

CONFLICTS AT THE INTERSECTION OF NATURE, WELL-BEING, AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS IN WILDE'S THE DEVOTED FRIEND

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Abstract

This study investigates the complex interplay between nature, well-being, and social relationships, focusing on understanding how social dynamics can undermine the positive effects of nature on individual well-being. The research seeks to answer the primary question: How do social relationships influence the impact of nature on well-being? Using Oscar Wilde's short story, *The Devoted Friend*, as a case study, this research employs descriptive textual analysis to examine the character of Hans and his relationship with nature, highlighting the harmful effects of social exploitation. The concept of intersectionality is applied to analyze how overlapping social pressures within nature-related experiences can negatively affect well-being. Key findings reveal that while nature-related activities, such as gardening, are widely recognized for their psychological benefits, the influence of toxic social interactions can erode these benefits, leading to submissive behaviors and well-being deterioration. The research concludes that addressing these social challenges is crucial for fully realizing the positive impacts of nature. The study's implications suggest the need for a deeper understanding of how social dynamics intersect with environmental experiences, calling for strategies to mitigate the adverse effects and enhance well-being.

Keywords: intersectionality, well-being, nature, social relationship.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini menyelidiki keterkaitan kompleks antara alam, kesejahteraan, dan hubungan sosial, dengan fokus pada pemahaman bagaimana dinamika sosial dapat merusak efek positif alam terhadap kesejahteraan individu. Penelitian ini berupaya menjawab pertanyaan utama: Bagaimana hubungan sosial mempengaruhi dampak alam terhadap kesejahteraan? Dengan menggunakan cerita pendek karya Oscar Wilde, *The Devoted Friend*, sebagai studi kasus, penelitian ini menerapkan analisis tekstual deskriptif untuk meneliti karakter Hans dan hubungannya dengan alam, menyoroti dampak merugikan dari eksploitasi sosial. Konsep interseksionalitas diterapkan untuk menganalisis bagaimana tekanan sosial yang saling tumpang tindih dalam pengalaman yang berkaitan dengan alam dapat berdampak negatif pada kesejahteraan. Temuan utama mengungkapkan bahwa meskipun kegiatan yang terkait dengan alam, seperti berkebun, secara luas diakui memberikan manfaat psikologis, pengaruh interaksi sosial yang beracun dapat merusak manfaat tersebut, yang pada akhirnya mengarah pada perilaku tunduk dan penurunan kesejahteraan. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa mengatasi tantangan sosial ini sangat penting untuk mewujudkan dampak positif alam secara penuh. Implikasi penelitian ini menunjukkan perlunya pemahaman yang lebih mendalam tentang bagaimana dinamika sosial beririsan dengan pengalaman lingkungan, dan menyerukan adanya strategi untuk mengurangi dampak negatif serta meningkatkan kesejahteraan.

Kata Kunci: interseksionalitas, kesejahteraan, alam, hubungan sosial

1. Introduction

This study explores the complex relationship between nature, well-being, and social relationships through a literary analysis of Oscar Wilde's *The Devoted Friend*. In the late Victorian era, marked by rapid industrialization and urbanization, society grappled with the effects of growing social stratification and environmental degradation. Against this backdrop, Wilde, influenced by the Aesthetic Movement, critiqued prevailing moral values and societal norms. His literary works

have numerous philosophical ideas and reflections (Akudolu et al., 2024). His works often highlighted the tension between individual well-being and societal expectations, themes central to this investigation.

