Oppressing Nature
A Study of Gretel Ehrlich’s The Solace of Open Spaces

Saman Jalali
Abstract

As the population of the earth expands the natural world shrinks in order to give space to our growing population. This is a problem since humans have a big part in the destruction of natural habitats. In Gretel Ehrlich’s *The Solace of Open Spaces* we find a close interaction between human culture and nature. *The Solace of Open Spaces* can be categorized as creative non fiction, and with this in mind I intend to employ a theoretical approach called ecocriticism when analyzing *The Solace of Open Spaces*. The following essay will examine how the narrator of *The Solace of Open Spaces* has depicted the relation between nature and culture. The study will be conducted by a close reading of *The Solace of Open Spaces*. Other than the close reading a series of important articles and websites have been consulted for further information regarding certain keywords and concepts. Important keywords which are found throughout the essay are: anthropocentrism, cowboy, culture, dualism, nature and sheepherder. My initial theory is that even though it might not be intended, a nature and culture dualism is present in *The Solace of Open Spaces*. I base the assumption on my belief that all humans objectify nature and see nature as a possession. The aim of the essay is to establish whether there is a nature and culture dualism present in *The Solace of Open Spaces*. 
# Table of Content

1 Introduction ........................................................................................................ 1  
   1.1 Introducing SOS .................................................................................. 3  

2 Aim and Scope ................................................................................................... 4  

3 Material ............................................................................................................. 6  

4 Analysis ............................................................................................................. 10  
   4.1 Clashes between nature and culture....................................................... 10  
   4.2 How nature affects Ehrlich in SOS ....................................................... 14  
      4.2.1 How nature affects the characters of SOS.................................... 15  
      4.2.2 Ehrlich’s personification................................................................. 19  
   4.3 Anthropocentrism and Ecocriticism...................................................... 21  
   4.4 Animals and culture .............................................................................. 23  

5 Conclusion ......................................................................................................... 29  

References ............................................................................................................. 32
1 Introduction

The interaction between man and the natural world is something we as human beings have to face in our everyday lives. Nature affects us in all aspects of our lives, and to a greater extent we affect nature. Humans and the natural world occupy the same space and need to form a symbiotic relationship in order to function. There are numerous oppositions found between nature and human culture, not least in literature. This essay will examine the portrayal of these oppositions in Gretel Ehrlich's *The Solace of Open Spaces* (henceforth *SOS*).

*The Oxford English Dictionary* (henceforth the OED) defines culture and nature in various ways. The definitions of culture most relevant to this essay are:

“A particular form or type of intellectual development. Also, the civilization, customs, artistic achievements, etc., of a people, esp. at a certain stage of its development or history” (OED, 2005).

The OED also defines culture as: “The action or practice of cultivating the soil; tillage, husbandry” (OED, 2005).

The OED’s definitions of nature most relevant to this essay are:

11.a (1) The phenomena of the physical world collectively; *esp.* plants, animals, and other features and products of the earth itself, as opposed to humans and human creations. 11.b. In wider sense: the whole natural world, including human beings; the cosmos (OED, 2005).

The two different ways of defining culture are included since one focuses on intellectual development while the other one focuses on human actions ‘cultivating the soil’. The nature and
culture opposition as defined above does not involve culture as 'customs and nature' but 'culture as manmade items and nature'.

An opposition is often called a dualism or: “The condition or state of being dual or consisting of two parts; twofold division; duality” (OED, 2005). The dualism which is examined in SOS is the opposition between nature and culture. The culture in SOS is represented by the cowboy customs and the culture of manmade items and their interactions with the physical world of nature (the earth, animals, flowers and weather etc). Before examining if there is a nature and culture dualism present in SOS one has to look at an array of other questions. The subcategories of questions to the overarching research question are: How is nature depicted from the narrator’s point of view? How does Ehrlich portray the way the characters of SOS affect nature? How does Ehrlich portray the ways nature affects the characters of SOS?

The first question, namely Ehrlich's depiction of nature highlights matters such as how Ehrlich the narrator has presented nature; the question also covers Ehrlich’s treatment of nature. The second question is equally important since it aims to examine how the culture of Ehrlich’s Wyoming affects the surrounding nature. Question two also looks at how the cowboy culture affects the animals which reside within nature. The use of animals is a central part of anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism occurs when humans place themselves above everything else, claiming superiority over all other forms of life. Anthropocentrism can be defined as:

1909 Webster, Anthropocentrism, the assumption that man is the center of all things.
1912 J. H. Moore Ethics & Educ. xvii. 141 There is a doctrine called Anthropocentricism... According to this theory, man is the centre of the universe (OED, 2005).

The third and last question will aim to show how Ehrlich has portrayed the effects nature has had on Ehrlich the protagonist and the characters in the book. The question will also aim to show how nature affects the lives of the cowboys and their everyday routines. Ehrlich's personification of herself in the surrounding landscape will also be included in this question.
These questions are all a part of the main overarching research question of whether there is a nature and culture dualism present in *SOS*.

### 1.1 Introducing *SOS*

At twenty, thirty, and forty degrees below zero, not only does your car not work, but neither do your mind and body. The landscape hardens into a dungeon of space (1-2).

When reading *SOS* one finds comparisons between culture (as defined above) and nature (as it is presented in the book). The quote above contrasts the cold climate to a manmade item which cannot function when exposed to nature (in this case extremely cold weather). A close reading of *SOS* reveals various examples of clashes between nature and culture. In *SOS* one finds examples of matters regarding the intrusion of culture in nature and how humans affect nature. *SOS* contains tendencies towards various concerns for nature and of nature preservation. Ehrlich often criticizes the exploitation of nature in *SOS*.

I believe it is important that one makes a distinction between Ehrlich the author and Ehrlich the narrator/protagonist. After having read the book and several articles with the author I believe that Ehrlich the author merely wrote the book while the narrator/protagonist interacted and was a part of the book. Ehrlich the narrator/protagonist expresses concern for how Americans consume everything in their presence, while Ehrlich the author’s opinions are quite the opposite. In the article by D. Rae Greiner titled *Negative Response: Silence in Gretel Ehrlich’s The Solace of Open Spaces* one finds passages where Ehrlich the author’s views on nature clash with Ehrlich the narrator (passages which will be presented later). Therefore when Ehrlich is mentioned in the essay I will solely be referring to Ehrlich the narrator/protagonist; I will do this unless I specifically say that Ehrlich writes or has written something, other than that I will be referring to Ehrlich as the narrator/protagonist.

*SOS* does not only contain matters concerning nature itself but also the animals which live within nature. *SOS* contains details of how the narrator works closely with various animals.
yet at the same time treating them in a degrading way. In The Human Impact by Andrew Goudie, one finds several topics concerning the treatment and domestication of animals, animals which are all included in SOS. The work Ehrlich conducts with the animals is a nature and culture clash; this clash is represented in the way humans in SOS have taken animals out of the wild to serve their own purposes. In SOS one finds Ehrlich expressing negative opinions regarding the consuming machinery of the American public. Ehrlich the narrator often forgets that the horse she rides, the sheep she herds and the dogs which help her are all a part of the consuming machinery. In various passages one finds Ehrlich describing how humans have changed the landscape, i.e. by stretching miles of barbed wire over it or letting animals graze until there is nothing left to graze. The way Ehrlich treats and interacts with animals and nature will also be brought up in the analysis.

