

Research Article

**Ecocriticism in Mary McCarthy's Birds of America**

K. Sriram<sup>1\*</sup>, Dr. R. Bharathi<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract**

The *Birds of America* is set in 1960s America and Paris and follows a 19-year-old boy's quest for common morality in a contemporary, industrial society. McCarthy published a series of essays which concentrating on the corrupting effect of Western Capitalist culture. She made a clear perspective of the society after the Vietnam War. McCarthy shares the views of the majority of liberal intellectuals about the countercultural movement and the efficacy of student protests. Mary McCarthy's ideas about nature and human existence in today's constantly changing world are represented in both her creative and critical works. Human beings can never be divorced from their surroundings, the culture they acquire, the language they speak, the people they know, and the natural forces that form them and their behavior and never be divorced from their surroundings and the culture they acquire, the language they speak, the people they know, and the natural forces that form them and their behavior. Capitalism is equated with contemporary industry, the devastation of nature, the massification of culture, and individual alienation in this passage. McCarthy's conflict between societal equality and individual expression are presented in her works. Mary McCarthy, as a writer, is brutally constrained by her own lived experience. McCarthy attempted to cram a running political, social, and ecological commentary into the confines of a book that cannot or will not support it in *Birds of America*. McCarthy in her novels she says about the problem connected to the loss of nature and the consequent moral crisis in society.

**Keywords:** Society Background , Vietnam War, Birds of America, Nature, Political Activist,

**INTRODUCTION**

Mary McCarthy's novel *The Birds of America* was published in 1971. The article reveals the governing influence of the French philosophers and literary critics on McCarthy's presentation of Nature as an ecological system in her novels. Ecocriticism is the study of literature and environment. It examines the various ways how literature treats the subject of nature. The movement started in the 1990's. William Rueckert *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* states Nature is concerned with complex interactions and with the large sets of interrelationships. Michael P Branch traces the word –ecocriticism back to William Rueckert's 1978 essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. According to

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<sup>1\*</sup>Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University, AnnamalaiNagar, Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu 608002, sriramphil@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor, English Section, (FEAT) Annamalai University, AnnamalaiNagar, Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu 608002

Rueckert, Ecocriticism means the application of ecology and ecological concept to the study of literature. Ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies. Everything is connected to everything else.

## **2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The objectives of this article are to trace a sense of disillusionment with American capitalist society and a yearning for a post, pastoral past. Mary McCarthy's critique of postwar American society focuses on mass production, destruction of the environment, and the breakdown of ethical and aesthetic ideals. This research paper seeks to achieve the following goals:

1. To learn about the precise descriptions of not only animals but also forests, caves, rivers, swamps, and deserts.
2. To investigate ecocriticism and McCarthy's novels within the context of American literary history.
3. By applying ecocritical ideas to her novel, this study reveals how McCarthy uses character to demonstrate the interconnectedness of humans with their environment.
4. This study represents a unique form of ecocriticism as well as a challenge to conventional literary criticism of Mary McCarthy by merging the environmental philosophies of deep ecology.
5. To investigate how humans are perceived as a part of nature, a contention central to most ecocriticism and critical to deep ecology.

## **3. SCOPE OF THE ARTICLE**

The scope of study is varied. There were bound to be some recurring themes in Mary McCarthy's work. It was not easy for her to have a significant impact on American literature, nor was it easy for her to become one of the best women writers of her time. It's easy to note the few themes she uses in her published works, which distinguishes and highlights her work. The themes of McCarthy's novels generally concern the social failures of a group of utopian communities' progressive education, cultural progress. She was a novelist and critic known for her bitingly ironic commentary on marital relationship, gender orientation, cognitive powerlessness, as well as the status of women throughout contemporary urban United States. McCarthy's work is primarily satirical, and much of it is achieved through exaggeration and generalisation. The dominant entity seems to be the pairing of a different character with each chapter, with an occasional chorus of viewpoints thrown in for good measure. McCarthy likened the technique to improvisation, in which the author projects her voice into various characters who speak for her.

## **4. FINDING AND DISCUSSION**

McCarthy's later work reflects a sense of disenchantment with American capitalist society and a yearning for a pre-industrial, pastoral past. Her criticism of postwar American society is aimed at mass manufacturing, environmental degradation, and the collapse of ethical and aesthetic ideals. McCarthy's opposition to the war, like that of many Americans, was cemented in 1965 by the United States' bombardment of North Vietnam. McCarthy became more vocal against the war in Vietnam as US ground troops and airstrikes mounted, as knowledge of

political instability in South Vietnam and the Vietcong's stubbornness grew, and as reports of US involvement in war crimes spread.

McCarthy published a series of essays in 1967 concentrating on the corrupting effect of Western Capitalist culture on the South Vietnamese and indicting liberal intellectuals for their seeming conflict with US officials in pursuing a moderate solution to the Vietnam issue. McCarthy's seeming extreme opposition to the Vietnam War masks a rather conservative criticism of contemporary industrial society and a sentimental yearning for a return to an idealized pre-industrial era. McCarthy identifies as a conservative in the strictest meaning of the word, wishing to preserve the past. McCarthy's criticism of mass society and culture, as well as her desire to restore a more ethical and natural past, are made clear in *Birds of America*, a book she wrote during the Vietnam War (Robert. M. 1999).

