



HUMAN-NATURE RELATIONSHIP IN MARY OLIVER'S THE SUMMER DAY AND THE SUN: AN ECOCRITICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Poetry often depicts nature as a key element reflecting the relationship between humans and the environment. This study identifies the meanings of natural symbols in Mary Oliver's poems *The Summer Day* and *The Sun*, and explains how the two poems construct the relationship between humans and nature. Using Cheryll Glotfelty's ecocritical perspective as an interpretive lens and a descriptive qualitative method, the data consist of words, phrases, and lines containing natural symbols, analyzed through close reading and textual interpretation. The findings show that these symbols carry ecological and existential meanings rather than merely decorative ones. In *The Summer Day*, the grasshopper, swan, black bear, and grass symbolize vigilance, the value of non-human life, and humanity's closeness to nature, while in *The Sun*, the sun, sea, horizon, clouds, and blackness symbolize survival, generosity, and the natural cycle of existence. Four dimensions of the human-nature relationship emerge from the analysis: nature as a space for self-discovery, nature as a teacher of moral values, interdependence and mutual belonging, and ecological awareness through everyday experience. The study concludes that both poems depict nature as an active presence that shapes human understanding of life and invites readers to develop a deeper awareness of their relationship with nature through daily interaction.

Keywords: The Sun; The Summer Day; poetry; Mary Oliver; ecocriticism; natural symbols

Abstrak

Puisi sering kali menggambarkan alam sebagai elemen kunci yang mencerminkan hubungan antara manusia dan lingkungan. Penelitian ini mengidentifikasi makna simbol-simbol alam dalam puisi karya Mary Oliver, *The Summer Day* dan *The Sun*, serta menjelaskan bagaimana kedua puisi tersebut membangun hubungan antara manusia dan alam. Dengan menggunakan perspektif ekokritik Cheryll Glotfelty sebagai lensa interpretatif dan metode kualitatif deskriptif, data dalam penelitian ini terdiri dari kata, frasa, dan baris yang mengandung simbol-simbol alam, yang dianalisis melalui pembacaan cermat (close reading) dan interpretasi tekstual.

Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa simbol-simbol tersebut membawa makna ekologis dan eksistensial, bukan sekadar hiasan semata. Dalam *The Summer Day*, belalang, angsa, beruang hitam, dan rumput melambangkan kewaspadaan, nilai kehidupan non-manusia, dan kedekatan manusia dengan alam. Sementara itu, dalam *The Sun*, matahari, laut, cakrawala, awan, dan kegelapan melambangkan kelangsungan hidup, kemurahan hati, dan siklus keberadaan alam.

Empat dimensi hubungan manusia-alam muncul dari analisis ini: alam sebagai ruang untuk penemuan diri, alam sebagai guru nilai-nilai moral, saling ketergantungan dan rasa saling memiliki, serta kesadaran ekologis melalui pengalaman sehari-hari. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa kedua puisi tersebut menggambarkan alam sebagai kehadiran aktif yang membentuk pemahaman manusia tentang kehidupan dan mengajak pembaca untuk mengembangkan kesadaran yang lebih dalam mengenai hubungan mereka dengan alam melalui interaksi sehari-hari.

Kata Kunci: The Sun; The Summer Day; puisi; Mary Oliver; ekokritik; simbol alam



INTRODUCTION

Mary Oliver is an American poet whose work is marked by close observation of nature and sustained engagement with the relationship between human and non-human life (Loreto, 2021). Written largely between the 1960s and 2010s, her poems explore consciousness, spirituality, and humanity's place within the natural world. Two poems from her Pulitzer Prize-winning collection *New and Selected Poems* (1992) *The Summer Day* and *The Sun* depict the universe as a moral and spiritual guide, encouraging readers to see, appreciate, and reflect on the sanctity of life through simple, everyday experiences of nature (Oliver, 1992).