2 Aim and Scope

The main overarching research question will be: is there a nature and culture dualism present in SOS? The essay will cover how the elements of culture and nature change and affect one another within the book. The main research question could have numerous sub categories to support it. I have chosen to limit the sub categories to the questions presented below:

1 How is nature depicted from the narrator’s point of view?
2 How does Ehrlich portray the way the characters of SOS affect nature?
3 How does Ehrlich portray the way nature affects the characters of SOS?

These questions all fit under the main question which was presented earlier. The questions will not be used to define the concept of nature or culture, but rather how nature and culture interact with one another in SOS.

A close reading of the book establishes how Ehrlich the narrator describes the characters of Wyoming and their interactions with nature. The close reading is essential since connections
need to be made between how Ehrlich the narrator depicts nature relative to the surrounding culture of *SOS*.

The first question covers how Ehrlich the narrator portrays the nature in which she lives in. The question covers the various ways Ehrlich the narrator describes the Wyoming climate, nature and landscape. Ehrlich the narrator sometimes describes nature as something ‘fierce’ yet ‘cosy’. Ehrlich often poses opposites and compares nature relative to manmade items (culture), often expressing resentment towards the exploitation of the earth, and at times contradicting herself. Ehrlich often describes mankind’s abuse of nature, yet in another passage Ehrlich herself is performing acts which contribute to the exploitation of nature. I will also proceed to link Ehrlich the narrator's actions to the main research question in order to get a clear picture of how Ehrlich the narrator connects culture and nature relative to one another.

The second question covers how animals and people are represented in the book. I include the question since the representation of animals and people makes up a great deal of the book. Ehrlich often focuses on the relationship between the animals and the cowboys. The section dealing with this question will cover how Ehrlich treats the animals which she interacts with. Ehrlich the protagonist’s interaction with the animals is largely based on the ‘western cowboy culture’ which she has adopted. I will also look at how Ehrlich has portrayed the cowboys in *SOS*. I will look at various matters such as social interaction between Ehrlich the protagonist and the general characters of the book (in order to establish culture); I will also look at the general behavior of the cowboys. Question two and three are linked together and were chosen to show how culture affects nature and how nature in turn affects culture in *SOS*. The second question will not only cover how the cowboys in *SOS* change the face of the landscape but also how the cowboys have affected the animals which they work with. A great portion of the book is dedicated to portray Ehrlich’s close work with animals and how she bonds with them; contrasting that close relationship we find chapters where Ehrlich watches animals being abused for entertainment purposes. My preconception is that Ehrlich is trying to (deliberately or not) portray herself as compassionate towards the animals which she works with, yet failing when only pitying some animals and ignoring others, thus creating a dualism. Question two will
not be dealt with as extensively as question three since there is more material in the book surrounding the subject of the impact nature has on the cowboys.

The third question will deal with the impact nature has on the cowboys of SOS and Ehrlich the protagonist. Throughout the book Ehrlich the narrator describes how the harsh climate affects every corner of her life; as a result one finds passages where Ehrlich personifies herself in the landscape. Those passages show how close Ehrlich the protagonist lives with nature and how it affects her. Ehrlich often describes the solitude which arises due to the harsh weather, be it the summer heat which keeps everyone inside or the freezing winter which has the same effect. One finds passages in SOS which describe how the cowboys are dependant on the weather for survival; yet at the same time, the rain which feeds their crops can cause droughts and submerge their crops in water. The physical and behavioral effects the weather has on the cowboys will also be examined, yet only to a lesser extent. The ways the cowboys in SOS have adapted to fit the surrounding nature will also be analyzed as a part of the nature and culture dualism.

The three questions were chosen since they represent matters which are of importance to the analysis. The questions which were picked will aim to show if there is a nature and culture dualism present in SOS, and if so, in what form the dualism can be found. It is important to remember that the analysis only focuses on the world within the book. This essay will not and does not intend to compare the events of SOS to events in the 'real world'.

3 Material

My primary material consists of Gretel Ehrlich's The Solace of Open Spaces. There is very little written about SOS since the book is quite new. The articles and papers which were found have been of little relevance to the topic of this essay. Due to the lack of accessible material focusing on the book itself, material has been chosen which deals with general facts about nature and culture within literature.
The material which I have chosen to work with focuses on general views on nature, culture and the oppression or negligence towards nature and animals. I will look at general explanations and definitions and apply them to SOS. Due to the lack of material available the analysis will concentrate almost exclusively on what is written in SOS. I have used the following books, articles, and websites as secondary sources:

The first book, *Ecocriticism* by Greg Garrard focuses on a variety of subjects closely related to ecocriticism. Garrard’s book contains extensive information regarding environmentalism and nature preservation. Garrard writes of matter such as pollution, animals, wilderness and other topics which are connected to nature. Garrard addresses topics such as how nature is perceived. The wilderness Garrard writes of is not only the wilderness of nature but also the wilderness of the human body. The wilderness of the human body is often found in Ehrlich’s narrative since she often personifies herself in nature (Ehrlich represents an abstract quality or idea as a person or creature). Garrard also deals with matters such as ‘man’ standing above nature, in the sense that nature is subordinate to humanity. Garrard’s chapter titled "Animals" will be used to an extent since it contains explicit information regarding the effects culture has on animals. Garrard writes of how man uses, abuses and exploits animals in various ways to serve his own needs (something which often occurs in SOS). Garrard also writes about the impact human beings have on the aesthetics of the landscape. Aesthetics are important to the essay since one of the sub-questions deal with the impact the characters of SOS have on nature (the landscape). Garrard’s views on culture and the treatment of nature will be used as a counterweight to the more general views concerning nature and culture dualisms posed by other writers.

I have also chosen an ecofeminist article written by D. Rae Greiner titled: *Negative Response: Silence in Gretel Ehrlich's The Solace of Open Spaces*. Greiner writes of how women are often silenced in books. The silencing of women will be compared to the way nature is perceivably silenced, forgot or left out. This is of great importance since Ehrlich does not ‘forget’ nature in her narrative. Ehrlich highlights nature and does not treat nature as if it were invisible; Ehrlich treats nature as something equal to man’s culture. Ehrlich gives nature a voice
and space throughout the entire book. Christopher Manes poses an interesting claim as quoted by Greiner:

Nature is silent in our culture (and in literate societies generally) in the sense that the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative (qtd. in Greiner, 229).

The silencing does not only include nature but also the animals which reside within nature. The Greiner article will be used and compared to *SOS* in order to see how the animals in the book are silenced. Matters such as the domestication of animals will be analyzed to see if one can find examples of ‘silencing’ (as domestication is a by product of culture). The article also includes an interview with Ehrlich where Ehrlich the author expresses various opinions about nature and culture.

