

Rediscovering the Self through Nature in Danielle Steel's *Finding Ashley*

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Abstract

Danielle Steel's Finding Ashley (2021) narrative presents nature as an active facilitator of the protagonist's emotional revival rather than a mere observer. With vivid descriptions of symbolic landscapes, Steel illustrates how nature acts as both a reservation and a catalyst for transformation, allowing the protagonist to reconnect with her past, welcome change, and redefine her identity. As she immerses herself in the rhythms of nature, Melissa begins to rediscover her sense of purpose and identity, shedding the burdens of her past and embracing a newfound sense of freedom and renewal. This highlights nature's transformative role in shaping human identity through the theme of loss, healing, and self-discovery. This analysis reveals nature's therapeutic power in encouraging self-exploration, building resilience, and guiding identity formation, ultimately emphasizing its significant impact on personal growth and emotional healing within the literature. The protagonist's connection with the natural world enables her to rediscover herself and embrace a new path forward.

Keywords: Emotional, Catalyst, Identity, Healing, Natural World, Rediscover

Introduction

In contemporary literature, the relationship between humans and nature has arisen as a significant theme, predominantly in narratives of personal renovation and healing. Danielle Steel's novel *Finding Ashley* (2021) presents a compelling search for this relationship, weaving the natural world into its narrative thing as both a setting and catalyst for change. The novel follows Melissa Henderson, a woman who fled to rural New England resulting in the death of her young son and subsequent divorce, seeking solace in the refurbishment of a timeworn Victorian residence amid the quiet splendour of country surroundings. When her separated sister Hattie, a nun turned undercover journalist, arrives with news about the daughter Melissa gave up for adoption as a teenager, the protagonist embarks on a journey that takes her through various natural sceneries, from the isolated woods of New England to the uneven landscape of Ireland.

This paper argues that in *Finding Ashley*, Steel pays nature as a multi-layered force that enables the protagonist's reunion with her

past and reform of her identity. Through close textual analysis, the paper examines how natural settings function as spaces of replication, therapeutic, and change, allowing the protagonist to navigate grief, rediscover persistence, and re-join with aspects of her long suppressed under suffering and loss. Moreover, it discovers how the shifting times and scenes mirror the internal growth of the character, suggesting the returning nature of healing and the potential for renewal inherent in both the natural world and human experience.

Literature Review

The healing connection between humans and nature has been extensively documented in both scientific literature and literary criticism. Eco Psychology, a field pioneered by Theodore Roszak, explores how connection with the natural world can foster psychological healing and wholeness. According to Wilson, *Biophilia* (1984) hypothesis suggests that humans possess an innate tendency to seek connections with nature and other forms of life. In literary studies, ecocriticism has emerged as an approach that examines the representation of nature in literature and its implications for human-nature relationships (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996).

Popular fiction, despite often being overlooked in academic discourse, frequently engages with profound themes concerning human relationships with nature. Steel's work, though primarily categorized as commercial women's fiction, consistently explores how environments influence character development and emotional healing. Previous studies of Steel's extensive bibliography have noted her attention to setting and place as significant elements in character transformation (Johnson, 2018), though few have specifically analysed the role of nature in her narratives through an eco-critical lens. This paper builds upon existing scholarship by examining how *Finding Ashley* contributes to our understanding of nature's role in narratives of self-discovery and healing, positioning the novel within broader conversations about environmental consciousness in contemporary fiction.

Nature as Refuge: The New England Setting

The novel opens with Melissa Henderson having fled to a rural New England setting, exactly choosing isolation among nature as a response to devastating grief. She loved this house with passion, and since moving there, her whole life had changed dramatically (Steel 4). The house represents an emotional or sensitive shift the act of selecting and caring for this particular home might reflect her embracing her authentic self or finding a sense of belonging she has previously affected. The passage establishes nature as a protective space that allows the protagonist to withdraw from a world that has become unbearable following her son's death. This is a space that allows for psychological recovery from attention fatigue, emotional distress, and general exhaustion. The place provides a physical boundary between Melissa and the outside world, creating a sanctuary where she can exist without the social pressures and reminders of her loss that characterized her previous urban life in Boston.

Significantly, Melissa's choice of an old Victorian house lacking general repair creates a parallel between the rejuvenation of the physical structure and her gradual emotional restoration. Steel frequently draws a network between Melissa's careful restoration work and the natural cycles occurring around her. The ground is lush and perfectly maintained, the historic home restored until it shone. It is something to be proud of, and a symbol of her survival (Steel 6). This picturesque setting is not only a source of pride but also a powerful symbol of the protagonist's survival. The meticulous care and attention is in detail that had gone into restoring the home and grounds reflected the protagonist's resilience and determination. The restored home is in all its beauty and splendour, is mounted as a witness to the protagonist's capability to overwhelm difficulty and thrive. This parallelism suggests that natural processes of renewal influence and reflect the human capacity for recovery.

The changes in New England serve as a sequential framework for Melissa's emotional state. Her initial arrival in winter, characterized by inexpression and quietness, mirrors her emotional numbness. As the narrative progresses shift, Melissa's gradual revival to emotional attachment and persistence agrees with spring's renewal. This idea establishes the nature not merely as a background but as a sequential and emotive counterpoint to the protagonist's journey.

