

*The Interpretation of Literary Images of Feminized  
Nature from the Perspective of Ecofeminism*

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**Abstract**

In this paper, I will compare the gendered landscape or the image of feminized nature in Wordsworth's poem "Nutting" to Whitman's "Pioneers! O Pioneers" and Cather's O Pioneers! from the perspective of ecofeminism. Ecofeminism is one of the most important concepts in ecocriticism, which shares the same characteristics as ecocriticism and concerned more with the interrelation between women and nature. By close reading and textual analysis of the description of nature in these works, it can be found, although the three works do not have any relation, nature in these three works is all described and implicated as female. However, there are differences in the image of nature in these three works, for instance, human's behavior is more active or consciously and aggressive in "Nutting" and "Pioneers! O Pioneers", whereas in Cather's O Pioneers! , the image of nature is more extensive or various and shares more on the power of discourse. What's more, the different ways of dealing with the image of nature between male writers and female writers can be found as well. In addition, by making reference on Carolyn Merchant's The Death of Nature, I also concern more about the cultural and symbolic meaning of how the feminized nature is represented in literary works, how the images of feminized nature reflects the cultural connection between women and nature, and how the way we describe the image of nature in novels or poems reflects human's attitude to nature.

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Ecofeminism is an interdisciplinary criticism which shares the same characteristics as ecocriticism, but it concerns more with the interrelation between women and nature. In *Ecofeminism and Globalization*, Heather Eaton and Lois Ann Lorentzen make a brief introduction of ecofeminism: “Ecofeminism encompasses a variety of theoretical, practical, and critical efforts to understand and resist the interrelated dominations of women and nature” (1). According to them, the term was originated in 1974 by French feminist Françoise d’Eaubonne, emphasizing on the interconnections between women’s oppression and the ecological crisis. They summarize three central claims of ecofeminism: the empirical, the conceptual, and the epistemological. The empirical claim believes that the impact of the environmental deterioration is greater on female than that on men: “environmental problems disproportionately affect women in most parts of the world” (2). The second claim is that the relationship between women and nature is conceptually and symbolically articulated in Euro-western worldviews: “According to ecofeminists, Euro-western cultures’ developed ideas about a world divided hierarchically and dualistically. Dualistic conceptual structures identify women with femininity, the body, sexuality, earth or nature and materiality; and men with masculinity, the mind, heaven, the supernatural, and disembodied spirit” (2). The epistemological claim argues that since women suffer more than men on the environmental crisis, women are considered to possess more knowledge on finding solutions to environmental problems: “Some claim women possess more knowledge about Earth systems than men and thus should be ‘epistemologically privileged’ (3).

Apart from Ecofeminism, my interpretation also involved some statements and opinions of environmental history. Environmental historian Carolyn Merchant reveals the historic connection between the domination of nature and women from the environmental historical perspective in *The Death of Nature* published in 1980. As our mind determines our behavior, the way how we consider nature determines the way how we treat nature. Merchant’s remarks that the metaphor of feminized nature affects and regulates human’s attitude to the earth could be applied in literary interpretation.

Although the metaphorically feminized nature is not uncommon or unusual in literature, more attention should be paid to how these images influence characters’ attitude toward nature in literary works. By analyzing the images of feminized nature represented in some of the classical literary works and in Cather’s *O Pioneers!*, we will see how the images of feminized nature reflects the cultural connection between women and nature, and how these images in literature influence on human’s behavior toward nature.

### **The Image of Feminized Nature in “Nutting”**

Drooped with its withered leaves, ungracious sign  
Of devastation; but the hazels rose  
Tall and erect, with tempting clusters hung,  
A virgin scene! — A little while I stood,  
Breathing with such suppression of the heart  
As joy delights in; and, with wise restraint  
Voluptuous, fearless of a rival, eyed  
The banquet; — or beneath the trees I sate

Among the flowers, and with the flowers I played;  
A temper known to those, who, after long  
And weary expectation, have been blest  
With sudden happiness beyond all hope.  
Perhaps it was a bower beneath whose leaves  
The violets of five seasons re-appear  
And fade, unseen by any human eye; (Line 18—32)