Andrew Goudie’s book *The Human Impact on the Natural Environment* covers how human influence has changed nature via agriculture and the domestication of animals. The book contains various chapters explaining how the consumption of humans has changed the vegetation, atmosphere, the soil and the water (consumption is yet another by product of culture). Goudie’s book will be used to look at how Ehrlich interacts with animals (in relation to agriculture), and to establish the effects animals have on nature seen from an environmental aspect. This will be done in order to establish whether Ehrlich the protagonist is contributing to the exploitation of nature and in fact strengthening the nature and culture dualism in the book.

Additional secondary material consists of various position papers (stored on an Internet database) on the topic of ecocriticism and letters which were submitted in response to those articles. The letters were all posted in the *ASLE forum on literature of the environment* under the topic of *The Growing Importance And Expanding Scope of The Fields of Environmental Literature And Ecological Literary Criticism*. The letters give various interpretations of what ecocriticism is, what nature is and how nature and the wild are seen from an ecocritical point of view. There were fifteen respondents which posted in the forum and each respondent wrote two to three pages of material. Out of these fifteen respondents Ursula K. Heise’s submitted letter
was chosen since I believe it to be of relevance to the essay. The letter was written for those who might not be familiar with the field of ecocriticism. Heise’s submission covers how ecocriticism spans borders. Heise writes of how the various notions of what nature is can differ from country to country. The various ideas of nature are closely related to culture (based on the assumption that the biggest differences between countries are their cultures). Heise concludes that ecocriticism has nothing specifically to do with nature. Ecocriticism deals with humanity in relation to nature at particular times in history; the treatment of this relation is why the opinions of ecocritics such as Heise’s have been included in the essay.

Yet another secondary source is Cheryl Glotfelty’s position paper (stored on an Internet database) from the session on *Defining Ecocritical Theory and Practice* from the 1994 *Western Literature Association Meeting*. Of the fifteen papers submitted on the question of “What is Ecocriticism?” Glotfelty’s was chosen by me to define what ecocriticism is (since I believe her opinions carry great weight in the ecocritic society).

In the position paper Glotfelty starts with a simple definition of what ecocriticism is and then moves to a more abstract definition of what ecocriticism might include. Instead of giving clear cut definitions, Glotfelty asks questions which ecocritics might ask when reviewing a text. Glotfelty asks questions like: “What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this novel? Are the values expressed in this play consistent with ecological wisdom?” (Glotfelty). These questions are all central to this essay and will be asked and answered relative to *SOS* as the essay progresses. Glotfelty writes of how “[e]cocriticism expands the notion of 'the world' to include the entire ecosphere” (Glotfelty). *SOS* is written in such a way that it gives humans, animals and nature the same space. *SOS* can thus according to Glotfelty's definition be perceived as ecoliterature even though it might not have been Ehrlich’s intention to write the book in such a manner.

As a complement to these books and articles, various web-based Internet sites have been consulted for further information regarding my research.

*The Psychological Value of Open Space* by Nora J. Rubenstein is the title of a web-based Internet source. Rubenstein writes of various aspects of open spaces and interactions with
open landscapes and nature. A part of her article focuses on how nature is depicted in SOS. The interaction between Ehrlich the narrator, author and nature is something which will be looked at closely throughout the essay. Rubenstein writes of how nature is used as a symbol. Throughout SOS one can find numerous references where Ehrlich the narrator uses nature as a symbol to reflect modern society. Rubenstein’s article will be used to analyze those symbols.

Wikipedia and The Oxford English Dictionary have both been used as sources for defining various word and or concepts. Wikipedia is one of the world's largest online encyclopedias while The OED is a well established dictionary which I have used to find more detailed definitions of various words.

4 Analysis

In the analysis which follows I will look at the treatment of animals in SOS, the interaction between humans and nature and also how the dualism of nature and culture have been manifested in SOS. The analysis has been broken down into smaller sections in order to get a better overall picture of what is being analyzed. Instead of jumping straight into the analysis, the background of the nature and culture interaction (as it might appear in SOS) will be looked at. Initially some background information will be given to how Ehrlich the narrator portrays nature and culture. Thereafter the discussion will move onto analyze why Ehrlich has portrayed the opposite fractions in the manner in which she does (nature and culture); finally the analysis will look at examples of how the nature and culture interaction is presented. Following the analysis there will be a conclusion where the results of the analysis will be presented.

4.1 Clashes between nature and culture

In the introduction of the essay a number of definitions concerning nature were presented. The presented definitions of nature will be analyzed further in this section in order to give a clearer
understanding of how the word nature is generally defined. The OED defines nature as a phenomenon, something which the earth has produced itself, as opposed to manmade items (which are ‘unnatural’, even though manmade items originally come from the earth). The definition splits the human world and nature (the nonhuman world) into opposing fractions creating a gap. When looking up the definition of nature it might be assumed that the result posted in the beginning of the essay (p1) would be the first and obvious search result (nature as plants and trees), yet this is not the case with the OED. The OED has placed the definition presented in the beginning of the essay (p1) after numerous other definitions of human behavior in relation to nature. One finds definitions such as:

(2) The vital or physical powers of a person; a person's physical strength or constitution

[…] Semen. Occas. also: the sexual fluid of a woman […] The power or force which is fundamental to the physical and mental functioning of a human being (OED, 2005).

Definition two presented above came before definition one (p1), which deals with nature as one might imagine nature. The OED chooses to present human traits and abilities before nature as an actual object. I use these definitions in order to show that it is uncommon for 'man' to put himself above nature, even though this particular case deals with the definition of ‘nature’ as a word, something which will be linked to SOS later on.

In SOS we find a constant battle between Ehrlich the narrator, protagonist and the elements of nature. The first few lines of Ehrlich’s book gives us a glimpse of how Ehrlich portrays her relation to nature as she curls up against a bush in order to shelter herself from the winds: “A front is pulling the huge sky over me, and from the dark a hailstone has hit me on the head” (1). Ehrlich gives us a very vivid description of how she is being battered by the natural elements. Ehrlich describes how she attempts to shelter herself, yet failing to do so when the hailstorm hits her over the head. After having been ‘attacked’ by the elements, we find a passage where Ehrlich describes how she trails sheep through the Wyoming badlands. Ehrlich describes how the trek is made difficult due to the harsh elements of nature, such as the scorching sun that prevents her from moving the sheep, portraying how she constantly fights the
elements of nature. When reading the book, descriptions such as the ones mentioned before of nature as something harsh and very unfriendly often occur. The first quote in section 1.1 describes the winter surrounding Ehrlich and once again shows the total indifference which the elements show to the presence of humans, or anything else for that matter.

The way Ehrlich describes nature and culture in the book portrays the ideas of: “[…] untamed landscapes and the sharp distinction between the forces of culture and nature” (Garrard, 60). One can quite often find passages where Ehrlich describes her ‘meetings’ with nature. In SOS numerous clashes are found between the ruggedness of nature and the cowboy culture: “During the winter, while I was riding to find a new calf, my jeans froze to the saddle […]” (2). Ehrlich is riding her horse in the cold weather when her blue-jeans freeze and get stuck to the saddle, showing that the elements of nature and her jeans which were created by culture are two incompatible items.

