrial era". These indicate that the world is indeed suffering from serious global warming and it is slowly dying.

As a result of climate change, a disaster such as extreme drought occurred in Africa, America, Europe, and consecutively in Indonesia since 2015. In Somalia, Africa, it was reported that more than 100 people have died due to a long drought which led to food scarcity and severe famine (BBC, 2017). In Europe, based on the World Meteorological Organization, hot and dry weather has led to an unsuccessful harvest of some crops, such as potato, wheat, and barley in German (Harris, 2018). In Central America, very low rainfall has caused a major loss of crops for food supply and

very dry soil made it difficult to be cultivated (Moloney, 2018). In addition, Meteorological, Climatological, and Geophysical Agency (BMKG), reported that water scarcity afflicted more than 100 cities across Indonesia in 2015 (Dompot Dhuafa, 2015). This happened because the forest that has kept the water supply during the drought is changed into housings, apartments, and factories. Therefore, there is no natural system that could be properly used as a reservoir to reserve the water land when the monsoon comes, and thus be useful to prevent an extremely dry season. The forest blaze in Sumatera and Kalimantan in September 2019 adds another drama on environmental problems in Indonesia. This incident has caused many victims. Around 919.516 people suffered from the respiratory problem due to the smoke they could not avoid the fire (Hakim, 2019). Besides, hundreds of animals are also killed in the catastrophe.

The ongoing destruction of nature is mainly because of the ignorance of government and some company elites. Although, the environmental damaged could no longer be denied as it has become a global concern, a country or a company's economical gain

is always placed higher than environmental protection. Politics has always stayed to support the increase in the economy sector and blindfolded to the rise of the global temperature.

The environmental crisis is urgent and can no longer hide under a carpet. This is very fundamental as the evolution and ability of nature to fix themselves take longer than the waste and destruction that the people do. Because the impetus of global climate change and other environmental degradation are humans per se, to find out what people could do about it is a sensible act. Movements to address the environmental problems have been done consistently by some environmental activists. One of the recent ones was the climate strike done in September 2019 in many countries around the world.

This strike could have been one measure to inform the government and other agencies about the steps to take to respond to global warming. Nevertheless, another effort to stop global warming is by investing in people, the young and also adults, about the importance of the environment through literature. Despite that this would take a longer time, the outcome would be lasting more permanently than the demonstration. Literature, especially children literature, could help to communicate the values of nature, plants, and animals living surrounding subtly.

The powerful use of literature to improve people's awareness of the environmental issue could be learned from Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962). This book has made a significant change in the environmental problem in the US in the 19th century. This book depicts the fatal impact of pesticides (DDT) that were used in agriculture and also stressed that the continuing use of this substance will also affect humans. Foote (2007) expressed that the narrative engages readers to involve in the story. It stresses that nothing could turn better unless people change their attitude toward nature. Foote highlights that *Silent Spring* is the most influential narrative in the US that embraces the environment and could create a significant change.

Literature has a significant contribution to education. It can be used as a means to transfer meanings, values, and also to change one's perspective or way of thinking. Children's literature, in particular, has been used for various purposes such as early literacy programs and early childhood education (Bouderreaux: 2006, Learner: 2012). Children's literature has the ability to give understanding to children better than any media that usually contain technical knowledge and adult's propaganda. It has the power to instill empathy, understand other people, and appreciate differences. Luken (2007) stresses that one of the positive functions of literature, including children's literature, is the ability to reflect reality and express understanding about society's norm and value in a pleasant way.

Another use of children's literature is to increase children's awareness of their environment. It is used to educate children about the earth, its inhabitants, and its ecosystem. Many stories in the picture book, for instance, engage animals and plants as the main characters, set in the seas or forests, and also involve rain, thunder, flood, as the natural forces that enrich the natural phenomena in the Children story. These presentations thus enable children to learn the world around them.

Some researches on Children's literature affirmed that it contributed to the increasing knowledge and awareness of children towards their environment (Egerton, 1996; Larsson, 2012; Harms and Lettow, 2000; Kuperts and Twiest, 2000; Li and Ryan, 2017). Literature focuses on narrating landscape and natural vegetation and habitats of various plants, animals, and another organism. The topic that explains the interdependence of people to their environment is yet many discussed. Applying eco-criticism theory, this article investigates the connection between man and nature and how these relationships are depicted in a novel by Jean Craighead George *My Side of Mountain*.

My Side of Mountain by Jean Craighead George is an award-winning book for children in America. It received Newberry Honor in 1960. This novel narrates Sam, a young boy, who runs from his family to experience adventure in the forest. He finally survives living in the wild

with the help of animals and plans. This novel depicts the interaction between the boy and nature vividly, and thus worth investigating.