Despite her opposition to the Vietnam War, McCarthy shares the views of the majority of liberal intellectuals about the countercultural movement and the efficacy of student protests. Her works on Vietnam are a critique of what she views as American capitalist society's corrupting effect on rural, agricultural folk culture. McCarthy mixes radical activity with a conservative desire to return to an imagined golden era of the past in her 1960s and 1970s political works. McCarthy argued that contemporary industrial society's depersonalization and mass culture had

also resulted in the degradation of high culture into a more vulgar and accessible version of mass culture. McCarthy, following the radical and romantic traditions, adopts an idealized image of a pastoral, pre-industrial civilization as embodying an ideal of ethical and social ideals. McCarthy's latter political writings pose a danger to the same liberties, intellectual and economic, that allow her to speak and be heard.

Mary McCarthy's ideas about nature and human existence in today's constantly changing world are represented in both her creative and critical works. In her 1970 article "One Touch of Nature," she laments the loss of nature in literature.

The lack of a narrative in contemporary fiction is often lamented, as is the disappearance of people. However, nobody has drawn attention to the absence of another aspect, as though no one noticed. We've nearly forgotten that descriptions of sunsets, storms, rivers, lakes, mountains, and valleys used to be a required component of fiction, not just a painted background for the action, but a component deemed essential to the art. (McCarthy 189).

It was a period when a Mary McCarthy ability to describe was seen as a measure of his skill: Dickens' London fogs, Fenimore Cooper's waterfalls, woods, and prairie, Emily Bronte's moors, Hardy's heath and milky vales, Melville's Pacific. Yet, in their day, they were regarded as samplings of the author's finest creative ore, his vein of genius even more so than his depiction of characters or narrative management. In the traditional triad of narrative, character, and setting, the setting, comprised of Nature and her moods, provided the atmosphere almost literally; it was the air that the book breathed, much like the life-sustaining air that surrounds Mother Earth.

To appreciate the loss of what could be termed the "typical outdoors" from modern fictionsunsets, birds, trees, meadows, pastures, and waterfallsit's necessary to remember that it wasn't always a significant presence. The eighteenth century saw the tremendous eruption of nature into fiction. Earlier in the century, descriptive writing flourished not in prose but in the

## Ecocriticism in Mary McCarthy's *Birds of America*

Romantic poets' poetry. It occurred during the Industrial Revolution, when the countryside was eroded by black satanic mills. As is well known, Romantic poets were enamored of common wildflowers such as celandine, oxlip, field daisy, snowdrop, autumn leaves, larks, and cuckoos, that is, of Nature in her most banal and minute details.

Ecocriticism is derived from the Greek terms *Oikos* and *Kritis*, which together mean "house judge," which may come as a surprise to many fans of green, outdoor literature. The *Oikos* idea, as established by W.J.Everett in his article "Work, Family, and Faith: Rewiring Our Values" (W.J.Everett 35–44), is an effective tool for evaluating our society and culture. The *Oikos*, which translates as "household/habitat" in Greek, served as the foundation for a holistic society in which humans, nature, and the holy were inextricably linked.

Human beings can never be divorced from their surroundings, the culture they acquire, the language they speak, the people they know, and the natural forces that form them and their behavior. They find solace in the lap of magnificent nature whenever they are dissatisfied or in need. Through literature, humans discover joy in nature. They find comfort in nature. Writers such as Thoreau want to be one with nature and to live in the deep woods. Their pleasure is contingent upon the external circumstances in which they find themselves. The 1970s were often referred to as the 'Decade of the Environment,' which began on 22 April 1970 with the inaugural 'Earth Day.'

Ecocriticism is the most recent of the revisionist tendencies that have raced across the humanities in recent decades. It gained pace, first in the United States and then in the United Kingdom, when an increasing number of literary academics started to consider what their discipline might offer to our knowledge of the growing environmental catastrophe. Eco-criticism is the interdisciplinary study of literature and the environment, in which all disciplines collaborate to evaluate the environment and discuss potential ideas for resolving the current situation.

Ecocriticism is often linked with the International Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE). It is a sub-discipline of literary criticism. It is the examination of nature or natural phenomena in literary works. This entails a concentration on the application of ecology and ecological ideas to literary analysis. William Rueckert may have coined the phrase ecocriticism. He wrote "Literature and Ecology" in 1998 and experimented with ecocriticism. (93)

Eco-critics value works that are primarily concerned with the landscape, which encompasses not only physical occurrences but also the history and geography of that location. Only when we have a sense of belonging to a place can we have a complete understanding. In *Beyond Ecology: Self, Place, and the Pathetic Fallacy*, ever den quotes Paul Shepherd as stating, "Knowing who you are without knowing where you came from is difficult" (Glotfelty 101). Eco-criticism seeks to integrate and identify human interaction with the environment in ways that enhance and expand man's intellect and soul. This participation would contribute to the revitalization of abandoned locations and instill in us a feeling of empathy and belonging, of knowing and being a part of that specific area.

Ecocriticism is not just a reaction to the aesthetic accomplishments of American nature

writing; it also attempts to raise societal awareness of the humanistic understanding of our connections with the natural world in an era of environmental pollution, harm, and devastation. Humans create environmental crises when they fail to understand the interdependence of all things. *The Eco-criticism Reader* (Cheryll Glotfelty & Harold Fromm.) is a critical introduction to a discipline of study that is completely committed to today's most urgent issue—the worldwide environmental catastrophe.

Nature and literature have long had a strong connection, as demonstrated by the works of poets and other authors throughout history in virtually every civilization on the planet. Today, all branches of knowledge and growth are analyzing and emphasizing the close connection between the natural and social worlds. Literary critics seek to understand how authors have textualized this intimate connection between nature and civilization in their works.