Presented below are various examples of clashes between nature and culture in SOS. They are presented in an attempt to gain further insight into how Ehrlich has portrayed nature in relation to the culture which the characters of SOS abide by.

In the chapter titled "The Smooth Skull of Winter" Ehrlich uses clashes between nature and culture in order to show the incompatibility between the people she lives with, and the nature in which they reside. Ehrlich often poses nature in contrast to human culture, as in the case with the jeans and the cold weather. In the initial pages of the chapter mentioned above, Ehrlich describes how: “[a] Wyoming winter laminates (emphasis added) the earth with white, then hardens the lacquer work (emphasis added) with wind” (72). In this quote Ehrlich uses a metaphor for a manmade process when describing how the natural elements work. Although this is not a clash between nature and culture, Ehrlich is clearly applying human characteristics to nature. Applying human characteristics to something non-human presumably asserts ownership of that item, placing the human ‘above’ what is being characterized. The snow falls (laminates) and turns everything white and the wind hardens the snow (lacquer work).

Although these clashes between nature and culture (man made items) might not be intended by Ehrlich, they do appear throughout the narrative and form a pattern of reoccurring
oppositions. Ehrlich describes how mercury acts when the temperature sinks too low: “[w]hen it’s fifty below, the mercury bottoms out and jiggles there as if laughing at those of us still above ground” (73). The thermometer which is a manmade item stops functioning at fifty degrees below zero, when it bottoms out it is impossible to see the temperature; nature turns the item which was constructed by culture into something useless.

Lastly Ehrlich describes how she rubs the toes of a stranger: “[…] whose pickup has veered off the road” (72) while at the same time helping to: “[…] splice a friend’s frozen water pipe […]” (72). The pickup is yet another nature and culture clash. The car is a mechanical device made by humans and does not function properly under extreme conditions. The frozen water pipe could be perceived a symbol of culture’s failure to contain the natural elements. After a snowstorm Ehrlich gets a call by a friend who needs her help, after having towed her pickup to get it started she: “drove across the Basin, trying one unplowed road after another. No route would take me to Ellen’s” (43). The manmade road was made useless by the layers of snow which covered it, showing the incompatibility between the constructions of man and nature.

There are several such examples of incompatibility between nature and items which derive from culture. Although all manmade items such as jeans, cars or pipes originally come from the earth, they have been processed and remade by humans, for humans.

In conclusion the OED gives various definitions of nature, while Ehrlich the narrator portrays nature as she perceives it. There are clear differences between nature as an actual concept and how one person perceives nature. This section (4.1) has shown a general definition of nature and compared it to how Ehrlich the narrator describes nature, namely something which often clashes with culture. The descriptions of Ehrlich the narrator are formed by the culture in which she lives, a culture which exists close to nature and often becomes affected by it. It is in these quotes we find the first signs of a nature and culture dualism in SOS.
4.2 How nature affects Ehrlich in *SOS*

The following section will look at how nature in Ehrlich’s Wyoming affects Ehrlich the narrator and/or protagonist. Ehrlich often describes nature and its elements as something harsh. The following quote is a typical description of how the landscape affects Ehrlich: “Winter scarified me. Under each cheekbone I thought I could feel claw marks and scar tissue” (43). There are several passages where Ehrlich describes the hardness and ruggedness of the landscape. There is seldom a time of tranquility. In the summer Ehrlich and the other characters have to endure severe dryness, which is followed by periods of drought. The season of rain is quickly followed by a period of extreme cold which changes into a thawing spring and then the cycle starts all over again. Despite the ruggedness, one finds passages where Ehrlich describes the ‘good’ side of nature and moments when she is at peace with nature: “[m]orning. Sagesmell, sunsquint, birdsong, cool wind. I have no idea where I am, how to get to the nearest paved road, or how to find the sheep” (54). In the previous quote we find Ehrlich disoriented, she does not know where she is. Despite her state, Ehrlich wakes up and takes in various positive impressions of the nature surrounding her. When first venturing to Wyoming, Ehrlich considers the landscape and the elements to be great and vast, a place where one can get spiritually lost. Ehrlich describes how: “I suspect that my original motive for coming here was to ‘lose myself’ in new and unpopulated territory” (3). Instead of losing herself in the landscape as priory mentioned, Ehrlich finds peace in the surrounding landscape and: “Instead of producing the numbness I thought I wanted, life on the sheep ranch woke me up” (3-4).

Ehrlich cannot change nature around her, instead her descriptions of nature change over a period of time, as does Ehrlich in relation to what she ‘was’ before coming to Wyoming. We find Ehrlich describing how: “[d]espite the desolate look, there’s a coziness to living in this state” (4). Upon moving in and working on the ranch Ehrlich describes how she: “threw away my clothes and bought new ones; I cut my hair” (4). Ehrlich’s liberating behavior starts after the death of her husband to be, David. In the chapter named "Other Lives" Ehrlich describes how
she moves to Wyoming to live with her husband to be. His condition worsens and eventually he
dies. After the death of her husband to be, Ehrlich decides to stay in Wyoming.

Ehrlich moves to Wyoming to loose or rather find herself: “I had the experience of
waking up not knowing where I was, whether I was a man or a woman” (ix). Ehrlich also
describes how: “[t]he arid country was a clean slate. Its absolute indifference steadied me” (4).
The quotes presented above move to show that Ehrlich used the landscape in order to find
solitude after the death of her husband to be. Ehrlich uses nature as a form of self medication.
Ehrlich embraces nature and allows herself be affected by it. In an article by Nora J. Rubinstein
titled *The Psychological Value of Open space* answers are given to why people might turn to
nature for healing. In the following quote Rubenstein writes of why one might use nature or
open landscapes: “Perhaps the dominant expressed rationale for using open space is the need for
a place of contemplation and solitude” (Rubenstein).

In conclusion, having worked so close with nature Ehrlich has been able to show us the
various ways in which nature and its elements have affected her as she moved to Wyoming. In
various chapters Ehrlich describes nature as something harsh and unfriendly, yet at the same
time we find her turning to nature for healing. Ehrlich uses nature as a refuge and a place where
she can contemplate. The way Ehrlich describes nature and the way she interacts with it are two
separate matters. Ehrlichs descriptions of the landscape are harsh, yet at the same time Ehrlich
turns to the landscape for soothing, displaying a symbiotic relationship with nature. Ehrlich’s
descriptions also give us an insight to how nature and culture (Ehrlich as she is a part of culture)
interact with one another.