The motivation to explore this topic arises from the widespread belief that nature is inherently restorative, promoting physical, psychological, and emotional well-being (Meuwese, 2022). As a fundamental aspect of human life, well-being encompasses a state of comfort, health, and happiness (Ruggeri et al., 2020). In today's world, where stress and anxiety have become pervasive, it is more important than ever to identify activities that nurture and protect our overall well-being. Gardening, in particular, has recently gained recognition for its therapeutic benefits, offering a sense of grounding, authenticity, and mental relief. This recognition is rooted in the understanding that humans are deeply interconnected and cannot be separated from nature. However, it is equally important to investigate how social dynamics and relationships intersect with the human connection to nature, as individual experiences with nature alone do not shape well-being. Social interactions can significantly influence and sometimes undermine the positive effects of nature. While nature is often regarded as beneficial for mental and physical health, individuals exist within complex social environments that can introduce conflicts, power imbalances, and emotional stress. Examining how these social forces interact with one's connection to nature is crucial to fully understanding well-being. This investigation reveals how social relationships can enhance or disrupt nature's benefits, providing a more nuanced perspective on the conditions necessary to preserve and improve well-being holistically.

Previous research has largely focused on the positive effects of nature, particularly its role in reducing stress and enhancing mental health. However, less attention has been paid to how these benefits can be compromised by social interactions that may introduce conflicts, such as exploitation or power imbalances. Gardening has been captured as a beneficial activity for health intervention and well-being. Some researchers have described some natural places, such as parks, nature reserves, street trees, and gardens, as the locations for relaxation and restoration of trees (Chalmin-Pui et al., 2021). Dr Stuart-Smith, a psychiatrist based in England, mentioned gardening as a form of space-time medicine (Roach, 2022). She explained that gardening has its philosophy and that, in the garden, people can grow hope. Seeds are such tiny things, but they are packed with life. Dr. Stuart-Smith expressed that gardening conditionally upscales human expression of nurturing. This expression allows us to understand how the human psychological state is affected by its relation to nature.

Previous research also indicates that green spaces and other natural environments increase residents' environmental satisfaction and mental well-being (Lai et al., 2024). Air quality enhancement can improve physical, mental, and cognitive health, encouraging more physical activity, fostering social connections, and reducing stress (Colley et al., 2022). Similarly, growing evidence highlights the importance of being in natural settings or green spaces for promoting a harmonious relationship with nature, forming emotional bonds with specific places, and developing values that promote responsible management of the environment (Colley et al., 2022). Some previous studies have also mentioned the important correlation between human and their environment. Since man is not only a body but a soul that also interacts with non-embodied souls like people and animals (Antonov et al., 2008), it is important to practice this condition so that people may have a pleasant existence on Earth. Antonov et al., in their book *Ecopsychology-*

Create Space, provided a thorough description of the human soul's connection with nature, beginning with the small quantity of energy introduced into plants, moving into animals' bodies, then to humans' bodies, and eventually growing from one incarnation to the next. Nature also functions as a nurturing primary caregiver for an individual. A study showed that individuals draw strength from nature as it gives them grounding and a sense of authenticity. These experiences possibly contribute to their ability for empathy and kindness, underscoring the importance of relatedness for self-experience (Vakoch & Castrillón, 2014). In this way, humans and nature are interconnected as one unified entity.

However, the relationship between humans and nature can influence and be influenced by human social interactions. Individuals possess multiple social identities. While individuals often adopt multiple social identities tied to various roles, this may not enhance individual well-being (Manzi et al., 2023). Such identities can either bolster or diminish well-being. Previous researchers have highlighted the close relationship between well-being and social interaction, identifying social interaction as a key predictor of well-being (Kroencke et al., 2022). Interaction partners vary in emotional closeness and reciprocity (Neyer et al., 2011), which likely influences the quality of social interactions. Many studies differentiate between interactions with strong ties, such as family members and close friends, and weak ties (strangers, co-workers, and classmates). However, the researcher mentioned that friendship and romantic relationships are crucial sources of social interaction (Kroencke et al., 2022). Being helpful and compassionate toward others is associated with increased well-being (Catarino et al., 2014), as these traits are key in friendships and romantic relationships. However, social interactions can also contribute to the emergence of negative emotions, particularly when they lead to submissive behavior.