Ecological awareness has received widespread attention and increased in importance as a topic of research across the globe in recent years. Due to the fact that eco-criticism also presupposes the reciprocal impact of nature and human culture, writings that investigate this mutual effect are expected to reflect an ecological awareness.

Ecocriticism as a concept originally emerged in the late 1970s, at WLA sessions (the Western Literature Association). Ecocriticism, as it currently exists in the United States of America, takes its literary cues from three significant nineteenth-century American writers whose work celebrates nature, the life force, and the wilderness as manifested in America: Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Margaret Fuller (1810-1850), and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862). Three of them were members of the transcendentalists, a group of New England authors, essayists, and philosophers who sought 'cultural independence' from European models. Emerson's first, brief book, *Nature*, originally published anonymously in 1836, is a contemplative essay about the natural world's effect on him, often expressed in starkly dramatic directness:

Crossing a barren common, across snow puddles, at dusk, beneath a cloudy sky, I have experienced pure ecstasy. I feel relieved to be on the verge of dread. (38)

*Summer on the Lakes*, published in 1843, is a beautifully written diary of her experience of the broader American environment after a time as the first woman student at Harvard. At Niagara, for example, she writes: "For here, there is no escape from the weight of an eternal creation; all other forms and movements come and go, the tide rises and falls, the wind blows in gales and gusts, but here is a constant, an indefatigable motion." Whether awake or sleeping, there is no escape; this rushing around and through you continues. This is the most profound sense of grandeur I've had almost everlasting, if not limitless. (71)

Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) is a diary of his two-year sojourn in a cabin he constructed on the bank of Walden Pond, a few miles from his hometown of Concord, Massachusetts, beginning in 1845. It is probably the quintessential story of withdrawing from contemporary life and seeking renewal via a 'return to nature.' These three novels may be considered seminal examples of American 'eco-centered' literature.

*Birds of America* is set against the backdrop of the Vietnam War. While the conflict is there in the background, *Birds of America*'s main subject is the destructive manner in which this

### Ecocriticism in Mary McCarthy's *Birds of America*

century's society has been controlled by technology. It is the tale of a lady seeking satisfaction as an artist, a wife, and a mother, as well as the story of her restless, idealistic adolescent son. From America to Europe's cities, it is a wistful cry for pristine nature, as we continue to be surrounded by shoddy and plastic, which is rapidly destroying the pure and natural.

McCarthy said in an interview with William F. Buckley, "I believe capitalism is the most effective deterioration of society of human existence." (130) Capitalism is equated with contemporary industry, the devastation of nature, the massification of culture, and individual alienation in this passage. According to her, contemporary man is experiencing an ethical dilemma as a result of the devastation of nature. McCarthy's late work delves into the massification of culture and society, as well as the struggle between social equality and artistic ideals. McCarthy laments the novel's and our lives' loss of nature in a radio conversation with Eric Rhode.

And if we lose nature, in the shape of trees, farms, and animals, it seems as if we also lose a moral standard for the natural. If you don't have a tree or some other form of nature that is eternal or at least more durable than man, and if you're not in touch with it, nor with the seasons, but just with frozen food, how can you maintain a notion of the natural as a moral value in human life? (Rhodes, Eric, p.95)

Additionally, the extinction of nature has created an aesthetic problem in which quantity has been sacrificed for quality. McCarthy sees a "kind of Gresham's Law" at work in the mass manufacturing sector, where poor bread supplants freshly made, excellent bread. McCarthy expresses freely in an interview with Jean Francois Revel, "I despise frozen food." I believe that, in general, poor goods drive out excellent. (Martin, T, 116) She is stuck in a liberal bind between her egalitarian principles making bread, art, and literature available to the masses and her aesthetic values preferring high culture over popular culture.

McCarthy's fascination with the conflict between societal equality and individual expression goes all the way back to her infancy and upbringing under strict Catholic guardians. In her memoirs, *Memories of a Catholic Childhood*, she describes how, for the sake of justice, she and her brothers were prohibited from possessing their toys or reading outside literature. Such "equitable" treatment taught McCarthy as a child that "equality was a kind of injustice" and honed her determination to stand out as an individual.

*Birds of America* is set in 1960s America and Paris and follows a 19-year-old boy's quest for common morality in a contemporary, industrial society. As with McCarthy, her protagonist is faced with the moral bankruptcy of modern industrial civilization and strives to recreate a more natural and ethical past. His egalitarian ideals are put to the test by the mass tourism business and, more specifically, the mass consumption of art. In this book, McCarthy examines the contradiction between liberal ideals and social realities.

*Birds of America*, like most of McCarthy's work, was inspired by current events. Although McCarthy situates *Birds of America* in a political context, she subordinates the political to the philosophical. The Vietnam War, student demonstrations, and the civil rights movement offer a platform for debating questions of equality, morality, and the collapse of contemporary industrial civilization.

The novel is mostly about Peter Levi, a young liberal idealist. Peter is the son of Rosamund Brown of Ohio and her first husband, an anti-Fascist Italian Jew who fled to the United States during World War II. Peter is a patriot whose political environment has been influenced by the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War's early phases. Peter, a philosophy minor, is a zealot of Kantian morality; he has sworn never to use anybody as a means to an end. He usually carried a card that said "The other is always an end: thine Maxim" in his wallet (8). He is reserved, and he weighs the importance of his actions in terms of humanity's needs rather than the peculiarities of a tiny culture. He makes an effort to organize his life according to Kantian principles.