4.2.1 How nature affects the characters of *SOS*

The previous section dealt with the impact nature had on Ehrlich the protagonist. This section
will deal with how nature and the climate actually change the characters of *SOS*, their relation to
one another and their everyday routines. In *SOS* Ehrlich does not only describe how she
changes, but also how the elements change and shape the entire community around her. The solitude which Ehrlich describes could originate from the great distances which separate the inhabitants. Ehrlich describes how only half a million people live in the entire state of Wyoming, a situation which creates vast spaces between the farms and results in people rarely meeting one another. The solitude and: “[t]he geographical vastness and the social isolation here make emotional evolution seem impossible” (52). The quote shows that the vast unpopulated landscape contributes to the seeming ‘coldness’ of the characters in *SOS*. An example of the isolation is found in a story Ehrlich tells of a farmer who drives thousands of miles in his truck over the course of a year, yet never setting foot outside his own farmlands. Nature does not only change people in the way they interact with one another, it also confines them and affects them in a physical way. In the summer the characters of *SOS* get their cowboys tans (12) and the blazing heat drives them to stay inside. In the winter the cold weather has the same effect as it keeps them inside, trapping them. In the chapter titled "The Smooth Skull of Winter" there are several examples of how the elements of nature affect the characters in various ways. The harshness of the Wyoming landscape is described by Ehrlich in this short chapter. On page 72 we find the following quote:

>[t]he deep ache of this audacious Arctic air is also the ache in our lives made physical. Patches of frostbite show up on our noses, toes, and ears. Skin blisters as if cold were a kind of radiation to which we’ve been exposed. It strips what is ornamental in us” (72).

This quote is a good example of Ehrlich describing how the human body is affected by nature. Ehrlich starts by writing that the ache of the cold air is the same ache which can be physically seen on the bodies the inhabitants (characters). The blistering skin and patches of frostbite which can be seen on their bodies can also be found in the surrounding landscape. Ehrlich often draws parallels between the human body and nature. In one section Ehrlich even refers to the land as: “The integrity of the land as a *geo-graphical body* (emphasis added) with the freedom to ride anywhere on it [...]” (10). In the chapter mentioned above, Ehrlich describes how the
landscape and the cold weather bring people together. The weather forces the characters to help one another out in any way they can: “we take mittens and blankets to the men who herd sheep” (72). The cold weather creates a form of camaraderie. Ehrlich describes how the camaraderie which is created is one that is: “[…] laced with dark humor, an effervescent lunacy, and unexpected fits of anger and tears” (73-74). On page 42 a character named Ellen Cotton calls Ehrlich and asks for her help. Ellen needs Ehrlich's assistance since she does not believe that it is possible to feed the farm animal alone. This shows that the elements change the cowboys in more ways than just the physical. Nature greatly affects the way the cowboys interact, which is yet another connection we find in *SOS* between nature and culture.

The cowboys are bound to the land and they all seem to share a similar view of life, something which could resemble: “[…] a slow accumulation of days, seasons, years, fleshed out by the generational weight of one’s family and anchored by a land-bound sense of place” (5). The way Ehrlich describes the traits which the cowboys possess could be closely linked to nature since their common denominator is culture, a culture which is presumably formed by the surrounding nature.

The way the characters in *SOS* are affected by nature can be seen in every season which is portrayed in *SOS*. Ehrlich dedicates the chapter "On Water" to how the lack of water in the summer affects the inhabitants of *SOS*. Ehrlich describes of how the cowboys: “have learned not to waste words from not having wasted water, as if verbosity would create a thirst too extreme to bear” (79). The climate as it is presented in the book has yet again affected the ‘normal’ behavioral patterns of the characters in *SOS*. The lack of water has according to Ehrlich also made the people sparse in their way of speaking. The characters of Ehrlich’s Wyoming either see no water or great quantities of it in a short period of time, which naturally makes them associate water with either life or death. The life or death association is something which the following quote exemplifies: “[it] carries, weightlessly, the imponderable things in our lives: death and creation. We can drown in it or else stay buoyant, quench our thirst, stay alive.” (83)

The abundance or lack of water does not have the same affect on all the inhabitants in the book. The Indians who also occupy the lands have a slightly different relation to water. Ehrlich tells
the story of how traditional Indians perceive water: “The old tribal crier used to call out every
morning for our people to drink all they could, to make water touch their bodies. ‘Water is your
body’, they used to say” (84). The Indians worry about their own well-being, as opposed to the
cowboys who are more concerned with the lack of water affecting the crops than their own
health (in relation to the use of water).

Ehrlich continues to describe how nature affects the inhabitants in the book: “[t]he
solitude in which westerners live makes them quiet” (6) is a statement which is directly
connected with the landscape and the way the humans dwell within the landscape. Ehrlich
describes how sheepherders can spend days out in the field while the sheep graze, turning nature
into their only companion. The characters in the book have become introvert as a result of their
interaction with nature. The isolation has led to the development of a communication form
which better suits their way of life. One of Ehrlich’s most striking passages gives a detailed
description of how the landscape has changed the way the inhabitants interact:

Sentence structure is shortened to the skin and bones of a thought. Descriptive words are
dropped, even verbs; a cowboy looking over a corral full of horses will say to a
wrangler, ‘Which one rode?’ People hold back their thoughts in what seems to be a
dumbfounded silence, then erupt with an excoriating perceptive remark” (6).

The quote shows how the inhabitants have adapted their way of communicating. It is a change
which can be linked to the solitude of Ehrlich’s Wyoming. The solitude in turn is a direct result
of the vast, rugged and empty nature which surrounds the people in SOS. The origins of the
solitude can be traced back to the earlier discussion regarding the lack of water and how the
inhabitants tend to be sparse with words, just as with their water. In the dryness of the Wyoming
landscape, true social interaction appears to be very rare. The inhabitants are portrayed as if they
waste words in the same manner as they would choose to use water, which is sparsely. Ehrlich’s
metaphoric language is found throughout SOS. In the initial pages of SOS a cowboy was
reported to have ended a relationship by saying: “‘[y]ou’re a bad check,’ meaning bouncing in
and out was intolerable, and even coming back would be no good” (7). The language is not the only thing which is affected by the isolation and interaction with nature; the ability to show ‘emotions’ is also affected to a degree. Ehrlich describes how the people around her: “[…] telegraph thoughts and feelings by the way they tilt their heads and listen; pulling their Stetsons into a steep dive over their eyes, or pigeon-toeing one boot over the other […]” (6). The inhabitants do not show emotions openly, they express emotions in other ways which could deviate from what other cultures would call ‘normal’. Ehrlich describes how she returns to town for supplies after having been sheepherding for a short period of time. When Ehrlich returns she finds herself disorientated and scared: “[l]onging for human company, I felt a foolish grin take over my face; yet I had to resist an urgent temptation to run and hide.” (5). When faced with this situation Ehrlich acts as if been isolated from humanity. Ehrlich at first feels happy to see others, yet at the same time Ehrlich shies away and fights the urge to run away from them.

In conclusion we can see that the nature surrounding Ehrlich and the cowboys affect their everyday lives in various aspects. It affects the way they interact with one another, speak, and eventually live. Section 4.2.1 presents a great deal of examples found in the book where nature directly affects the characters; once again showing how nature affects every aspect of the culture. This moves to show the obvious, that even though it might not be intended, there is a nature and culture dualism present is SOS.