Building on previous research, this study highlights the connection between well-being, nature, and social relationships, raising questions about how their interactions might pose significant risks to personal well-being. Social influences can disrupt the human-nature bond. Social interactions could impact the stability of the well-being nurtured by the bond between individuals and nature. It is intriguing to observe Mother Nature's influence in revitalizing human well-being, particularly when societal development may have affected it. Social environments like communities, families, and other social groups can affect individual psychology by integrating into their social identity. The positive social identity shared by social groups positively affects individual mental well-being (Haslam et al., 2009). However, this study highlights a gap wherein society could disrupt the bond between individuals and nature. The acquisition of information and the development of thinking capacities contribute to the beneficial development of the human spirit. For instance, engaging in serious religious practice might be perilous without intellectual development (Antonov et al., 2008). This argument can be interpreted as stating that the presence of 'the other' can disrupt a 'self' (Vakoch & Castrillón, 2014). It could be suggested that the distinction between self and other may sometimes lead to tension and raise inquiries about individual existence and well-being.

While existing research underscores the positive impact of nature on mental health and well-being, it also highlights the complex interaction between social relationships, nature, and personal well-being. The potential for social interactions particularly those involving power imbalances or conflicts to disrupt the benefits derived from nature suggests a nuanced understanding of well-being. This review identifies a gap in research regarding how social dynamics can compromise the restorative effects of nature, especially as individuals' social identities and relationships evolve. The

interconnectedness between nature, social interaction, and well-being presents an important avenue for further exploration, as understanding the risks these interactions pose could help develop more effective strategies for maintaining mental and emotional health. By addressing this gap, the present study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how social contexts and environmental factors work together to influence individual well-being.

2. Method

This qualitative study uses Wilde's *The Devoted Friend* as the primary data to investigate the risks inherent in the interaction between nature, well-being, and social relationships. As Paradis et al., (2016) outlined, document analysis is the primary data collection technique that effectively explores individual and group experiences and perspectives. Additionally, the analysis is augmented by drawing upon relevant research articles and reference books to provide a broader theoretical foundation.

The data were analyzed using qualitative methods, with thematic analysis as the primary approach to identify recurring patterns and themes related to the research question (Brooks et al., 2018). This method allows the researcher to interpret the data and uncover the connections between nature, well-being, social relationships, and the associated risks to individuals' life. By examining empirical studies, theoretical frameworks, and scholarly debates, the study seeks to deepen the understanding of these intersections, highlighting potential risks and challenges inherent in this complex dynamic.

The data analysis was conducted in three sequential steps. First, explore the main character's relationship with nature. The analysis begins by examining the character's engagement with nature, mainly through gardening, to assess how nature positively contributes to well-being. Second, the influence of social relationships is assessed. The second step focuses on how the social and economic conditions shaped by the city's structure affect the main character's well-being. Third, the role of social relationships should be investigated. The analysis explores how specific social relationships influence the character's well-being, with particular attention to how nature, social interaction, and well-being intersect. Through this three-step process, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between nature, well-being, and social relationships while highlighting the potential risks and challenges embedded in this dynamic

3. Findings and Discussion

Wilde's *The Devoted Friend* illustrates the significance of nature in shaping individual well-being and highlights the potential risks when it intersects with social relationships. The subsequent sub-chapter will delve into a detailed analysis and discussion of these themes.

Investigating How Social Relationships Influence the Impact of Nature on Well-being

This section explores the complex interplay between social relationships and nature's effects on individual well-being. While nature is widely recognized for its positive impact on mental and emotional health, the role of social interactions in shaping or potentially disrupting these benefits remains less understood. This investigation aims to uncover the dynamics contributing to a holistic understanding of human flourishing by examining how different social relationships influence the connection between nature and well-being.