According to Wordsworth's own notes, the early blank-verse poem, written around the end of 1789 when he and Dorothy were living in Goslar, derives from the remembrance feelings he had as a boy while attending Hawkshead School. In the above description, phrases such as "unvisited" and "virgin scene" suggest the underlying erotic meaning so that the image of nature as a virgin could be enhanced. The boy is attracted by "A virgin scene"—the tall hazel with tempting clusters, and he realizes that he has come across an "unvisited" corner of the wood. A sense of achievement and a great deal of gratification is generated within his heart, and he delights the scene. The boy's happiness probably reflects male's sexual desire and longing for a virgin. Wordsworth makes a detailed description on his delightful experience with nature, his enjoyment in it and appreciation of it. However, at the end of poem, the boy's abrupt behavior makes the turning point. Right after enjoying the virgin scene, he, all of a sudden, urges himself into merciless ravage and sully of the virgin scene.

And on the vacant air. Then up I rose,  
And dragged to earth both branch and bough, with crash  
And merciless ravage: and the shady nook  
Of hazels, and the green and mossy bower,  
Deformed and sullied, patiently gave up  
Their quiet being: and, unless I now  
Confound my present feelings with the past;  
Ere from the mutilated bower I turned  
Exulting, rich beyond the wealth of kings, (Line 43—51)

This scene contrasts sharply with the boy's enjoyment of nature, showing the rude masculine domination of the "virgin scene". As the physiological characteristic is determined, men are more competitive and aggressive than women, and have a stronger desire to monopolize and manipulate women; "rich beyond the wealth of kings" implies that to dominate a virgin satisfies man's desire and gives him a sense of fulfilment. In this poem, the boy's ravage of the virgin scene can be metaphorically comprehended as the symbol of man's sexual maturity. At the same time, from the view of the relationship between human and nature, the boy's ravage of the virgin scene represents the conquest and destruction of nature which symbolizes how humans are gradually separated from nature and stand in opposition to it in the end. This poem dramatizes the fact that human's intimacy with nature fades away as they grow up by showing the rude masculine dominance of the virgin and natural scenes. The image of feminized nature, with apparently hidden but distinct enough sexual implication, plays an important role in explicating the lines.

## **The Image of Feminized Nature in “Pioneers! O Pioneers!”**

Come my tan-faced children,  
Follow well in order, get your weapons ready,  
Have you your pistols? have you your sharp-edged axes?  
Pioneers! O pioneers!  
O you youths, Western youths,  
So impatient, full of action, full of manly pride and friendship,  
Plain I see you Western youths, see you tramping with the foremost,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!  
Have the elder races halted?  
Do they droop and end their lesson, wearied over there beyond the seas?  
We take up the task eternal, and the burden and the lesson,  
Pioneers! O pioneers! (Line 1-16)

The weapons, pistols and sharp-edged axes in the first stanza are the instruments used to conquer the wilderness. By intentionally using an imperative and two interrogatives briskly here, Whitman reminds the pioneers to make sure they bring weapons, namely pistols and sharp-edged axes when they go to the wild West. As indispensable tools for people to conquer the wilderness, the weapons are the symbol of the industrial intrusion into nature. The second stanza seems to render the same masculinity as that in “Nutting”. “Western youths”, who are “so impatient”, “full of action”, and “full of manly pride and friendship” show some typical characteristics of masculinity here. The energetic and high-spirited young pioneers described in the poem, by stressing that they are “so impatient, full of action, full of manly pride and friendship”, indicate that they are ready to struggle against nature to achieve their self-realizations. The refrain “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” at the end of each stanza sounds like an encouraging call in the battlefield. The poem in general demonstrates aggressive masculine power, which is what Whitman seems to emphasize most. Then, by contrast, nature should be feminized correspondingly, seen in the following stanzas.