4.2.2 Ehrlich’s personification

Section 4.2.1 dealt with how the landscape affected the inhabitants and Ehrlich physically. The following section will discuss how Ehrlich embodies herself in nature and the elements. The OED defines embodiment as follows: “That in which (a principle, an abstract idea, etc.) is embodied, actualized, or concretely expressed.” (OED, 2005) This section will attempt to show how Ehrlich uses nature in opposition to culture (herself). The subject of embodiment will be
analyzed in order to give further proof that there is a nature and culture dualism present in *SOS*.

One finds Ehrlich using nature as a symbol in *SOS*. In her article Rubenstein writes of how our relationship to the landscape could originate from a desire to see ourselves reflected in a natural form (Rubenstein, 1997). The idea of seeing ourselves in a natural form is highly applicable to the way *SOS* is narrated, this since Ehrlich often projects herself on to the landscape. There is a passage where Ehrlich uses the attributes of her peeled skin in relation to nature and compares her physical state to the surrounding landscape. The following quote shows how Ehrlich compares herself with nature:

If I was leery about being an owner, a possessor of land, now I have to understand the ways in which the place possesses me. Mowing hayfields feels like mowing myself. I wake up mornings expecting to find my hair shorn. The pastures bend into me; the water I ushered over hard ground becomes one drink of grass (90).

Throughout this quote one can see how Ehrlich projects herself in the lands, and how the lands work and affect her body as if they were one element. It is important to emphasize that the quote is highly metaphorical; nevertheless it does show how Ehrlich (metaphorically or not) uses personification in the text. Rubenstein writes of how the solitude of the natural environment enables us as humans to discover and explore our social and personal identities. In *SOS* one can often find Ehrlich using space as a means of escape. The open landscape soothes Ehrlich and lets her find herself, often by personifying herself in the lands. Rubenstein: writes “[n]atural environments are unique in their ability to provide solitude and privacy, no matter how we use them, or even whether we use them” (Rubenstein, 1997).

The personification of Ehrlich is included since it helps give a better understanding of how Ehrlich describes nature. This section shows that culture (Ehrlich) and nature interact in more ways than just the physical.
This section will look at the relation between anthropocentrism and ecocriticism in *SOS* and how Ehrlich portrays the nature and culture dualism. To strengthen Ehrlich’s portrayal of nature I will to a lesser extent include general opinions regarding nature and the consequences of exploiting nature. This section will also show why Ehrlich the protagonist and Ehrlich the narrator need to be separated as two different individuals.

The topic of anthropocentrism deals with humans as being the most important living thing on Earth. Signs of anthropocentrism are rarely seen in *SOS*. Ehrlich moves the focus away from human selfishness and highlights the importance of the surrounding nature. The writings of Ehrlich show how man interacts with nature, yet at the same time living off of, exploiting, and changing the face of the landscape.

Garrard writes of how: “[e]chophilosophers often criticize the arrogance of anthropocentrism, sometimes using the Ancient Greek term ‘hubris’ for this fatal flaw of overweening self-righteousness and willful misuse of power” (179). In Garrard’s book one finds discussions of how man places himself above nature and how man willfully changes nature. Ehrlich exemplifies one such change when she describes how barbed wire was stretched miles and miles over: “[…] beautiful valleys, into the mountains, over desert badlands, through buffalo grass” (10). The openness of the land changed due to these boundaries. In one passage of *SOS* we find the following: “[t]here is no wilderness left; wildness, yes, but true wilderness has been gone on this continent since the time of Lewis and Clark’s overland journey” (8) which shows that Ehrlich’s approach to nature is in some ways very pessimistic. On page 10 Ehrlich also describes how wilderness is lost due to the intrusion of man. Yet again Ehrlich makes a statement which shows that she (willingly or not) expresses opinions against anthropocentrism and the exploitation of nature.

Continuing this trail of thought we find a passage where Ehrlich portrays the consuming culture of the American people: “[w]e Americans are great fillers, as if what we have, what we are, is not enough. We have a cultural tendency toward denial, but, being affluent, we strangle
ourselves with what we can buy” (15). Ehrlich describes this situation in relation to how Wyoming is different from the rest of America. According to Ehrlich America is consuming itself, she describes how Americans try to fill a never ending emptiness by buying items. In the previous quote Ehrlich describes how Americans are great fillers, implying that Americans are never content as long as there is space they will try to find a way to fill it. As long as the population tries to fill space with items and things, nature will be exploited in order to make those items and the spaciousness of the landscape will be filled with manmade items. The way Ehrlich brings up matters such as human exploitation of the lands gives rise to an anti-anthropocentric stance. Even though it might not be intentional, Ehrlich clearly expresses resentment towards the dominating effect human culture has on nature.

The exploitation of land always affects nature. In the beginning of the book Ehrlich describes how she works as a sheep farmer, and how hundreds of sheep are let out everyday to graze in the open fields. When great quantities of animals graze, they consume the vegetation, and without vegetation to hold back the desert, the sand spreads and makes the landscape even more desolate. Even though Ehrlich opposes the overexploitation of nature, she is contributing to the destruction of nature by herding sheep. The way Ehrlich works with the sheep, yet at the same time exploiting nature, provides further proof that there is a nature and culture dualism present in SOS. Even though Ehrlich has not proclaimed herself to be an ecocritic, her opinions express ecocritical views on various matters and resemble ecocritical writing.

What is ecocriticism? Cheryll Glotfelty defines it as: “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty). In her article posted on ASLE Ursula K. Heise wrote that:

“Second, ecocriticism has nothing specifically to do with nature writing. Again, this does not imply that ecocriticism does not ever deal with nature writing; clearly, it often does […]. Ecocriticism analyzes the ways in which literature represents the human relation to nature at particular moments of history […].” (Heise, 1999).
Ehrlich’s *SOS* deals with the physical world which is represented by the Wyoming landscape. The Wyoming landscape is opposed to the culture which is present in that part of the country. Ehrlich’s writing style can thus be interpreted as Ecoliterature (nature writing).

Ehrlich the narrator expresses opinions in *SOS* which can be interpreted as her being against anthropocentrism, yet in an interview with Greiner, Ehrlich the writer states that: “‘this whole involvement with the environment is totally self-serving' because human survival is impermanent anyway” (qtd. in Greiner, 231). Ehrlich the writer clearly states that it does not matter whether humans help nature or not, since nobody cares. In the quote Ehrlich the writer implies that is futile to save something which in the end will be destroyed anyway. Ehrlich the writer clearly has an anthropocentric view on nature, contrary to Ehrlich the narrator/protagonist who believes that the natural world will survive no matter what happens. We find a split here between Ehrlich the writer and Ehrlich the narrator/protagonist since they have different views concerning nature and its preservation.