3.1 Impact of nature on well-being

Gardening, often embraced as a pastime by many, serves as a means for individuals to engage with nature intentionally. This research explores the motivations behind why nature becomes a compelling hobby for individuals. It seeks to uncover nature's positive attributes through gardening, prompting individuals to nurture plants, foster environmental stewardship, and even transform them into a livelihood. By understanding these underlying factors, this research aims to shed light on the profound connections between humans and the natural world and the potential benefits for personal well-being and environmental conservation.

The story features two main characters deeply connected to nature. Hans, the protagonist, is a humble city dweller known for his exceptional garden, which is the envy of the neighborhood. He diligently tended to his garden daily, resulting in the most enchanting and fragrant garden in the surrounding area. Due to his diligent care of the garden, he was rewarded with a bountiful display of blooming flowers each month. Miller, depicted as the second character, is portrayed as a prosperous agriculturalist who held vast expanses of farmland and ranch properties, as articulated in the narrative: "...he had a hundred sacks of flour stored away in his mill, and six milk cows, and a large flock of woolly sheep..." (Wilde 2017, 47-48). From the scenarios, it becomes evident that nature reciprocates generously for those who tend to it with care. Hans' garden offers a variety of delights, including flowers, herbs, and fruit, which entices Miller to visit and gather them frequently. The garden serves as Hans's primary source of sustenance and income, on which his livelihood depends.

As an urban dweller, Hans enjoys gardening, which enhances his well-being. His positive emotions stem from his deep bond with nature. Hans demonstrates his commitment to his garden in the quote, "*Oh, I am so sorry,*" said Hans, "*but I am really very busy today. I have got all my creepers to nail up, and all my flowers to water, and all my grass to roll*" (Wilde 2017, 56). This excerpt illustrates his devotion to gardening, reflecting his heartfelt connection with nature. Not only that, Hans' closeness to nature is also reflected in his hobby of listening to nature sounds, reflected in these lines below:

"I am very sorry," said little Hans, rubbing his eyes and pulling off his nightcap, "but I was so tired that I thought I would lie in bed for a little time and listen to the birds singing. Do you know that I always work better after hearing the birds sing?" (Wilde 2017, 58)

The statement "*Do you know that I always work better after hearing the birds sing?*" suggests the positive influence of nature on Hans's well-being. He prioritized his flowers above everything else, as evidenced by the line: "Little Hans was very distressed at times, as he was afraid his flowers would think he had forgotten them" (Wilde 2017, 60). The natural sounds ignite Hans's zest for life, turning the garden and its surroundings into a rejuvenating sanctuary for him to replenish his energy. Consequently, gardening offers psychological benefits to humans, fostering happiness, health, and prosperity (Pantjiru et al., 2024).

3.2 The impact of social relationships on well-being

Various factors can influence individual well-being, including one's connection to nature. Nevertheless, this bond is not immune to fracture and may be susceptible to disruption. Social and economic factors play a significant role in disrupting individuals' connection to nature. The recent increase in global warming issues can be attributed to environmental negligence, which stems from

various sources such as unawareness, indifference, or economic pressures. These factors threaten the bond between individuals and nature, making it susceptible to erosion.

In *The Devoted Friend*, the disruption of social and economic conditions profoundly affects Hans's well-being. Hans is portrayed as a humble individual residing in a small cottage, where gardening is his primary livelihood source. His bond with nature shapes his positive well-being. However, it is crucial to remember our inherently social nature. Despite cultivating the most beautiful and pleasant garden in the urban community, Hans's well-being is still affected by social conditions. He is portrayed as an innocent man, a loyal and honest individual. He did not own enough to get through winter. He relied on selling the harvest from spring, summer, and fall for daily food, as seen from the lines below:

So little Hans worked away in his garden. During the spring, the summer, and the autumn he was very happy, but when the winter came, and he had no fruit or flowers to bring to the market, he suffered a good deal from cold and hunger, and often had to go to bed without any supper but a few dried pears or some hard nuts. ... (Wilde 2017, 48)

Hans' growing sense of peace and tranquillity occasionally makes him too naive about his surroundings. Mixing urgent needs with his innocence only makes him more vulnerable. Social and economic pressures often disrupt the happiness and inner peace he has achieved.