Down the edges, through the passes, up the mountains steep,  
Conquering, holding, daring, venturing as we go the unknown ways,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!  
We primeval forests felling,  
We the rivers stemming, vexing we and piercing deep the mines within,  
We the surface broad surveying, we the virgin soil upheaving,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!  
Colorado men are we,  
From the peaks gigantic, from the great sierras and the high plateaus,  
From the mine and from the gully, from the hunting trail we come,  
Pioneers! O pioneers! (Line 22-28)

Several images of woman as nature among these human activities are described in the poem. For example, the mining mentioned in this stanza represents how the image of mother nature creates an influence on human’s behavior and how the image is being devastated by industrialization. It is well known that mining is a very common human activity in modern society. However, it was restricted or prohibited in traditional society because the mines were previously considered a symbol of a mother’s womb. The behaviour of mining itself is metaphorically related to the physical aggression of

a mother's body, the brutal intrusion to nature, and the desecration of mother nature. The metaphorical connection between nature and mother seems to emphasize and praise the maternal characteristics of the natural environment, laying stress on the bountiful resources of the earth which never seem to be exhausted. This connection between them ironically results in human exploitation and devastation of the natural environment. In order to satisfy the increasing needs, human beings take these graces of nature for granted, and overexploit the natural resources of mother nature. Compared to the image of nurturing mother nature, the image of nature as a virgin is emphasized as well. Nature viewed as a virgin means that it can be conquered by human beings. It might as well stem from men's deep-rooted urge to conquer a virgin. The image of nature as a virgin activates both men's appetite to conquer a virgin and human's desire to control nature. In a word, Wordsworth's "Nutting" and "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" both represent the equivalence between human's conquest of nature and men's conquest of women.

In "Nutting" or in "Pioneers! O Pioneers!", human behavior is more active, more deliberate and aggressive. In these works, nature does not have the positive existence, and seems to be silent. In contrast, in Cather's *O Pioneers!*, the land itself is personified as a protagonist. The land in *O Pioneers!* like a normal human, who has not only physical needs like breathing, and a heart, but also has psychological needs like emotion, desire, mood-swings, even the power to struggle. In addition, the image of nature as female is more complicated and varied than the other two. Nature in "Nutting" and "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" is depicted as a typical virgin, but in *O Pioneers!*, nature is not only depicted as a virgin, but also as a witch. So next, we are going to interpret the image of feminized nature in Cather's *O Pioneers!*

### **The Image of Feminized Nature in *O Pioneers!***

Willa Cather's place in American literature was established with her first Nebraska novel, *O Pioneers!*, which tells the story of the Bergsons, a family of Swedish immigrants in the farm country near the town of Hanover, Nebraska, at the turn of the 20th century. The protagonist, Alexandra Bergson, a strong-willed and intelligent woman, inherits the family farmland when her father John Bergson dies, and turns the wilderness farmland into a very prosperous one. The novel is divided into five parts, each of which has numerous chapters: "The Wild Land", "Neighboring Fields", "Winter Memories", "The White Mulberry Tree" and "Alexandra". Needless to say, nature has long been feminized linguistically. In the beginning of Part III—"Winter Memory", Cather directly uses "she" to refer to nature:

Winter has settled down over the Divide again; the season in which Nature recuperates, in which she sinks to sleep between the fruitfulness of autumn and the passion of spring. (*O Pioneers!*, 139)

In Part II of the novel, Cather shows us the feminized nature imagery by using the fascinating language and ambiguous and erotic descriptions in the following scene. In Part II, "Neighboring Fields," the heroine Alexandra leads her family, against all odds, and constructs the beautiful garden on the wild prairie. The description of a gratifying landscape of the great harvest presented in chapter 2 runs as follows:

The Divide is now thickly populated. The rich soil yields heavy harvests; the dry, bracing climate and the smoothness of the land make labor easy for men and beasts.

There are few scenes more gratifying than a spring plowing in that country, where the furrows of a single field often lie a mile in length, and the brown earth, with such a strong, clean smell, and such a power of growth and fertility in it, yields itself eagerly to the plow; rolls away from the shear, not even dimming the brightness of the metal, with a soft, deep sigh of happiness. The wheat-cutting sometimes goes on all night as well as all day, and in good seasons there are scarcely men and horses enough to do the harvesting. The grain is so heavy that it bends towards the blade and cuts like velvet. (O Pioneers!, 57-58)