METHODS

This article employs library research in collecting the data and descriptive-analytic method to analyze it. Words, phrases, and sentences from George's *My Side of Mountain* are read repeatedly and the relevant ones are selected, collected, and analyzed carefully applying the perspective of ecocriticism.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Everyone has the same needs. The needs of twelve years old-boy are no different from the forty or sixty years old-adult. They need food, water, clothes, shelter, protection, and friends to share. George's *My Side of Mountain* reveals this situation and stresses that humans could get all of these supports even though they isolate themselves from other humans. They need to study every living thing in their surroundings because the vital resource of all of these lies in nature.

Discussion

Human's Dependence on Nature

Sam as the main character of *My Side of the Mountain* represents someone who depends on nature to survive. With the permission of his parents, he runs to Gibrley land, in the Catskills Mountains, where his great-grandfather had lived. On his journey, he brings some equipment such as "folding knives, a string of reel strings, an ax, a sum of \$ 40, and a stringed flint that was used to make fire" (9). Sam, who plans to live in the wild, is described to carry simple tools to survive. He does not carry a big bag-pack full of food supply with him. He does not even carry water, tent and extra clothes.

"I cut off a green twig and began to whittle..I whittled angle on that twig, and bound the two angles face to face with strip of green bark. It was supposed to be a fishhook.I then dug worms...I was depending on fish to keep me alive until I got to my great-

grandfather'a mountain, where i was going to make traps and catch game" (11-12)

This infers that nature is capable of providing humans with their needs. Sam does not bring his own food. He trusts nature to provide him meals. He simply needs to bring some equipment to benefit from resources nature has served. Sam counts on the natural resources such as water and fishes running in the river in the Catskill mountain. The aforementioned quote convinces that nature provides food for Sam. The only thing that he has to prepare is the fishing rod to catch the fish. Also, he does not find it difficult to build the fishing rod because the material to build it is also provided by nature.

In another part of Sam's adventure in the Catskills Mountains, his dependence on nature is seen when he collects nuts, tubers, and berries in the forest (22). Various sources of protein, vitamins, or minerals are easily obtained from nature. The change of seasons could not halt Sam to get some food. In autumn, Sam can consume hickory nuts (26), while in the summer he gets food ingredients to make frog-leg soup, turtle soup, and rabbit stew (36). Besides, during winter, Sam has no trouble getting vegetables and plants that can be consumed (114). Nature never leaves Sam to starve. He can rely on his life on nature. He could go to a river, to a field with green grass, to a small tunnel under a pile of snow, or to a tree that is bearing fruit to fulfill his daily needs (86-87).

Sam also nurtures an eagle named Frightful. Having knowledge that an eagle is adept at hunting, he takes care and trains her to be her hunting buddy. Frightful becomes her eye and ear to obtain some food (72). Once more, Sam relies on his food supply on nature.

"Frightful took care of the small game supply, and now that she was an expert hunter, we had rabbit stew, pheasant potpie, and an occasional sparrow, which I generously gave to Frightful."(48)

Frightful becomes another component of nature which becomes a place for humans to depend. Frightful is a source of food for Sam because she could gather rabbit, sparrow, and other animals that he cannot catch himself. With Frightful in his side, Sam could taste different types of meat that warm him during the cold winter.

Other than Sam, Mrs. Thomas Fielder is also portrayed as a character who relies on nature to meet her daily needs. Mrs. Fielder, who lives in Delhi, in an area near the Catskills Mountains, says that she does not need to grow strawberry if she wants to eat it. She always harvests strawberries in the grasslands of the Catskills Mountains without anyone forbidding her.

“That’s the best strawberry patch in the entire Catskill range. I came up here every spring.” For forty years I’ve come to that meadow for my strawberries” (39)

Mrs. Fielder has begun to harvest strawberries that grow wild in the Catskill Mountains every spring for forty years. This situation highlights that nature has been used a very long time and never stops giving. Nature never fails human and consistently gives the best taste to humans who need it.

Despite that nature is proven to fulfill the needs of humans in terms of food supply, *My Side of the Mountain* also represents nature as a shelter and a shield that protects humans from dangers. In Catskill Mountain, Sam lives in an old giant tree.

“I looked at that tree. Somehow I knew it was home, but I was not quite sure how it was home.” (27)

Even though Sam has no experience to live under a huge tree, and finds it strange to live there, he is finally sure that a tree is a convenient place to stay. Inside the tree, Sam builds a divan using dried branches and leaves that he could find nearby (15). He also builds a fireplace that will protect him from the cold. He is comfortable living inside and says that “I was perfectly free and capable of settling down anywhere. “My tree was just a pleasant

habit” (47). The tree has given Sam a house that protects him from the harsh weather of the wild.

Furthermore, nature is also a source to get some clothes. Sam leaves his house with one piece of clothing stuck to his skin. He does not bring extra clothes, blanket, or anything else that could warm and protect his body from the upcoming winter. In such a situation he gets them from nature.