The book is set in the fictional town of Rocky Port, Maine, as well as in Paris and Rome. The opening and last sequences are reliant on birds, namely an owl and a swan. Peter is a nature enthusiast. At the novel's outset, Peter travels to the sanctuary to pay a visit to an old friend, the Great Horned Owl. He is devastated to learn of the owl's death. He is choked with grief and astonishment. He never imagined that the owl, like any elderly person, would die. Peter had been promising himself a visit to the Wild Life Sanctuary since he learned from his mother that they would be returning to Rocky Port for the summer. He was distraught about the loss. He also misses the three cormorants he used to see from his window. Due to his timidity, which necessitates a roundabout approach, he often finds himself doing just that. He believes that if he did not inquire now, he would never learn the reason for the bird's demise. He inquires of many others about the bird's demise.

By the way, could you tell me what happened to the Great Horned Owl that was formerly housed at the Wild Life Sanctuary? " How could he fight for racial rights in Mississippi if he had the freedom to ask a simple question in "unneighborly" New England? (8)

Peter is informed by a variety of locals, including the lady who notifies him in the opening scene that the great horned owl has died: "You must anticipate changes." When he and his mother initially arrived in the autumn, he liked to watch three cormorants perched on pilings in the cove and hoped to see them again upon their return. He had planned three emotional journeys: one to the cormorants, another to the Great Horned Owl, and a third to a secret waterfall. However, he is dissatisfied with the modifications. Apart from birds, Peter laments a hidden waterfall that has disappeared due to highway construction.

Following the Industrial Revolution, the great change produced inequalities between lawful resource use and environmental well-being. The Industrial Revolution resulted in agricultural advancements, large-scale iron and steel production, the invention of equipment, and the factory method of production. Industrialization facilitated the transition from rural to urban areas. The current industrial society's well-publicized promise of improved living circumstances for everyone is well-known. The use of factories and mass manufacturing has resulted in the depletion of some natural resources, irreversibly altering the ecosystem. Environmental changes can result in harm.

Rocky Port currently has regular air service and a new roadway connecting it to New York. While Peter is politically liberal, he is fundamentally a conservative. Except for civil rights, he was a staunch opponent of development in any direction. For Peter, living in a small home in New England with his mother is very dull. He had never taken a trip to California; he

yearned for the winter. He despised his stepfather's garden in Berkeley, where roses, daffodils, tulips, and irises bloomed concurrently, leaving him with nothing to look forward to. He was solely interested in hummingbirds. He was opposed to the desert. He was sure that it was the result of a nuclear disaster that had struck a previous group of scientists. He refused to include Death Valley in the realm of Nature. Peter was an ardent supporter of nature and a critic of contemporary physics for meddling with nature. Peter believes that this is the last year he will want solitude; next year, he will be interested in ladies and parties. He also claimed that it would be the final year for him to spend with birds and animals, unless he wanted to be an ornithologist or abiologist.

Peter and his mother took walks together, something they had never done in Berkeley since they did not have a vehicle. They went down to the point every clear evening, past the abandoned lighthouse and boarded-up whaling museum, to watch the sunset. It was a ceremony, similar to the lowering of a flag. They stood there watching the fishing boats return. Peter had the distinct impression that he was not just living in a fairy tale, but in a paradise, where his love for his mother coexisted with his passion for nature and the austere New England environment. That was why he had a feeling of return or repatriation.

McCarthy argues here that contemporary man is in a moral dilemma as a result of the loss of nature in the pursuit of development and industrialization. The consequences of the industrial revolution on innocent lives were immediately evident to the authors. McCarthy explores issues of the environment, culture, and the search for equality in this book. The title is derived from John Audubon's eponymous bird collection. McCarthy tells interviewer Joan Kufrin that "the core, the tiny germ concept, and the seed" of *Birds of America* is that: "There was a guy we knew in Paris." He was the son of academicians from my age, whom we knew only tangibly. He used to stop by and say hello. He lived in a deplorable flat. And he purchased a plant. And he used to take this plant on WALKS, which is how the novel germinated... (Kufrin, Joan, p.198)

Peter and his mother, Rosamund, attempt to evade the onslaught of mass, metropolitan civilization by fleeing to rural Rocky Port, where she prepares from scratch and the son communes with Nature. Rosamund's attempts to gather the goods required for her game of making genuine American dinners were continually foiled. Bean pots were always difficult to come by in Rocky Port, but muffin tins, along with buttons and other homely items, vanished from the shops.

Rosamund was a staunch defender of tradition, and whenever she introduced anything new, it became a part of the established order, something that had "always" existed. She had experimentally convinced Peter that homemade chili sauce was superior to the bottled ketchup his peer groupers splashed on their hamburgers, just as she had convinced him of the superiority of homemade cake. Each morning, she prepared his breakfast, rather than simply leaving corn flakes, frozen fruit juice, and chocolate milk for him. Rocky Port's market relied heavily on frozen foods, and there were few fresh vegetables available, even at the neighboring town's supermarket. Despite the fishing fleet, obtaining fresh fish was a challenge. Rosamund nostalgically describes what America was like in those days, despite the fact that things have changed rapidly:

She saw the old America during the summers when she and her sister visited their



grandmother's farm after their mother died, which she associated with the speckled foxgloves in her grandmother's yard. Winters in Marietta, where she had grown up and attended college, had been similar to now. Simply, the distinction between radio and television, as well as between short-and long-play recordings. She smiled at Peter for romanticizing the radio era. (33) Peter despised it when she assigned him the task of borrowing muffin pans, cake racks, and a flour sifter. He attempted to persuade his mum that no one owned or used them anymore. "You're missing the point, mum. You've lost your bearings. Americans have ceased to cook. You humiliate them. " (57) Peter even mocks his mother, saying, "Perhaps you are spoilt, mother." Only a few wealthy individuals with chefs can afford the kind of cuisine you like. " (60)

Thus, modern eating patterns serve as an essential metaphor for the writer as he or she delves into the realm of nature, the source of human sustenance. McCarthy's greatest desire is for humans to live as near to nature as possible. One feels a deeper connection with Nature in this condition of being. Artificial eating habits deteriorate the human body and alienate humans from nature. As a result, her characters have a strong bond with nature.