In conclusion Ehrlich the narrator/protagonist does not make any overtly political statements concerning the treatment of nature and culture. Although throughout *SOS* various examples are found of how Ehrlich the narrator/protagonist expresses resentment against how Americans exploit nature for their own egotistic reasons. One finds Ehrlich the narrator willingly or not taking a stance against anthropocentrism yet at the same time exploiting nature by taking a part of its destruction (i.e. by herding sheep). The views Ehrlich the narrator expresses against the exploitation of nature, and the indifference Ehrlichs the writer shows toward this subject (as shown in the Greiner article) is the reason why I have chosen to separate these two individuals.

### 4.4 Animals and culture

This following section will look at how the characters in *SOS* change and interact with the animals. This will be done in order to find further proof of the nature and culture dualism in
SOS; it is important to find in what form the dualism is found within the text. Throughout this section I will attempt to prove that Ehrlich the narrator has an anthropocentric view on the treatment of animals. This can be seen in the way Ehrlich works and uses farm animals for human purposes, like riding her horse. The animals in SOS which are controlled by humans are not native animals. The animals in SOS consist mainly of sheep which were brought to the lands by humans for the sole purpose of being used as ‘raw material’. Goudie addresses this topic and writes that:

This [domestication] has been one of the most profound ways in which humans have affected animals, for during the ten of eleven millennia that have passed since this process was initiated the animals that human societies have selected as useful to them have undergone major changes (Goudie, 106).

Ehrlich travels to Wyoming and becomes a sheep herder, an occupation where she finds herself treating the animals as if they were ‘raw’ material instead of something living. The word ‘cattle’ itself is anthropocentric. By looking at the definition of ‘cattle’ one finds the following:

Cattle are domesticated ungulates, a member of the subfamily Bovinae of the family Bovidae. They are raised as livestock for meat […], dairy products […], leather and as draught animals […] (Wikipedia, 2005).

The cowboys work with sheep and cattle everyday and it is perhaps not strange that the cowboys see the cattle as ‘raw’ material. The cattle, just like the sheep and horses are all domesticated animals. By domesticated I mean that they have been tamed by humans and kept in captivity or that they have been bred for various purposes. Not only are they domesticated, the cowboys raise them to be used as a source for meat, milk and wool, which are all essentially ‘raw’ materials. I do not believe Ehrlich’s anthropocentric behavior to be intentional but a reflection of ‘modern society’s’ views on animals. The way Ehrlich treats animals is one way the nature
and culture dualism is present in *SOS*. To a greater extent, Ehrlich only describes trees, plants, the landscape and how one has to be self-conscious in relation to nature. In spite of Ehrlich’s descriptions, nature does not only consist of trees and plants, it also includes animals. Greiner describes how Ehrlich refuses to look at the world from an anthropocentric point of view, yet this not true since Ehrlich describes animals in an anthropocentric way. In the chapter "*From a Sheepherder’s Notebook: Three Days*" Ehrlich describes her relation to sheep ranching and goes into descriptions of how she works with and treats animals. On page 55 we find the following quote: “[i]t’s like being a first-time mother, but mother now to two thousand sheep who give me the kind of disdainful look a teenager would his parents and, with my back turned, can get into as much trouble”. This quote is interesting and ironic from several points of view, the first one being that Ehrlich describes herself as a mother to the sheep. One could ask if a mother would herd her children, treating them as nothing more than simple objects. Furthermore Ehrlich applies human traits to the sheep, describing how they look at her as a teenager would. By viewing animals in this way and applying traits which are typically human to an animal Ehrlich is placing humans ‘above’ the animals. When placing humans in a dominant position, Ehrlich in unwillingly taking a step towards anthropocentrism.

Ehrlich describes how humans try to tame and control animals by using them as a means to an end. In the following quote Ehrlich describes how animals need to follow the ‘laws’ which humans have laid down. In the sheepherder chapter Ehrlich describes how: “[d]own in the valley again I send the dog ‘way around’ to turn the sheep, but he takes the law into his own hands and chases a lamb off a cliff” (57). The question raised is what ‘law’ Ehrlich is referring to. Ehrlich is also implying that the dog is willfully defying her, just as the sheep would when Ehrlich described them as teenagers. The dog running off could be a symbolic act when trying to show that even though man tries to control nature, he is not able to. The dog shows that even though humans have attempted to tame it and make it follow their ‘laws’, the dog asserts his independence and goes back to his natural state and playfully chases the sheep.

Further examples of human characteristics being applied to animals occur when Ehrlich sees something sticking out of the ground. The item sticking out of the ground was the shell of a
dead frog. Ehrlich describes the carcass as: “[a] cartoonist’s idea of a frog relaxing” (58). The
typical humanization of animals depicted in cartoons makes Ehrlich associate this carcass with
cartoons. Applying human characteristics to an animal establishes ownership of that animal.
The application of characteristics means that if one starts thinking of animals as something
‘manmade’ one assumes ownership of it.

It is clear that Ehrlich pities and relates to the animals which she works with. In the
chapter "Friends, Foes, and Working Animals" Ehrlich describes how: “[a]nimals give us their
constant, unjaded faces and we burden them with our bodies and civilized ordeals” (62). In the
previous quote Ehrlich describes how the horses carry the cowboys on their backs, and how they
never complain and never seem tired. Ehrlich continues to describe how man forces animals to
break their natural patterns of behavior and abide to what human civilization has deemed as
‘acceptable animal behavior’. If a horse which is bred to carry cowboys after a period of time
refuses to ‘work’ that animal will most likely be put down. The animal is punished since it takes
the law into its own hands and breaks the patterns the humans have created for it. It is
impossible to say that the horse carries the cowboys willfully since one cannot know how an
animal thinks. The horse has been bred and domesticated and thus does what it is ‘supposed’ to
do. The domestication and use of animals gives further proof to the question of whether there is
a nature and culture dualism present in SOS.

There are numerous examples throughout the book where humans attempt to tame
animals and instill human values on them, or merely use them for recreation. In the chapter
"Rules of The Game: Rodeo" Ehrlich describes how she and her husband honeymoon in
Oklahoma City where they witnessed the game of rodeo. One segment of the game involves a
cowboy sitting on a bucking horse or bull for a period of time. The longer the cowboy can stay
on the back of the horse or bull the more points he will receive. The horses and bulls are taken
out of their natural environment in order to be deprogrammed of their natural behavior and
reprogrammed with behavior fitting a rodeo horse or bull.

Another aspect of the rodeo is ‘steer wrestling’ which involves a cowboy riding his
horse with the aim to jump off it and wrestle a steer to the ground in the shortest amount of
time. Ehrlich describes the sport of ‘steer wrestling’ in the following manner:

Now the steer wrestlers shoot out of the box on their own well-trained horses [.....] He’s airborne for a second; then his heels swing into the dirt and with his arms around the horns, he skids to a stop, twisting the steer’s head to one side so the animal loses his balance and falls to the ground. It’s a fast-paced game of catch with a thousand-pound ball of horned flesh. (92-93)

The quote shows a great deal of interesting aspects regarding how animals have been forced to adapt to culture. The ‘steer wrestler’ or the cowboy jumps out of the box with his ‘well trained horse’. Calling the horse ‘well trained’ shows that the horse is inferior. I say inferior since the cowboy or someone else has trained the horse in such a way that it is considered a ‘good’ horse, which then immediately raises the question: what defines a ‘good horse’? In this context a ‘good horse’ is one that has been successfully trained to act as its rider wants it to act.