Hans is portrayed as a social individual, evident from the statement, "*Little Hans had a great many friends, but the most devoted friend of all was big Hugh, a rich Miller*" (Wilde 2017, 47). Being social often requires adapting to one's surroundings. Hans firmly attaches to Miller because he is depicted as a loyal friend, exemplifying the essence of friendship. However, Hans's positive well-being occasionally traps him into being overly trusting and overlooking the flaws of others, as depicted in the following lines:

Sometimes, indeed, the neighbors thought it strange that the rich Miller never gave little Hans anything in return, though he had a hundred sacks of flour stored away in his mill, six milk cows, and a large flock of woolly sheep; but Hans never troubled his head about these things, and nothing gave him greater pleasure than to listen to all the wonderful things the Miller used to say about the unselfishness of true friendship (Wilde 2017, 47-48)

The sentence "... and nothing gave him greater pleasure than to listen to all the wonderful things the Miller used to say about the unselfishness of true friendship." reflects the distraction of social condition to individual positive well-being. Miller's seemingly wise words are portrayed as social interaction. However, they are a form of manipulation, reflected in this sentence "*Real friends should have everything in common,*" (Wilde 2017, 47) that Miller used to say, and little Hans nodded and smiled, and felt very proud of having a friend with such noble ideas. Hans' tranquil demeanour, influenced by his deep bond with nature, made him excessively submissive to Miller.

In another scenario, economic factors similarly affect Hans's overall well-being. Unlike Miller, who possesses a farm, Hans relies solely on a modest garden for sustenance and livelihood. When winter arrives, Hans has nothing to eat. Despite maintaining a positive outlook, he refrains from seeking help from Miller. He even sells all his possessions to survive, as illustrated in the following passage:

“They are certainly very lovely,” said Hans, “and it is a most lucky thing for me that I have so many. I am going to bring them into the market and sell them to the Mayor’s daughter, and buy back my wheelbarrow with the money.”

...

“Well, the fact is,” said Hans, “that I was obliged to. You see the winter was a very bad time for me, and I really had no money at all to buy bread with. So I first sold the silver buttons off my Sunday coat, and then I sold my silver chain, and then I sold my pipe, and at last I sold my wheelbarrow. But I am going to buy them all back again now.” (Wilde 2017, 52-53)

The conversation highlights Hans's genuine positive well-being from his connection with nature. The use of the expressions is very lovely and a most lucky thing reflects Hans's gratitude toward nature. However, his necessity for food or economic pressure compels him to be submissive to Miller's authority, as evidenced in the dialogue below:

.... And now, as I have given you my wheelbarrow, I am sure you would like to give me some flowers in return. Here is the basket, and mind you fill it quite full.”

“Quite full?” said little Hans, rather sorrowfully, for it was really a very big basket, and he knew that if he filled it he would have no flowers left for the market, and he was very anxious to get his silver buttons back (Wilde 2017, 54)

The phrase rather sorrowfully indicates Hans's ability to manage his emotions. Despite Miller's greedy demands, Hans remains composed and does not express anger. Hans remains calm regardless of the circumstances. However, it is essential not to see this positively. Hans emerges as a character who becomes increasingly oppressed due to his optimistic demeanour.

Moreover, the toxic societal dynamics also significantly impact Hans' well-being. Despite Hans' ability to coexist harmoniously with others, his neighborhood fails to address Miller's mistreatment of him. The statement, “*Sometimes, indeed, the neighbors thought it strange that the rich Miller never gave little Hans anything in return,...*” (Wilde 2017, 47) illustrates the community's indifference towards Hans' plight. This absence of societal support highlights his neighbors' lack of attention and empathy regarding his situation, leaving Hans to cope with his challenges alone. As previously explained, this condition can be grouped into weak ties in which working relationships are less emotionally significant than primary ones yet still have a strong influence (Drageset, 2021).