“On our way, we scared up a deer. It was a doe. I watched her dart gracefully away, and said to Frightful, “that’s what I want. I need a door for my house, tethers for you, and a blanket for me. How am I going to get a deer? (52)

“It was not until dark that Frightful and I got to the deer, and a beauty it was. The rest of June was spent smoking it, tanning it, and finally, starting on my deerskin suit. I made a needle, cut out the pants by ripping up one pair of old city pants for a pattern (62)”

Sam encounters some hunters who hunt a deer in the forest. He plans to steal the hunted animal for his benefits. With the help of Frightful, he finds it faster than the hunter. They both keep the deer and make use of the skin and the meat to survive during winter. Sam sews the deerskin and puts on it like a cloth, make another part of the skin like a blanket, and use the rest as a piece to decorate his treehouse. From the rabbit fur, Sam also makes underwear (105). He prepares the cold winter by maximally use the potential sources from nature.

Apart from the primary needs such as clothing, food, and shelter that depend on nature, human dependence on nature also manifests in the need to communicate and socialize with others. Living in the forest alone has insisted Sam to establish a communication with the animals living nearby. He starts to build an intimate conversation with Frightful.

“I was thrilled. She had learned a whistle meant “come”. I looked into her steely eyes that morning and I thought I saw a gentle recognition. She

puffed up her feathers as she sat on my hand. I call this a “feather word.” It means she is content. (62)

Sam has become a good friend of Frightful. The above quote explains that Sam and Frightful build a connection and communicates with each other using the language of nature. Sam felt that Frightful became more than just a bird who helped him hunt. He exclaims that “I was so fond of her. She was more than a bird” (91-92).

Frightful is a loyal friend to Sam. His loneliness is relieved by her presence (116). Although she is only an animal that is unable to answer his questions using the language of humans, Sam is now has a friend to talk to. This can be identified from his daily activities as he narrates that “I slept, ate, played my reed whistle, and talked to Frightful” (131).

Furthermore, Frightful always accompanies Sam every day. One day when he “...was thinking very hard about being alone, Frightful gave her gentle call of love and contentment. I looked up” (85). She befriends him. She helps Sam to feel love and free from isolation in the midst of his adventure in the wood. In his solitary, Sam recognizes Frightful’s love and affection.

Frightful is not the only animal that sparks happiness to Sam. Other animals in Catskill Mountain also change the quietness that haunts Sam into excitement. He has two friends; Baron, a Weasel, and Jessie Coon James, a raccoon, who live nearby. Sam socializes with these animals, and he quickly learns something from them. He notices the change of time and weather from observing their behavior (46, 47). Because of his very good acquaintance with these new friends, Sam holds a Halloween party in his tree-house. Together with them, Sam rejoices at a food feast inside his house.

Thus far, Sam finally turns into a skillful boy who could maximize the natural resources in the Catskill mountain. By observing and studying plants and animal behaviors, Sam could survive living in the wild for several months. He recognizes plants and various animals living in the forest. He could

also read signs nature has shared by seeing the pattern of the trees and the behavior of the animals living there. The intimacy between Sam and nature has given rise to a discourse explaining that humans cannot survive on the earth without nature. Nature gives strength to humans to conquer every condition that is not always friendly.

The Dependency of Nature to Humans

The depiction of nature’s dependence on humans does not appear in *My Side of Mountain*. Humans are subjects who always benefit from nature. They are the ones who count on nature to exist. When plants or animals are declared to depend on humans, the logical reasoning for this believes should be traced carefully. Usually, such a situation occurs due to the humans themselves. They situate the circumstances thus the other needs their assistance.

For example, Frightful closes to Sam and depends on him because Sam steals her from her mother in the nest. Sam took her from her natural habitat to satisfy his ego. He wants to own a pet that could help him to hunt food in the forest. This is proven when he says that he “... will get one. I will train it to hunt for me” (40)

Besides, Sam lives in isolation and he needs a friend to escape from his loneliness. So, at her very young age, Frightful relies on Sam. She counts on Sam, especially, to get some meat.

“Here I dressed down the rabbit and fed Frightful some of the more savory bites from a young falcon’s point of view: the liver, the heart, the brain, she ate in gulps” (47).

The above quote illustrates that Sam cares and provides everything for Frightful. He serves her with food that is naturally consumed by a falcon in the wild. He feeds her with the brain and heart of a rabbit.

Nevertheless, Sam prevents Frightful from returning to his natural virtue. Sam limits Frightful so that he remains dependent on Sam for a number of things. He does not want her to live independent and free in the wild.