Ornithology, according to Peter, is a branch of natural science that enables one to approach nature without messing with it. Ornithology is one of the few surviving descriptive sciences; it entails merely watching birds and attempting to alter their biological characteristics. Birds in nature are left alone, free of human intervention, while ornithologists operate only as observers. McCarthy and her protagonist are preoccupied with this desire to protect nature and with applying the ethical principles of nature to a civilization in distress.

McCarthy depicts Peter and his mother's effort to reestablish moral order via a return to nature in the opening section of *Birds of America*. By returning to Rocky Port, the New England town where they used to spend their summers, Peter and his mother want to revert to a more natural condition devoid of television, automobiles, and other external intrusions. Peter's more realistic father mocks his effort at Rocky Port to learn about nature: "Nature!" "Do not be a Goddamn idiot!" he responds. "Nature is anachronistic." (43) Peter's father is more concerned with the contemporary realities of securing Peter's future by enrolling him in a reputable school.

Rosamund sees the most obvious invasion of mass manufacturing in the home realms of cooking and gardening. As with Peter, she is skeptical of technological advancements, but she allows for practical exceptions: "She was always attempting to draw a line, her high-water mark, across her history of accomplishments in order to avoid becoming a complete reactionary: in the house, she said, a good place to stop would have been with the flush toilet and vacuum cleaner.

(167) McCarthy compiles lists and catalogues of fresh delicacies and chefs' attire that have become outdated in this day of mass manufacturing. From bean pots to jelly glasses to entire fish to non-instant tapioca, the narrative was the same: they haven't had a request for them in years, that they have become obsolete. Rosamund's opposition to processed foods and mass manufacturing stems from a strong sense of taste and an underlying conviction that quality cannot be measured. Additionally, she behaves as if the distinction between sliced and unsliced bread is a distinction between good and evil.

McCarthy foresees the future course of American consumerism and predicts the present

fake yearning for whole foods.

The deterioration of the natural past, as represented by the settlement of Rocky Port, culminates in the yearly Battle of Rocky Port festival. Once limited to homemade cuisine and backyard gardens, the celebrations have become commercialized, with corporate-sponsored hot dogs and ice cream stalls. The ultimate insult occurs when the winner of the garden contest is shown to have used store-bought plants; the sole surviving natural garden is overgrown with weeds. In the novel's second section, Peter, disillusioned with American capitalist culture's failure, travels overseas in search of common humanity. In this book, Jamesian themes of the innocent abroad in Paris and Rome are explored.

**The critic Helen Vendler, observes**

Mary McCarthy, as a writer, is brutally constrained by her own lived experience. [...] Peter's wanderings, meetings, discussions, and misfortunes seem to have been plucked from any number of returned-Fulbright stories, and we lack the sharpness and vehemence of Miss McCarthy's own smart and sarcastic replies. (Vendler, Helen, p.16)

Peter travels over the Atlantic on a ship with his motorcycle, intending to take a leisurely overland journey to Paris before checking in at the Sorbonne. In Paris, Peter lodges in a military hotel. Peter sends a twenty-eight-page letter to his mother in which he strikes a balance between aesthetics and morality, aristocracy and democracy. When Peter swears to reject Rosamund, we hear echoes of McCarthy's internal conflict for years. He has finally acquired his flat. He puts his beliefs to the test while staying in a succession of hotels, which revolves around the issue of tipping the chambermaids: if he tips, he receives superior treatment. Her responsibility is to clean the toilet. If no one tips, it is unfair to the chambermaids; if everyone tips, it is unfair to those who cannot afford to. Tipping creates a moral dilemma for the young Kantian who believes it is proper to tip the chambermaid but is averse to purchasing privileges or making others seem bad.

Peter's quest for universal humanity is fruitless. Peter is unable to connect with anybody, from his fellow students overseas to the ordinary people on the street. While out on a stroll with his Fatshedera plant, he recalls the plant seller's warning that the Fatshedera could not tolerate much light, which should have made it an excellent tenant for his apartment. He came up with the concept of taking it for walks on a weekly or biweekly basis, depending on the weather. He even talked eloquently to it, at times aloud, pleading with it to grow. He pondered what the plant world looked like prior to the grafting process beginning. He mentally connects the plant world to the avian world. He therefore believes that ornithology must be one of the few descriptive disciplines still alive. One just observes birds and does not attempt to alter their biology. For instance, he had never heard of a nightingale being crossed with a parrot. Birds in nature were untainted by humans. He admired birds and animals, moths and stars for their distance, independence, and solitude. He believes that plants are unique; humans have been "cultivating" them since the dawn of time, feeding and caring for them in gardens, to the point where they have developed an attachment to the human family, as if they were pets or livestock. "An immortal man was sent into the world to serve as the immortal plants' husband-man." (143) He'd read an article in the Figaro about Parisians contributing to air pollution by growing plants on their balconies and window ledges. They functioned as cleansers by inhaling carbon dioxide and expelling oxygen. When Peter took his tall Fatshedera on a stroll, he sensed an exchange of

advantages; in exchange for the light it got, it acted as a filter, purifying the atmosphere.