The second thing the cowboy does is to jump off his horse and wrestle the steer to the ground by twisting the steers head. This act by the cowboy is a mere show of strength. The cowboy is supposed to overpower the huge animal by wrestling it to the ground with his bare hands. When handling the steer in this way the cowboy is not showing the animal any respect as he throws it onto the ground. Ehrlich rids the steer of any identity by simply calling it an ‘animal’ which looses its balance, placing the steer in a position where it has no value since it is a mere ‘animal’.

Thirdly Ehrlich decides to call it a ‘game of catch’. The steer is once again degraded to a simple item. In this case Ehrlich uses a metaphor to compare the steer to a simple ball which is passed ‘back and forth’. The definition also suggests that this game of catch is a cooperative act, something that is far from truth since the steer is not doing anything willfully.

There is also a ‘game’ called ‘team roping’, where the aim of the cowboy is to ‘rope’ the steer together with a fellow cowboy. The goal of the ‘game’ is to throw a coil of rope under the running steer's hind legs and catch it, and when the steer is stretched out, an official waves a flag
and the time is taken. The steer is brutally tied and released several times during the course of a rodeo event. None of these events show any respect to the animals as they are treated as mere objects. The horse and the steer are both treated as sub creatures, a view that is strictly anthropocentric.

Ehrlich does not see any faults in the sport since she romanticizes the entire rodeo event, even calling the cowboys: “[...] graceful technicians [...]” with “[...] feminine grace [...]” (93). Ehrlich expresses an opinion, intentional or not about the animal (nature) and human (culture) dualism when she says: “We’re comrades who save each other’s lives” (62). The phrase was expressed in regard to a horse which Ehrlich has trained as a ‘good’ horse. When making such a claim Ehrlich is looking down on the horse which she uses as an everyday tool. As with the case of the rest of the animals, Ehrlich sympathizes with them, yet fails to place animals and humans on the same hierarchical level. Ehrlich is having a hard time creating equality between animals and humans since the animals are used as a means to meet the cowboys’ ends, be it for work or for recreational purposes. In her narration Ehrlich shows that nature and the elements of Wyoming to an extent control humans and shape them. The humans on the other hand control and shape the animals, forgetting that animals too are part of nature.

In conclusion the animals which are found in SOS are not native animals but animals which are controlled and bred by man. The domestication and Ehrlich’s close relationship to the animals give rise to anthropocentrism. In various sections of the book one finds Ehrlich looking down on animals and placing herself on top of the hierarchical ladder and the animals on the bottom. Ehrlich romanticizes the ill treatment of the animals and clearly (willfully or not) takes an anthropocentric standpoint even though she pities the animals. The clash we find between the animals (nature) and humans (culture) is one of the dualistic features of SOS.
5 Conclusion

This section will be dedicated to answer the research questions which were presented in the introduction. The conclusion will act as a form of summary for each question which has been asked and subsequently answered.

**Is there a nature culture dualism present in SOS?**

The main research question which was the foundation of the essay was answered early on. There is proof throughout the book that nature (including animals) and culture (including humans) are in opposition with each other. The dualism might not be intended yet it is found throughout *SOS*. The dualism is found in various ways, some oppositions can be found in: the way Ehrlich personifies herself in nature, the way manmade items interact with nature, the way humans treat animals and the way Ehrlich attributes human characteristics to abstract ideas. This leads us to the sub questions since we have answered if there is a dualism. The questions below intend to answer how the dualism is presented.

**How is nature depicted from the narrator’s point of view?**

To summarize the answer one can say that Ehrlich portrays nature in *SOS* as something wild and untamed. Nature is not something which the inhabitants of *SOS* live with, nature is something they have to endure. Ehrlich often depicts nature as an obstacle, a force which inhibits the inhabitants when performing their daily routines. The nature which Ehrlich describes is one that contains great landscapes and wide open ranges, one does not often find descriptions of smaller ecosystems within the landscape. Ehrlich describes the abuse which nature has to endure just to satisfy the human need to consume. One often finds clashes between nature and culture and how the opposite parts are forced to endure each another.
How does Ehrlich portray the way the characters of SOS affect nature?

Ehrlich does not describe how mankind affects the physical world; Ehrlich describes how man changes the animals which live within the landscape. Ehrlich does describe how man changes the face of the landscape by stretching barbed wire over the landscape in order to establish boundaries between farms. Ehrlich describes the affects culture has on the normal behavior of the animals. In several chapters Ehrlich describes how man affects animals in negative ways.

The biggest change man has inflicted upon nature is the domestication of the animals. Ehrlich describes how she pities animals yet in her work she uses animals as tools of labor. She herds sheep which are bred for the sole purpose of having their wool cut. Ehrlich is contributing (intentional or not) to the oppression of animals. Even though Ehrlich pities the animals her actions give rise to anthropocentrism. The oppression of animals is part of human culture, a need to be ‘on top’. The characters not only affect nature but also the animals which reside therein.

How does Ehrlich portray the way nature affects the characters of SOS?

As mentioned before the characters of SOS have had to adapt their way of living to the surrounding nature. Their living patterns have been dictated by the extreme climate surrounding them. In various passages one finds Ehrlich describing the physical effects the climate has had on the characters (and herself). The heat gives rise to heatstroke while the freezing weather causes their skin to freeze and crack. The animals which they work with also dictate their way of living. The sheep need to be cut, the cows milked and the horses constantly groomed and fed, chores which make up the bulk of the inhabitants lives. The people are dependant on nature for their survival. If it does not rain their crops die and if there is a dry period water will be sparse, natural factors which all affect the people in SOS. Throughout the book one can see how nature affects every corner of Ehrlich’s and the other characters lives; in return the characters of SOS affect nature and the animals. Intentional or not, Ehrlich’s narrative gives the reader food for
thought concerning matters such as anthropocentrism and the intrusion of human culture in the realm of nature.

In conclusion one can say that Ehrlich has done a good job giving animals and people an equal amount of space throughout the book. In every chapter one finds references to animals or humans. Ehrlich does have chapters which she dedicates solely to humans, yet she compensates this by dedicating other chapters to describing how she works with animals or spends time in nature. Ehrlich seldom meets actual people since she spends all her time in the fields herding sheep. The people that she describes are often very introvert and seldom make any greater emotional outbursts. The inhabitants of Ehrlich’s Wyoming are often loners and spend great portions of their lives doing the same thing day in and day out. Work is the cowboy’s livelihood and more than often the cowboys prioritize their job or ‘getting the job done’. In addition Ehrlich seldom gives the animals a voice at all, the only time the animals are given a voice is through Ehrlich’s own stories of how she pities the animals. This is a clear clash between culture and nature (the animals). The conclusion which can be drawn from this discussion is that there is a nature and culture dualism present in SOS. There signs of a dualism are evident in every chapter of SOS.
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Primary Material


Secondary Material


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