Nature as Catalyst: The Journey to Ireland

When Melissa's sister, Hattie, reaches out with news about the daughter Melissa gave up long ago, the narrative shifts to an intertwined journey to Ireland. This geographical movement is from the familiar natural setting of New England to the wild, rugged landscape of the Irish countryside functions as a catalyst for more active transformation in the protagonist's life. Steel describes Melissa's first impression of the Irish landscape: She knew she was home the minute she walked into the once beautiful, hundred year-old Victorian home. It had ten acres around it, with orchards, enormous old trees, and a stream running through the property in the foothills of Berkshires (Steel 3). Danielle Steel discovers the theme of reviving the person through the therapeutic supremacy of landscape and place. This is emotionally showed when Melissa steps into the once-beautiful, hundred-year-old Victorian home and closely feels she is home. Despite its grey grandeur, the house indicates a return to genuineness and forgotten parts of her. The house is surrounded by ten acres of natural beautiful orchards, ancient trees, and a stream flowing gently through the foothills of the Berkshires.

The setting becomes more than just a backdrop; it mirrors Melissa's inner journey. The peaceful, untamed landscape offers her a sense of foundation and renewal, allowing her to reconnect with her past and begin the process of emotional and spiritual healing. Through this reconnection with nature and place, Steel suggests that true self-discovery often begins in the quiet, restorative spaces away from the noise of the world. This description personifies nature as an active agent in Melissa's journey, forcing her to challenge aspects of herself and her history that buried in the protective nest of her New England refuge. The physical force of the setting's influence suggests that nature in the novel operates not just as setting but as a character with agency, pushing the protagonist toward essential growth. The contrast between the cultivated, controlled nature surrounding Melissa's Victorian home in New England and the wild, ancient landscape of Ireland represents a progression in her healing journey.

An Unseen Guide: Norm's Role in Melissa's Emotional Recovery

Norm provides a sturdy, grounding incidence for Melissa as she relinks with her past and initiates to rectify. His inaudible care and profound construction to the land reproduce a form of expressive stewardship. Through him, Steel highlights the curative power of silent comradeship and landscape's soft strength. It's too dangerous for you to stay. If the fire gets here, you could be trapped, or hit by a falling tree or part of the house (Steel 38). This explores how Norm, though a quiet and secondary character, plays a noteworthy role in Melissa's emotive curing journey in *Finding Ashley*. As the caretaker of the Victorian home, Norm symbolizes stability, serves as a gentle and grounding force. His provisions are upholding the property, about Melissa's space, and present calm comradeship to create a pacific environment that supports her repossession. Norm supports Melissa through quiet presence, giving her space to heal without burden. His subtle role shows that powerful support doesn't have to be loud. Steel highlights the strength of calm, reliable care in emotional reclamation.

Role of Sisterhood in The Journey of Self-Rediscovery

When nature offers Melissa a space for solitude and healing, it is her renewed relationship with her sister Hattie that truly anchors her responsive alteration. The relinking becomes a vital foundation of emotive sustenance, trust, and courage. Hattie's decision to reach out with information

about Melissa's long-lost daughter catalyzes the entire journey both literal and figurative towards self-discovery. The link allows Melissa to provoke throbbing memories, access long-suppressed feelings, and eventually retrieve parts of her identity she had uncontrolled. Through Hattie's unwavering existence, Steel clarifies how reawakening is not an unsociable act but one cultivated through evocative relationships. Just as nature echoes Melissa's innermost replenishment, Hattie's role replicates the supremacy of love, shared history, and forgiveness in the process of healing. "I love my house, and I'm happy to see you again," she said (Steel 70). The line expressed both responsive addition and peculiar warmth. The speaker's love for their house redirects a profound sense of belonging, relief, and perchance melancholy suggesting that the house is more than just a structure. It's a space filled with reminiscence and sense. It adds a personal layer, demonstrating care and an optimistic sensitive linking with the person speaking to. Together, the sentence blends themes of arrival, expressive grounding, and the joy of reunifying with meaningful.

Nature and Temporal Healing

A notable aspect of Steel's treatment of nature in *Finding Ashley* is how natural landscapes function as temporal bridges to connect the past, present, and future in ways that help to recovery. The ancient Ireland landscape has its own layers of sceneries, lasting one to continue its nature. The individual suffering pacifies through the renovation of her house in Berkshires. The novel captures the rhythm of human values and emotions further reinforces the temporal healing. Melissa's sufferings in this novel rooted in deep personal loss, separation and long guilt over the child. Her emotional is connected strongly with her career, family and shifting from the past to present. The restorative power helps her to concentrate on natural rhythm, countryside life. The change over supports her to self-realising. So Melissa's journey is illustrated from the healing to silent wisdom to herself.

Conclusion

Danielle Steel's *Finding Ashley* presents a nuanced representation of nature's role in human healing and character formation. Through the ideas of protagonist's loss, longing, and search changed the views of her new life. She has the reconnection towards the natural environment, symbolic structure, relationship bridge and approving on time to get in the process of emotional recovery and self-discovery. The progress of passive depart delves in the nature to active with the natural landscapes reflects Protagonist's journey. The emotional detachment revived the connection. The novel has the multiple views of narratives. But the landscape creates a rich role in environmental context. Through the shift, she has got a connection between new people. The analysis reveals the understanding of environmental connection influences, psychological wellbeing and identity connection.

Through Melissa Henderson's journey, *Finding Ashley* confirms nature's potential as both healing occurrence and dynamic participant in human alteration, suggesting that expressive commitment with the natural world ruins the vital way thoughtful and recreating the self in the face of loss and conversion in the way of life. The major findings of the research paper are the issues self to recover with the help of nature and landscapes. One should need the change in one's life. The change helps her to move for her self-realization. She has chosen the right path to recover herself. It holds an unshaken position for her way. In the novel, *Finding Ashley* illustrates the healing is a layered process, nurtured by both nature's inaudible resilience and the lasting strength of human connection.

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