In *The Summer Day* the grasshopper is not merely an object of observation but an element of an experience that triggers existential awareness; in *The Sun*, light is not merely a natural phenomenon but a force that shapes how humans understand change and life. Reading nature only as an object interpreted by humans limits the perspective on its function in literary works; an approach is therefore needed that treats the relationship between humans and nature in a more balanced way. Ecocriticism supplies this foundation. Wellek and Warren (2014, in Widiono et al., 2026) argue that literature is an imaginative use of language that presents reality aesthetically and symbolically, so literary language must be interpreted through its implicit rather than literal meaning. Building on this, Luxemburg, Bal, and Weststeijn (2012, in Widiono et al., 2026) explain that literary symbols point to meanings beyond their literal sense and are contextual, fully intelligible only through the text as a whole.

Because Oliver's symbols are drawn consistently from nature animals, light, seasons, landscapes this study draws on Cheryll Glotfelty's ecocritical perspective, which examines the relationship between literature and the physical environment (Glotfelty, 1996), together with the concept of deep ecology, which holds that every living being possesses intrinsic value (Oppermann, 2018). Prior scholarship situates Oliver's work as a bridge between the romantic tradition and contemporary ecopoetics (Chen, 2018) and highlights her integration of sensory experience with affect (Zona, 2011), yet the specific interpretation of natural symbols in *The Summer Day* and *The Sun* through Glotfelty's framework remains limited. This study therefore addresses two questions: (1) What meanings of natural symbols are presented in Mary Oliver's poems *The Summer Day* and *The Sun*? and (2) How do the two poems describe the ecological relationship between humans and nature? The analysis is confined to the poetic text itself, setting aside biographical and comparative dimensions, and aims to contribute both to ecocritical theory applied to nature-derived symbols and to readers' practical awareness of their relationship with the environment.

This study makes both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it broadens the application of ecocriticism to poetic representations that are themselves drawn from nature, demonstrating that natural imagery functions as an active sign system rather than mere ornamentation, and that a deep-ecology-informed reading can surface ecological dimensions that a purely thematic or

biographical reading would miss. Practically, the study illustrates how symbolic language in poetry can cultivate environmental awareness and a more reflective stance toward the non-human world, offering a reference point for readers, students, and future researchers interested in the relationship between literary symbolism and ecological consciousness.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Ecocriticism and Literary Symbolism

Ecocriticism, most closely associated with Cheryll Glotfelty, is defined as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (Glotfelty, 1996). Recent scholarship extends this beyond representation to how literary works build ecological awareness (Clark, 2019; Heise, 2016). Buell (1995) argues that ecological awareness requires a shift from human-centered thinking toward a fuller regard for non-human existence, while Iovino and Oppermann (2014) contend that nature actively participates in the formation of meaning rather than serving merely as backdrop. Deep ecology (Devall, 1985) supplies a moral foundation by asserting the intrinsic value of every living being, and Braidotti (2019) and Oppermann (2018) reinforce this by situating humans within, rather than above, a relational ecological network.

Symbolism, etymologically from the Greek *symbolon*, denotes a sign pointing to meaning beyond its literal reference. Wellek and Warren (2014, in Widiono et al., 2026) note that literary language must be read through implicit meaning, and Luxemburg, Bal, and Weststeijn (2012, in Widiono et al., 2026) add that such meaning is contextual and suggestive rather than singular. Somani (2023) traces symbolism's emergence as a response to the limits of romanticism, oriented toward psychological depth rather than sentimentality. Taken together, these perspectives frame symbols as objects, animals, or phenomena that carry meanings the reader must actively interpret within the text.

2.2 Previous Studies

Several studies inform this research. Jema (2025) applies Glotfelty's ecocriticism to five poems by William Wordsworth, finding that flowers symbolize memory while mountains and rivers symbolize eternity and spiritual journey. Singh (2025) examines Robert Frost through the same lens, showing nature as an active influence on human thought. Malikh, Wijayanti, and Musyaffa (2025) combine Glotfelty and Fromm's ecocriticism with thematic analysis to read Fadwa Tuqan's "*Wajadtuhā*" against Indonesia's Sea Wall Project. Kamal et al. (2025) apply Glotfelty and Buell's frameworks to the war poetry of Ka'ab bin Malik, reading natural elements as symbols of struggle and spirituality. Most directly relevant, Hasan (2024) studies environmental awareness in Oliver's *Wild Geese* and *American Primitive*, finding that nature functions as a crucial element of consciousness and spirituality rather than mere backdrop. These studies confirm ecocriticism's broad applicability to poetry, yet none specifically interprets the natural symbols of *The*



Summer Day and The Sun together the gap this study addresses.