“With a great backwatering of wings, Frightful broke her fall, and at the same time seized the sparrow. It took it away from her and gave her the lure. That sounds mean, but if she gets in the habit of eating what she catches, she will go wild.” (68)

It is clear from the above excerpt that Frightful can hunt her food without anyone’s help. Sam did not play a significant role to help Frightful seizing her needs. She can hunt freely. Yet, he tries to block her from returning to her natural feature. He is afraid that it will cause her to be untouched and thus making her free Sam.

Thus it can be concluded that nature, represented by Frightful, does not depend on humans to survive. Nature does not need humans to help them fulfill their needs to eat, to drink and to build a house. The existence of animals or nature that depends on humans occurs because humans disturb their natural habitats. By creating this situation the animals incline to humans. They need them to survive. Humans’ selfish behavior can be seen from the relationship between Frightful and Sam.

Humans’ Responsibility to Nature

A large number of natural contribution to humans does not lead them to preserve nature and animals that live in the surrounding. From various mass media published in the current era, it is reported that more and more deforestation occurs and the rising sea levels are unstoppable. These all are the consequences of humans’ overexploitation to nature.

As one of the powerful children books set in a forest, *My Side of the Mountain* describes human responsibility for the development and preservation of nature.

“He was a fire warden. Of course, it has not rained, I told myself, for almost three weeks, and the fire planes have been circling the mountains and valleys, patrolling the mountains. Apparently, the smokes from my fire were spotted, and someone was sent to check it”.

The above quote conveys that humans could play a significant role in the protection and preservation of nature. Using sophisticated technologies, safeguarding natural resources such as mountains and forests could be done easily and very effective. The greater destruction of nature can be prevented as early as possible when humans reflect on their misdeeds and work together to produce an environmentally friendly situation

Nevertheless, humans’ action seems ambivalent. This because the one who destroys nature is humans, and the one who is responsible to solve the environmental problem is also the human themselves. Yet, it has to be recalled that the damage resulted from human actions is faster than environmental reformation that they may initiate. From *My Side of the Mountain* instance, it is Sam who endangers nature when he builds a fire in the forest. He has attracted the forest fire brigade to come and clean the mess. It is also Sam who threatens Frightful because he carelessly burns some branches inside of his treehouse while he and his comrades are inside it.

“Then I noticed something dreadful. Frightful was sitting on the bedpost, her head under her wings. She was toppling. She jerked her head out of her feathers. Her eyes looked glassy. She is sick, I said. I picked her up and stroked her, and we both might have died there if I had not opened the tent flap to get her some water”. The cold night air revived her. “Air” I said. “The fireplace used up all the oxygen. I’ve got to ventilate this place” (92)

Of the two situations reflected in the novel, it is reflected that humans have too little attention to nature. The attitudes to exploit nature to the fullest are not matched by the awareness to guard them. Humans wake up from that ignorance behavior when they get negative consequences from their own doing.

CONCLUSION

George’s *My Side of Mountain* narrates a story of Sam who runs from his home in New York City. He goes to his grandparent’s old

farmland, Gribbley, in the Catskill Mountains to prove to his family that he could survive in the wild. In his wander, he experiences many challenges and problems to fulfill his needs for food, water, warm, safety, love, belonging, self-esteem, friend, and self-actualization needs. Accordingly, he has to rely on other living things in his surroundings to meet his wishes.

Nature and its surroundings have a very significant contribution to fulfill the need of humans. Sam could live in the wood due to the help of nature. He gets sufficient food and water provided by the forest. He consumes raspberry, strawberry, even fish, deer, and other living things in his surroundings. He stays under a big tree and gets protection from the wind of the night and the breeze of the winter snow. In addition, he is also accompanied by a falcon, a raccoon, and a weasel that make his day cheerful, busy. They help him escape from being lonely in the wood

Nevertheless, nature's generosity is unpaid equally. Sam seems to forget that plants and animals also have the same needs as a human to live and survive in the wood. To keep themselves alive, for example, plants and animals need food, water, and appropriate habitat to allow them to grow. Failing to get one of these primary needs, animals and plants could extinct.

Nature is indeed more independent than humans. The dependence of nature on humans is not significant. Plants and animals fulfill their needs themselves or depend on another plant or animal. Human does not contribute to their well-being. The trees in the forest do not depend on Sam to grow big and tall. Instead, Sam needs them to keep him from the wrath of the night and the winter. The animal such as the falcon, beavers, and weasel also hunt their own food without Sam. It is Sam who needs them to hunt food every day.

In the past, a human could live together with nature in harmony. The mutualism between the two was significant before the emergence of the industrial revolution. By the coming of the industrial revolution, people are more greedy and they always chase happiness and successfulness by sacrificing nature. They care and eager to attach to nature, but they keep

their own priority and self-fulfillment more than caring for its sustainability. As it is found in the story, the interdependence of humans and nature is less prevalent. Sam ignorant of the location and animals supplying his needs during the run-in Catskill Mountain.

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