Humans and plants have always had a profound relationship. Plants have an impact on every part of our lives, and in fact, life as we know it would be impossible without them. As a result, McCarthy's characters have a strong bond with nature.

He once saw a clash between student protesters and police officers. As the police officers swing their "beautiful blue capes," he admires their deft management of the situation until he discovers the capes are laced with lead. Peter witnesses the arrest of a young Polish American and believes him to be innocent. Peter barely avoids being struck by the paddy wagon while pursuing justice for his new buddy. In another case, Peter challenges a bureaucracy in the American Embassy's consulate until the young man is freed.

Peter joins an American general and his wife in celebrating Thanksgiving. According to Peter, the most pleasant aspect of the dinner party was a girl named Roberta Scott, a medical student. He confesses that he admires her more for her beliefs than for her person, despite her betrayal by having an affair with a married man.

Peter spoke about the current technology dilemma, drawing on his broader expertise. Peter is very perceptive of his surroundings. Peter screamed if robots took over the most repulsive tasks of society, such as trash collection. He acknowledges that the disposal had a significant impact on human satisfaction. However, he believed that any new innovation should be regarded with mistrust until it could demonstrate its innocence. He believes that under such a system, detergents, for example, would never have entered the market, since they contaminate waterways and killfish.

Pollution occurs when pollutants are introduced into the natural environment, causing undesirable changes. Water pollution occurs when contaminants are released into bodies of water without being adequately treated to eliminate hazardous chemicals. Water pollution has a detrimental effect on the plants and creatures that live in these bodies of water. Water contamination is a significant worldwide issue that the author addresses in this work.

Peter believes that capitalists are responsible for polluting the environment. He believes that rather than waiting for a revolution to put an end to producers, consumers must be educated. Additionally, he believes that chemical fertilizers are detrimental to the soil. He believes that a future in which only machines can work would be dull.

If the right to labor became a privilege for a few, as may occur as a result of automation, this would be just as unfair as having leisure become a luxury for a few. What made the Middle Ages great was that everyone worked: the knight battled, the peasant ploughed, and the lady cooked and made simple. Even a cat was assigned the task of capturing mice. (198)

On the other hand, McCarthy argues that in today's aimless society, change might be brought in via educational changes. Peter believes that all children, beginning in elementary school, should be assigned to learn a genuine trade, like shoemaking, under the supervision of a master shoemaker, rather than playing with fingerprints or making pottery. McCarthy

emphasizes the need to implement reforms to the educational system, since technical education is a contemporary necessity. Along with practical education, Peter argues that education must address the human aesthetic self, since an aesthetic viewpoint elevates and refines human preferences.

Peter is overjoyed when he receives an invitation to a Rome Christmas party. During his Christmas break, Peter immerses himself in as many murals, sculptures, and structures as possible. He was uninterested in imperial Rome, but he admired early Christian churches, particularly Santa Maria in Comedians. Borromini is his favorite artist. Borromini, he believes, must have adored wings, since he often gave his angels two pairs, like little clothes, one folded and the other open. Peter adores Borromini's stars, veggies, leaves, acorns, and flowers. He perceives "coded messages from Mother Nature" in the art form (222). When Peter gazed at Borromini, he got the same sensation he used to receive from fairy tales. He travels to San Giovanni dei Fiorentini on a religious pilgrimage. He bumps into his Sorbonne advisor and is intrigued and amused to discover that Mr. Small is researching tourism as part of an educational grant-funded initiative. Mr. Small is a caricature of the liberal idealist, with a Panglossian perspective that "all is for the best in the greatest of all conceivable worlds." Dr. Small's defense of mass culture shows Peter's underlying conviction about the importance of art for the sake of art. Unlike Dr. Small, Peter makes a distinction between class and mass tourism, favoring small, self-contained groups over big, organized groups.

He notes that the paradox of tourism is that the tourist gets irritated by the presence of other visitors. Peter is enraged by the large number of visitors who seem to lack a real appreciation for art. Peter saw the tourist swarm as trash dropped by aircraft and touring buses, with guides and merchants diving for them like scavenging birds. Peter believes that it is not the individuals that are unpleasant; rather, it is the process that corrupts them. Peter's egalitarian worldview eventually crumbles when he admits that, in an ideal world, "a tourist should have to pass an entrance exam in order to see the 'Mona Lisa,' the 'Last Supper,' or the Sistine Chapel. That is the only way" (Chase R 251). Peter believes that if you love someone, you want to be alone with them. Likewise, with art. McCarthy has a similar bias in her belief that widespread consumerism has eroded the consumer's sense of aesthetic value.

Peter argues with Dr. Small that capitalism is certain to generate plenty. However, what is the abundance of? I admit that it is causing changes. However, they are not the reforms desired by the current generation. He further argues that if capitalism is so wonderful, consider what it has accomplished in terms of civil rights.

Peter's liberal ideals are finally put to the test during his meeting with a clochard. When he returns to Paris, he discovers clochards sleeping on gratings, in subways, and in hotel foyers. Peter's discomfort is growing as a result of the clochards. When he discovers an inebriated woman on his stairwell one night, he brings her to his apartment and offers her an opportunity to sober up. He nourishes her and treats her as if she were a fellow creature. The lady will only eat if she is bribed with wine, and she is no more delighted to be there than Peter is to have her. After she leaves, the floor is covered with pee, and Peter's doorknob is missing. As with the filthy bathrooms at the novel's opening, the clochard incident demonstrates to Peter the absence

of common moral standards in nature and civilization.

