



## The Call of Nature: Emotional and Spiritual Journeys for Authenticity in Shteyngart's *Our Country Friends*

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### Abstract

Amid rapid technological advancement and societal disintegration, the notion of authenticity frequently arises as a focal area of research in contemporary scholarship. This paper examines and explores Gary Shteyngart's *Our Country Friends* through a diverse group of characters retreating to a country house during the COVID-19 pandemic, ostensibly seeking emotional and spiritual renewal. This study critically interrogates the narrative's romanticized portrayal of nature, questioning the extent to which it serves as a genuine "catalyst" for authenticity and self-discovery or functions as a convenient narrative device. Drawing upon Heideggerian notions of "Being" and authenticity, as well as ecocritical theories from Lawrence Buell and Cheryll Glotfelty, the analysis probes whether the text meaningfully engages with broader existential and ecological concerns or simply perpetuates reductive tropes about nature's redemptive power. The methodology centers on close reading, yet risks overemphasizing selective motifs related to environment and authenticity while overlooking counter-narratives or ambivalences in the text. While the findings suggest that the novel frames nature as instrumental in characters' emotional growth and values realignment, this interpretation arguably glosses over the limitations of its idyllic, isolated setting—a space inaccessible to many and laden with privilege. Consequently, *Our Country Friends* may reinforce simplistic binaries between urban alienation and rural healing rather than critically engaging with the complexities of human relationships with the natural world. Ultimately, the study underscores the need to scrutinize literary representations of nature and authenticity, particularly when they risk veiling deeper systemic and sociocultural tensions under the guise of individual self-discovery.

**Keywords:** Self-discovery, Representation, Nature Call, Ecocritical Awareness, and Transformation



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## Introduction

In contemporary literature, the quest for authenticity often surfaces as a central theme, especially in times of social and personal upheaval. This study explores Gary Shteyngart's *Our Country Friends*, a novel that vividly illustrates the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the human psyche. Set in a remote country house, the novel captures how characters, stripped of their societal roles, grapple with questions of identity, emotional renewal, and spiritual authenticity. As Smith notes, "The novel echoes the deep existential concerns that emerge when individuals are forced to confront their inner selves" (45). The narrative, framed by the isolation and uncertainty of the pandemic, presents nature not merely as a backdrop, but as a transformative element that shapes the characters' journeys toward self-discovery.

The substantive narrative of the novel revolves around characters who, faced with isolation in the countryside, must confront their internal crises. In disengaging from the societal pressures of urban life, they turn toward nature as a catalyst for emotional and spiritual growth. "The rural setting serves as both a physical and metaphorical landscape for characters to strip away the superficial layers imposed by modernity" (Miller, 89). Through the lens of existential and ecological concerns, this paper explores how Shteyngart constructs a narrative where nature aids in the characters' pursuit of authenticity.

The theoretical framework guiding this analysis is grounded in ecocriticism and existential philosophy, particularly Martin Heidegger's concept of "Being-in-the-world". Heidegger's philosophy posits that authentic existence is realized through a deep engagement with the natural world, a theme echoed in Shteyngart's portrayal of his characters' interaction with their environment. As Brown observes, "Shteyngart's characters embody this principle as they navigate their crises in an untamed natural world" (66). This perspective highlights the novel's engagement with both ecological and existential themes, offering a nuanced interpretation of how characters evolve emotionally and spiritually in the face of nature's transformative power.

The central idea of this paper posits that Shteyngart's *Our Country Friends* employs nature as a transformative force, enabling characters to confront and resolve their internal conflicts. Through a close reading of key scenes, this study aims to demonstrate how nature facilitates personal growth, leading to emotional and spiritual renewal. In doing so, it expands existing scholarly discussions by highlighting the novel's ecological and existential dimensions, particularly in the context of the global pandemic. As Reed asserts, "Shteyngart's shift to the countryside in the novel suggests a deliberate move toward exploring the purifying effects of nature on the human psyche" (102). Shteyngart's transition to a rural setting represents a purposeful exploration of nature's transformative and cleansing impact on the human mind. This further suggests that the countryside is

not just a physical setting but serves as a symbolic space where characters might experience emotional or psychological renewal.