RESEARCH METHODE

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative method (Creswell, 2018), suited to interpreting textual meaning rather than testing hypotheses. The primary data are two poems by Mary Oliver, *The Summer Day* (1990) and *The Sun* (1992), from which words, phrases, lines, and descriptions containing natural elements were extracted as the units of analysis. Secondary data consist of supporting literature, theoretical texts, journal articles, and prior theses on ecocriticism and Oliver's poetry used to contextualize and reinforce the interpretation.

Data collection followed three steps: repeated close reading of both poems to grasp their language, imagery, and structure; identification of words and lines containing natural elements (animals, light, landscape, and other phenomena) as the primary data; and consultation of supporting references on ecocriticism, particularly Glotfelty's framework, to contextualize the interpretation. Data analysis proceeded through identification of all relevant symbols, classification of the symbols by type and by the ecological theme they express, and critical interpretation of each category using Glotfelty's ecocritical perspective, focusing on how nature functions as an active participant rather than passive setting. Deep ecology (Devall, 1985) supplements this framework by clarifying how natural elements such as the grasshopper or the sun carry ecological meaning as entities of value in themselves.

Trustworthiness in this qualitative design rests on close, repeated reading rather than statistical measures. To reduce interpretive bias, each candidate symbol was checked against three criteria before inclusion: it had to denote a concrete natural referent (an organism, phenomenon, or landscape feature) rather than an abstract concept; it had to occupy a syntactically or thematically prominent position within its line or stanza; and its proposed ecological meaning had to be traceable to specific textual cues diction, imagery, or structural placement rather than inferred solely from biographical knowledge of the poet. Symbols meeting all three criteria were retained for the classification presented in Section 4; borderline cases (for example, purely grammatical or connective natural words with no independent imagistic function) were excluded to keep the twenty-eight-symbol set analytically coherent.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Distribution of Natural Symbols

Close reading identified twenty-eight natural symbols distributed evenly between the two poems, fourteen in each, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of Natural Symbols in The Summer Day and The Sun

No.	Poem	Number of Symbols	Percentage
1	The Summer Day	14	50%

2	The Sun	14	50%
Total		28	100%

In *The Summer Day*, the identified symbols Summer Day, the world, swan, black bear, grasshopper, grass, sugar, complicated eyes, pale forearms, face, wings, fields, die, and wild emerge primarily from a prolonged encounter between the speaker and a grasshopper, which expands into existential reflection on death and the meaning of life. In *The Sun*, the symbols the sun, life, evening, horizon, clouds, hills, rumpled sea, blackness, other side of the world, red flower, heavenly oils, early summer, wild love, and warmth are drawn instead from large-scale environmental processes, the sun's daily and seasonal cycles, before returning to questions of humanity's emotional responsibility toward nature. This balanced distribution suggests that Oliver constructs ecological meaning with comparable symbolic density whether the poem's scale is a single small organism or a planetary process.

4.2 Meanings of Natural Symbols in The Summer Day

Table 2 summarizes the fourteen symbols identified in *The Summer Day* together with their contextual meanings.