Peter learns about the United States' bombardment of North Vietnam via the media. Peter and Silly visit the zoo to divert their attention. Peter opposes Silly's request to visit the monkey home, stating that he wants to examine some of the trees and flora. Peter notices that the closer nature gets to humans, the nastier it may become. He asserts that one could rarely find a plant that was not attractive, even if it was speckled in an unusual manner. He wonders whether one day he will awaken and discover that trees, plants, and flowers no longer look lovely to him. As if to bolster his ideas, he discovers the botanical park is overrun with abandoned, lonely plants, their pale-green identification signs evocative of a graveyard.

The region's deteriorating state was not a pleasant shift for this nature lover, and his displeasure is often shown throughout the book. Nature, as a healing factor, helps our well-being by bestowing mental tranquility. McCarthy's portrayal of nature is not just a sensual pleasure in natural splendor; it also reflects an environmentalist's concern for wildlife preservation.

McCarthy then describes Peter's passion for animals via a visit to the zoo with his buddy Silly. Though Silly is fond of animals, he takes pleasure in taunting them. However, it seems to be harsh and harmful to Peter. Silly taunts the swans by throwing peanuts between them, which causes them to fight. In retaliation, Peter attempts to feed the black swan with his hand, and the bird attacks him. The mechanism through which birds connect with humans in captivity is a double-edged sword. Human people provide food, water, and life itself, yet they are also a source of danger and death. When birds are rescued and transported to a refuge, they often struggle to trust their human caretakers. He is hospitalized due to blood poisoning, and a penicillin response almost kills him. When he regains consciousness, his mother is present. She is on route to Poland as part of a State Department trip. Kant comes to him in a vision, as though in some ancient tragedy. Peter's moral adviser informs him of something he already knew: "Nature is dead, mien kind." At first, Peter misunderstands him to mean that God has died, which is not such bad news for him. Nature's demise is a different issue, since man has always relied on nature, abiding by her moral rules.

Peter is not just in love with nature, but also feels a sense of responsibility for it. As a city dweller, his connection to Mother Nature is diminished. He attempts to live a natural existence in order to discover a natural state of mind that is shared by everyone. McCarthy worries about the invasion of technology into the contemporary industrial world as a result of this moral dilemma.

McCarthy expresses a similar worry about the future of American society in an interview with Jean Francois Revel. She considers the following: If nature in its most beautiful form, that is, the outdoors, plants, farms, and woods, were to vanish, as it is, there would be nothing solid left to stand on, no basis for ethics. I believe we have become disoriented. I am not a believer in optimism. 115 (Jean Francois Revel)

Peter's obligation to nature extends to the plant kingdom. Nature and the comfort she is meant to give us is the feeling of being in the midst of something bigger and grander than ourselves. He walks his plant once or twice a week in Paris, depending on the weather. He even teaches youngsters in Italy how to cultivate plants. Although birds are the most apparent of

## Ecocriticism in Mary McCarthy's *Birds of America*

Nature's wild animals, Peter's tale starts and finishes with imprisoned birds, the sad owl and the angry swan, both of whom are victims of the un-feathered kind.

Peter favours art and nature over society, yet he recognises the connection between common humanity and thinks that human people are ethically obligated to nature as well. Natural law perception is man's moral capacity, the regulating sense that keeps him in harmony with the natural environment. However, individuals continue to obstruct. The bombing news devastates Peter. He seeks solace in nature, but the desolation of the zoo only serves to reinforce his loss. The abandoned botanical gardens resemble a graveyard, and the vegetable world is further reduced to a bizarre display. All of this led him to believe that the universal mother, Nature, has died. When America rained death on defenseless people during World War II, there was no regulating impulse at work.

Mary McCarthy claimed to adore *Birds of America* as the greatest of all her books till the end of her days. The author's treasured views and pet crotchets are evident throughout this book. They first appear in Rosamund, who is attempting to give her son two short but idyllic idylls in a New England town that has some similarity to Stonington, Connecticut. Rosamund is prepared to speak out against the proliferation of frozen food in the Rocky Port supermarket, to fight the gaudy zinnias blazing in the village's deteriorating gardens, and to fight the new historic plaques adorning the village's oldest homes. She wants to give Peter the America of her youth, not some tarnished version of it:

### **The critic Foster Hirsch observes**

One of the novel's most pleasant aspects is its deft avoidance of the Bildungsroman's all-but-inevitable clichés: here is an account of a young man's typical journey from youth to adulthood. Despite his exposure to experience, which convinces him that this is not the best of all possible worlds, he remains committed to living according to egalitarian, Kantian ethics....  
(Foster Hirsch, *op. cit.*, p. 328)

Peter's travels have shown a world suffering under the ancient weight of injustice, poverty, and violence, with none of the traditional solutions working. As a result of its involvement in the bombing of North Vietnam, science is more destructive than constructive. However, when societal development occurs, it is destructive, destroying ancient comfort in nature and art, and severing ties to the past. Nature is a victim of humanity's busy monsters, and her condition is dire, but when she perishes, human beings perish as well. Humans and nature are inextricably linked.