3.3 The intersection of nature, well-being, and social relationships

Social relationships, encompassing social and economic conditions, have been identified as a significant disruptor of positive well-being. The convergence of nature, well-being, and social conditions can profoundly impact individuals, often leading to tragic outcomes. In Hans' situation, he finds himself at this intersection, where his deep connection to nature ultimately results in his demise. Hans becomes entangled in Miller's manipulative behavior, unable to defend himself against external pressures and being submissive. Ironically, his cultivated positive well-being inadvertently leads him to act against his best interests.

In the story, Hans's kindness shines through as he readily agrees to help Miller call a doctor during the storm. Despite feeling indebted, Hans's positive nature compels him to assist his friend. The situation is not just about obligation; it is a reflection of Hans' deep friendship with Miller, evident in his discomfort at refusing Miller's plea below:

.... You know I am going to give you my wheelbarrow, and so it is only fair that you should do something for me in return.”

“Certainly,” cried little Hans. “I take your coming to me as a compliment, and I will start out at once. But you must lend me your lantern, as the night is so dark that I am afraid I might fall into the ditch.”

“I am very sorry,” answered the Miller, “but it is my new lantern, and it would be a great loss to me if anything happened to it.”

“Well, never mind, I will do without it,” cried little Hans, and he took down his great fur coat, and his warm scarlet cap, and tied a scarf round his throat, and started off (Wilde 2017, 61-62)

Hans' responses, “*Certainly*” and “*Well, never mind, I will do without it,*” show vulnerability due to his positive characteristics. The story depicts his tendency to forgive, be grateful, be courageous, and be generous, shaped by his strong bonds with nature. Finally, it reflects innocence that blinds him to potential dangers and losses.

Courage and generosity, while integral to Hans' well-being, do not ensure a good life. Two examples highlight his positive well-being: “*What a dreadful storm it was! However, he was courageous, and after he had been walking about three hours, he arrived at the Doctor's house and knocked at the door*” (Wilde 2017, 62) and “*You certainly suffer for being generous.*” (Wilde 2017, 64). These examples signify a clash of ideals, showing that being close to nature does not guarantee meeting society's demands. “*Little Hans is certainly a great loss to everyone,*” ... (Wilde 2017, 63) illustrates Hans' inherent goodness, which has been evident throughout, contributing to his positive well-being. However, these intersections can lead to significant challenges when influenced by social pressures and interactions. Many individuals drift away from their connection with nature due to ideological beliefs, political relations, sociocultural norms, and institutional structures that hinder awareness or promote disregard for people as part of nature (Beery et al., 2023). Hans, for example, shifts from depending solely on nature to seeking support and companionship from Miller, demonstrating a move toward interdependence for success. Unfortunately, Hans' strong ties, particularly his friendships, ultimately harm him, making him more vulnerable and submissive to others. The positive traits he developed from his close connection to nature through gardening such as kindness, loyalty, and integrity compel him to be a good person. However, these qualities leave him susceptible to exploitation by others who may exploit his good nature. In conclusion, this study highlights the increased mortality risk that arises from the complex interactions between social pressures and the natural environment.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the intricate relationship between nature, well-being, and social connections is undeniable. Social factors, such as strong interpersonal relationships and supportive community networks, are vital in nurturing individuals' well-being, like the symbiotic relationships in nature. Additionally, economic factors, such as access to resources like food, are essential for maintaining a sense of well-being and are intricately linked to our relationship with the environment. When these social and economic factors are disrupted or deficient, they impact individual well-being and strain our connection with nature and community. Therefore, addressing and mitigating these challenges must foster a harmonious balance between humans, nature, and social relationships, promoting holistic well-being for individuals and communities.

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