Table 2. Natural Symbols and Their Meanings in The Summer Day

No.	Symbol	Line	Meaning
1	Summer Day	Title	Fullness of life, abundance, peak of the natural cycle
2	The World	1	The interdependent web of all living beings
3	Swan	2	Natural beauty and harmony
4	Black Bear	2	Strength and the wild side of nature
5	Grasshopper	3–4	Awareness and attention to simple things
6	Grass	5, 13	Human closeness to nature
7	Sugar	6	Nourishment in the human–nature encounter
8	Complicated Eyes	8	Intrinsic complexity and value of non-human beings
9	Pale Forearms	9	Embodied nature of the human–nature encounter
10	Face	9	Individuality of the non-human other
11	Wings	10	Impermanence of human–nature encounters
12	Fields	14	Space for human–environment interaction
13	Die	17	Mortality as part of the



natural cycle			
14	Wild	19	Untamed vitality of life beyond domestication

The poem opens with the question "Who made the world?" (line 1), placing the world before any individual being and, in Buell's (1995) terms, textually embodying biocentrism by locating the world's origin beyond human categories. The swan and black bear that follow (line 2) are deliberately paired opposites grace against wildness through which Oliver asserts that ecological diversity encompasses both the peaceful and the untamed, each possessing intrinsic value regardless of human judgment. The grasshopper (lines 3–4) then becomes the poem's central focus: an ordinary insect rather than a majestic animal; it demonstrates that ecological understanding begins with patient attention to everyday life and that nature follows its own rhythm independent of human observation. Grass (lines 5, 13) places the speaker and the grasshopper on the same physical plane the speaker "falls" and "kneels" rather than remaining upright, signaling humility rather than dominance, while sugar (line 6) reframes the feeding of the grasshopper as coexistence rather than control, a moment of mutual, not one-sided, enrichment.

The grasshopper's complicated eyes (line 8), pale forearms, and face (line 9) extend this attentiveness to the insect's embodied particularity, challenging the assumption that complexity and individuality are exclusively human traits; its wings (line 10), by which it departs, mark the impermanence of the encounter and the insect's autonomy from human control. The poem's closing movement fields (line 14), die (line 17), and wild (line 19) broadens the observation into existential reflection: strolling through the fields signals active rather than distant engagement with landscape, the question "Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?" (line 7) erases the hierarchical distinction between human and non-human mortality, and the closing image of "your one wild and precious life" (line 19) places human existence within the same untamed vitality that governs grasshoppers, swans, and black bears alike.

4.3 Meanings of Natural Symbols in The Sun

Table 3 summarizes the fourteen symbols identified in The Sun.

Table 3. Natural Symbols and Their Meanings in The Sun

N o.	Symbol	Line	Meaning
1	Sun	Title, 5, 30	New hope, the cycle of life, source of energy
2	Life	3	Totality of conscious existence sustained by natural forces
3	Evening	6	Transition, ending, preparation for renewal
4	Horizon	8	Life's journey and possibilities
5	Clouds	9	Impermanence and the

ever-changing sky			
6	Hills	9	Boundary between the familiar and the unknown
7	Rumpled Sea	10	Change and the dynamics of life
8	Blackness	13	Natural cycles and ecological balance
9	Other Side of the World	15	Stability and the grounding presence of the world
10	Red Flower	16	Life and growth
11	Heavenly Oils	18	Sacred, nourishing quality of natural light and warmth
12	Early Summer	19	New beginnings and renewal
13	Wild Love	24	Uncontainable, generous force of nature
14	Warms	32	Energy and comfort

The sun itself (title, lines 5, 30), described through active verbs such as reaches, touches, and warms, is figured as a force of generosity distributed equally to every element of nature, reinforcing ecological equality rather than human privilege. Life (line 3) is likewise framed collectively: Oliver's wonder arises not from human achievement but from the shared conditions sunlight, energy, natural cycles that sustain every living being. Evening (line 6), clouds (line 9), and the rumpled sea (line 10) together depict nature as fundamentally dynamic: the sunset is not loss but transition, clouds embody impermanence and the water cycle's interdependence, and the sea's constant motion mirrors life's continuous transformation rather than static permanence. The horizon (line 8) symbolizes possibility rather than limit, connecting earth, sea, and sky into a single ecological landscape, while the hills (line 9) mark a boundary beyond which natural processes continue outside human perception.