From the earliest eras of human settlement on the planet to the present day, the connection between humans and the environment has evolved. The first humans saw the environment as dominating. Human beings were once noble savages who lived in harmony and peace with nature and could have continued to do so, but over time, they have used their intelligence and authority to not only transform the environment for their own advancement, but also to make a variety of incursions that have weakened it. They are constantly exploiting the

natural environment that has fostered human existence. Primitive humans who dreaded nature's vengeance were entirely reliant on nature for their existence. We subdued the environment and obtained favourable outcomes as a consequence of our intellect, reasoning ability, and ability to evaluate situations. However, what began as a logical method of survival has devolved into irrationality in the name of civilisation.

Summits like Copenhagen and Cancun demonstrate that we are acutely aware of the damage we are doing to the environment. However, what is critical is that we begin doing rather than just recognising what is already understood. Due to the fact that the ecological situation is a worldwide issue, it is critical to have a comprehensive framework in place to ensure the system operates optimally. While reverting to the primitive period is not feasible, a change in mindset, rather than turning a blind eye to the situation, and prudent use of existing resources may assist in maintaining an ecological balance.

To begin describing the environmental deterioration, the book transports us to Rocky Port, where Peter and his mother are spending their summer after a four-year hiatus. Peter is always disappointed. It is reminiscent of Wordsworth's poem Tintern Abbey, to which he returned after a five-year absence. Although the poem focuses on Wordsworth rather than the scenery, when Peter Levi and his mother returned to Rocky Port, the town had altered almost beyond recognition.

Although the tale is presented completely from Peter's perspective, the voice is believable and the character likeable. The book has many flaws.

It is about Peter's mental development. Rosamund's meals and customs are significant on a conceptual level, but the lists and catalogues dull the intellect. And we're wondering whether we're required to know so much about Parisian toilets.

**The critic, Jay L. Halio, comments:**

McCarthy attempted to cram a running political, social, and ecological commentary into the confines of a book that cannot or will not support it in *Birds of America*. At best, it aspires to be a modern Candide but falls short, mostly due to Peter's naivety being more vexing than invigorating. (Halio, Jay L., p.276)

The book is meticulously constructed. The story started in the summer of 1964 and continued into 1965. It takes place in Rocky Port, Maine, as well as in Paris and Rome. The opening and last sequences are reliant on birds. Peter is equally enthralled by the events of his generation-Vietnam, civil rights, and pollution, to name a few. Additionally, the comparison links the items together. The two Christmas parties, two encounters with police officers, two cities, Paris and Rome, and even Rome and Rocky Port, are set against one another explicitly or implicitly, and the similarities and contrasts aid in the development of the interrelated themes of

### Ecocriticism in Mary McCarthy's *Birds of America*

nature, art, tradition, and morality. Kant, Peter's tutor, appears in the beginning via his maxims and again at the conclusion through Peter's hallucination. Thus, Emmanuel Kant functions as a structural assist to the book, closing together all of the narrative's loose ends. He gives the book a taut framework. At the start of the book, Maxims present the novel's primary topics. Towards the end, his presence in simple hallucinations brought to light Peter's and an entire generation of sensitive people's disenchantment. Once Peter departs from Rocky Port, his narrative takes on the characteristics of a pilgrim's journey, an intellectual biography in which people and circumstances primarily supply him with food for contemplation.

McCarthy, a culinary purist, considered 1960s and 1970s American home life revolting. By the time she wrote *Birds of America*, the movement away from the kitchen toward frozen, packed, and already-cooked food was well underway. According to Anatole Broyard's *New York Times* review, "Miss McCarthy has chosen to take us inside the kitchen and nursery of her imagination." (627) McCarthy relied on her personal experience in the book to express her sorrow over the loss of traditional domesticity and much else in America as a result of technological advancements. In her article "A Touch of Nature," she laments how technology has supplanted nature in people's perceptions of man's size.

Nature has ceased to be a human habitat. It cannot be a coincidence that modern physics, by meddling with nature, has presented a danger to the species and perhaps to the majority of other forms of biological life on the planet for the first time.... Originally linked with the civilizing skills of building and weaving, technology has supplanted nature as human society's primary adversary. McCarthy's book is critiqued by critics for its conventional perspective and structure. McCarthy's realistic book, with its lists and catalogues of meals and home goods, is criticized by reviewers, especially in the Rocky Port portion of the novel. The list of items is intended to represent a deeper opposition to technology's assault on a more natural and ethical past. The novel's fascinating complexity stems from the novel's combination of realistic form, philosophical substance, and satirical point of view. The problem with *Birds of America* is that Mary McCarthy's voice is heard not just through Peter's mother, Rosamund, but also through Peter, making it impossible to differentiate between characters and between characters and the author.

According to McCarthy, the contemporary novel's problem is connected to the loss of nature and the consequent moral crisis in society. McCarthy's capacity to recognize the limits of established beliefs and her receptiveness to new ideas allow her to criticize established society with the aim of changing it. In its interest in art, travel, culture, and the general intellectual life, in its many literary allusions and allusions to Eastern boarding schools and Ivy League universities, and in its commitment to radical politics. *Birds of America* bears the author's imprint by integrating nearly all of the prior publications' absorptions. McCarthy accomplishes the satirist's mission of moral change through his at times caustic humor. Without a doubt, McCarthy has produced an incisive, sensitive account of changing values and society: the deterioration of life quality.

The book's moral is that Peter matures beyond both his mothers, Mother Rosamund and Mother Nature, a moral reinforced by the novel's embarrassing final scene, in which Peter, in delirium due to an infected swan bite, is visited in the hospital by a vision of Kant, who informs



him, in the book's final words, "Nature is dead mien kind." The baddies are allegedly technology, the Pentagon, and frozen meals. Thus, truth and nature are synonymous; both exist simultaneously outside and inside the human person.

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