The landscape is a harvest scene which contains several important implications. Firstly, the image of the plow as an instrument appears in this scene. The plow is not just a labor instrument for pioneers; it also becomes a symbol of the invasion of civilization into the wilderness. The plow becomes the tool and instrument which helps human on the one hand to fulfil their dreams and complete self-realization, and on the other hand, transfers the wild land to crop fields. Land or the wilderness is the rival of humans and is opposed to them

### **Dichotomous Depictions of Feminized Nature**

We have seen that the feminized nature derives from men's desire to conquer women as well as nature, and the similarities between them. Another relation between nature and women is based upon the connection between dangerous nature and the woman-as-evil tradition. In the New Testament, Eve is considered as the culprit of human's exile from the Garden of Eden. The ancient Greek story of Pandora, who opens the box and brings all of the dreadful things to the world, also tells us women are easy to be deceived by evil. In fact, many researchers have been concerned with the relationship between the fear of nature with the evil of women. Carolyn Merchant, also uses witches to refer to the disorder of nature in one of her representative works *The Death of Nature*:

The images of both nature and woman were two-sided. The virgin nymph offered peace and serenity, the earth mother nurture and fertility, but nature also brought plagues, famines, and tempests. Similarly, woman was both virgin and witch: the Renaissance courtly lover placed her on a pedestal; the inquisitor burned her at the stake. The witch, symbol of the violence of nature, raised storms, caused illness, destroyed crops, obstructed generation, and killed infants. Disorderly woman, like chaotic nature, needed to be controlled. (Death 127)

The sharp contrast between the two different descriptions of landscape makes the feminized nature more complex and significant in Cather's *O Pioneers!*. In order to make a more comprehensive interpretation of feminized nature in Cather's *O Pioneers!*, it is necessary to compare the descriptions of land in Part 1 to those in those Part 2 in order to make a dialectical analysis on the difference. In Part 1, the Divide is described as a "dark country". If the colour of the landscape in Part 1 is dark and sombre, and the atmosphere is unsettling and horrifying, then compared to this frustrated landscape, the nature is presented as delightful scenery in Part 2:

There is something frank and joyous and young in the open face of the country. It gives itself ungrudgingly to the moods of the season, holding nothing back. Like the plains of Lombardy, it seems to rise a little to meet the sun. The air and the earth are curiously mated and intermingled, as if the one were the breath of the other. You feel

in the atmosphere the same tonic, puissant quality that is in the tilth, the same strength and resoluteness. (58)

In conclusion, from the untamed wilderness to the cultivated nature, nature is established here as a multi-dimensional character in the novel. The novel also expresses the traditional American ecological attitude towards land. On the one hand, for American people land is like a virgin, bearing the pastoral image, on the other hand, wilderness is like a witch or fallen Eve, which is disordered, chaotic, devastating and needs to be tamed and conquered by men. The tamed and improved peaceful productive image of mother nature is the garden which American people desire to establish. The two sides of woman and nature what Merchant has mentioned above is critical for us to understand human's attitude towards nature and the dichotomy of feminized nature. Merchant further explains why the image of witches is associated with the chaotic nature: "Symbolically associated with unruly nature was the dark side of woman" (Death 132). She also points out that even of the image of Virgin Mary is the incarnation of holiness and salvation, the image of woman is always considered as having more sexual passion and is easier to be tempted: "women were also seen as closer to nature than men, subordinate in the social hierarchy to the men of their class, and imbued with a far greater sexual passion" (Death 132). So, just like nature, woman should be controlled: "Like wild chaotic nature, women needed to be subdued and kept in their place" (Death 132).

### **Conclusion**

Nature is depicted with two metaphors—the virgin land and the mother nature in Whitman's "Pioneers! O Pioneers!". The West wilderness viewed as virgin reflects human's desire to conquer and exploit the land. Nature as the benevolent fertile mother leads to human's overexploitation and devastation of it. Both metaphors criticize the destructive consequence brought by commercialism and industrialization. In this way, the image of feminized nature represents human's attitude as well as determines their behavior to nature. As is discussed above, ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary comprehensive criticism involved with the contemporary environmental crisis. The way we describe the image of nature in novels or poems can also reflect human's attitude to nature. Analysing and comparing the image of feminized nature lead us to rethink and reconsider the interrelation between human and nature.

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