Blackness (line 13), rather than signifying threat, is read as an essential and generative phase of the day–night cycle on which countless organisms depend, and the other side of the world (line 15) extends the poem's frame to a planetary scale, reminding readers that the sun's light never truly disappears but continues to sustain life beyond individual perception. The red flower (line 16) and heavenly oils (line 18) render the sunrise as an image of growth and sacred nourishment, dissolving the boundary between the terrestrial and the celestial, while early summer (line 19) situates this renewal within the recurring rhythm of seasonal regeneration. The poem's emotional climax, wild love (line 24), positions nature not the speaker as the origin of generosity, so that human affection becomes a response to ecological abundance rather than its source; the closing image of warmth (line 32) makes this abundance physically felt, reminding the reader that human well-being depends on natural processes it does not produce.



4.4 The Human–Nature Relationship: Four Ecological Themes

Interpreted through Glotfelty's (1996) framework, the twenty-eight symbols cluster into four themes describing the human–nature relationship across both poems, summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Distribution of Natural Symbols by Human–Nature Relationship Theme

No.	Human–Nature Relationship	Qty	%	Representative Symbols
1	Nature as a Space for Human Self-Discovery	8	30.77%	Grasshopper, Grass, Fields, Die, Wild (TSD); Life, Evening, Wild Love (TS)
2	Nature as Teacher and Guide of Moral Values	7	26.92%	Sugar, Swan, Black Bear, Pale Forearms, Face (TSD); Heavenly Oils, Red Flower (TS)
3	Interdependence and Mutual Belonging	6	23.08%	World (TSD); Sun, Clouds, Rumpled Sea, Horizon, Other Side of the World (TS)
4	Ecological Awareness through Everyday Experience	5	19.23%	Summer Day (TSD); Early Summer, Blackness, Warms, Hills (TS)

a. Nature as a Space for Human Self-Discovery

The most dominant theme (30.77%) begins with the grasshopper (TSD, lines 3–4) and the image of life (TS, line 3), each redirecting the speaker's attention outward, from self toward nature, making self-understanding possible through observation rather than isolation. Glotfelty (1996) holds that literature must be read in relation to the physical environment because human experience cannot be separated from nature, a claim Loreto (2022) extends by noting that Oliver finds spiritual meaning in ordinary encounters with living forms. The settings of grass and fields (TSD, lines 5, 13–14) and evening (TS, line 6) provide the quiet, familiar spaces in which this reflection occurs not exotic wilderness but everyday surroundings echoing Weiher's (2022) observation that Oliver continues the Transcendentalist practice of locating deep meaning in ordinary experience. The closing symbols die and wild (TSD, lines 17, 19) and wild love (TS, line 24) complete the process: life's finitude demands purposeful living, and gratitude toward nature reflects an acceptance of one's place within it, consistent with what Morton (2016) terms *ecognosis* the recognition that humans have always already been part of nature.

b. Nature as Teacher and Guide of Moral Values

The second theme (26.92%) locates moral instruction in nature's own conduct. Sugar offered to the grasshopper (TSD, line 6) and the heavenly oils given continuously by the sun (TS, line 18) both model generosity without expectation of return, supporting Valera's (2019) account of deep ecology, in which every being holds value independent of its usefulness to humans. The swan and black bear (TSD, line 2) and the red flower receiving equal sunlight (TS, line 16) model respect through their unranked coexistence, illustrating Glotfelty's (1996) claim that *ecocriticism* challenges human primacy by attending to the non-human world on its own terms. The poems close this theme on humility: the grasshopper resting undisturbed on the speaker's forearm (TSD, line 9) and nature's gifts received with gratitude rather than possession (TS) together suggest, following Morton (2016) and Weiher (2022), that patience and care, not domination, are the conditions under which moral understanding of nature develops.

c. Interdependence and Mutual Belonging

The third theme (23.08%) is drawn almost entirely from *The Sun*, whose horizon, clouds, and rumpled sea (lines 8–10) depict a continuous natural process in which no element exists in isolation, while *The Summer Day* contributes only its opening image of the world (line 1), which places humans and other beings within one shared existence before any individual is named. Valera (2019) situates this within deep ecology's premise that all beings possess intrinsic value, encouraging humans to see themselves as part of, rather than above, nature. The image of the other side of the world (TS, line 15) extends this interdependence to a planetary scale, and Morton (2016) frames the resulting sense of belonging not as ownership of nature but as recognition that human life depends on the same world that sustains every other form of life.

d. Ecological Awareness through Everyday Experience

The least frequent but structurally significant theme (19.23%) is carried by the titles themselves *Summer Day* and *early summer* (TS, line 19) situating both poems within ordinary, repeatable moments rather than extraordinary events. Loreto (2022) argues that Oliver's ecological vision grows from exactly such ordinary encounters. Hills, blackness, and shifting light (TS, lines 9, 13) render nature's continuous change as something easily overlooked precisely because it is constant, a dynamic Weiher (2022) links to Oliver's Transcendentalist inheritance. The closing image of warmth (TS, line 32) makes this awareness physically immediate, supporting Morton's (2016)



concept of ecognosis: an awakening not to something new but to what has always been present and merely unnoticed.

Across both poems, the four themes together indicate that Oliver's central ecological concern is the reshaping of the speaker's and, by extension, the reader's inner relationship with nature. Self-discovery and moral learning alone account for more than half of the thematic data (57.68%), suggesting that Oliver treats environmental interdependence and seasonal change as the ground on which reflection on the self and on ethics takes place, rather than as ends in themselves. This pattern supports Glotfelty's (1996) broader argument that literature should be read in relation to the physical environment: throughout both poems, nature functions as an active participant in the construction of meaning, not a passive backdrop to human concerns.

CONCLUSION

This study identified twenty-eight natural symbols in Mary Oliver's *The Summer Day* and *The Sun*, evenly distributed between the two poems, and interpreted them through Cheryll Glotfelty's ecocritical perspective. The symbols carry ecological and existential meanings rather than merely decorative ones: in *The Summer Day*, the grasshopper, swan, black bear, and grass express vigilance, the value of non-human life, and human closeness to nature, while in *The Sun*, the sun, sea, horizon, clouds, and blackness express survival, generosity, and the natural cycle of existence. Four interrelated themes describe how the two poems construct the human–nature relationship: nature as a space for self-discovery, nature as a teacher of moral values, interdependence and mutual belonging, and ecological awareness through everyday experience. Together, these findings confirm Glotfelty's argument that literature and the physical environment are fundamentally interdependent, and that nature in Oliver's poetry functions as an active presence shaping human understanding of life rather than a passive setting for it.

Future research could extend this ecocritical approach to other poems by Mary Oliver to test whether comparable patterns of human–nature relationship recur across her body of work, or apply comparative analysis across poets and genres. Complementary theoretical lenses ecofeminism, environmental ethics, or animal studies could also illuminate dimensions of the human–nature relationship not addressed here. More broadly, this study suggests that attending closely to natural symbolism in poetry can deepen readers' everyday ecological awareness, encouraging them to regard nature not as a backdrop to literature but as an integral part of human life.

5.1 Limitations and Future Directions

This study is limited in scope by design: it focuses exclusively on two poems and does not address Oliver's biography, the historical circumstances of their composition, or comparison with other poets' treatment of similar natural imagery. The classification of symbols into four themes, while grounded in repeated close reading,

also involves interpretive judgment inherent to qualitative textual analysis, and a different reader applying the same ecocritical framework might weight certain borderline symbols differently; for instance, treating "fields" primarily as an interdependence symbol rather than a self-discovery symbol. These limitations do not undermine the study's central claims but do suggest that the four-theme framework proposed here should be treated as a productive lens rather than a fixed taxonomy. Extending the same method to Oliver's wider body of work, or applying it comparatively to other nature poets writing in different cultural and ecological contexts, would help establish whether the patterns identified in *The Summer Day* and *The Sun* reflect a broader and more durable feature of her ecopoetics.

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