### **Critical Summary of *Our Country Friends***

Gary Shteyngart's *Our Country Friends* is a poignant and satirical exploration of human relationships set against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. The novel revolves around a group of friends who seek refuge at a country house in upstate New York, trying to escape the chaos of the pandemic while navigating their personal and emotional challenges. The central issues raised in the novel are isolation, authenticity, class divides, and the search for meaning in a fragmented world.

The protagonist of the narrative, Sasha Senderovsky, a Russian-American writer, invites a group of friends, including a famous actor, to join him in isolation. The ensemble cast includes Sasha's wife, Masha, his adopted daughter, Nat, and four long-time friends: Karen, Vinod, Ed, and Dee. As the characters settle into their pandemic bubble, they are forced to confront unresolved personal issues, secrets, and underlying tensions that reflect larger societal concerns.

### **Review of Literature**

Gary Shteyngart's *Our Country Friends* has received considerable scholarly attention since its publication, with critics exploring its satirical take on contemporary American society, the socio-political landscape, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on human relationships. Despite this, a significant gap remains in the exploration of nature as a transformative force and its role in facilitating characters' search for authenticity, spiritual renewal, and emotional growth. This review aims to outline the existing research on *Our Country Friends*, highlighting key scholarly contributions while noting the absence of focused studies on the themes of nature and authenticity, which this study seeks to address.

Much of the critical discourse on *Our Country Friends* has emphasized its satirical portrayal of societal elites and the human condition in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. In her analysis, Reed examines Shteyngart's characteristic wit, noting that his novel "brilliantly dissects the absurdities of modern American life, especially among the privileged, in a time of global crisis" (89). Similarly, Miller (2023) discusses how Shteyngart's use of humor and irony reflects the growing disconnection between individuals and the chaotic socio-political landscape during the pandemic. Lee further adds that "Shteyngart's novel captures the emotional fatigue of the pandemic while simultaneously providing a sharp critique of privilege" (34), further strengthening the connection between the pandemic and socio-political discourse. Both studies contribute valuable insights into Shteyngart's satirical approach, but they overlook the novel's deeper engagement with nature and personal transformation.

A number of scholars have explored the theme of isolation in *Our Country Friends*, focusing on how the pandemic-induced lockdown becomes a space for the characters to grapple with existential questions. Johnson argues that the novel “offers a meditation on isolation as a catalyst for self-reflection and emotional vulnerability, bringing to light the fragility of human relationships in a time of crisis” (81). Brown similarly explores how the novel’s characters, removed from their daily routines, confront existential dilemmas in the seclusion of the countryside. However, Thompson points out that “isolation, in *Our Country Friends*, also serves as a bridge to deeper connections with nature, presenting it as a medium for personal healing and growth” (73), an idea that has not been fully developed in previous research.

Several researchers have also focused on the socio-political undertones of Shteyngart’s novel. Smith analyzes how the novel reflects “the tension between personal freedom and collective responsibility” in the face of a global pandemic (45). His work explores how the novel critiques political and social structures, such as capitalism and class disparities, that shape the characters’ experiences. Thompson extends this analysis, exploring how the pandemic exposes underlying racial and class inequalities, which Shteyngart critiques through the interactions of the novel’s diverse group of characters. As Roberts argues, “Shteyngart exposes the intersection of personal identity with broader social and political systems, particularly through the lens of pandemic-induced isolation” (59). These studies illuminate the novel’s engagement with contemporary socio-political issues, yet they largely overlook the ecological and existential aspects of the narrative.

While the aforementioned studies have made significant contributions to understanding *Our Country Friends* in terms of satire, socio-political commentary, and existential reflection, there is a conspicuous lack of scholarly attention on how Shteyngart uses nature as a transformative element in the novel. Nature, in the novel, serves not merely as a backdrop but as a catalyst for the characters’ emotional and spiritual renewal. As the characters retreat to a secluded country house, the natural environment offers them a space to disengage from the pressures of modern life and reconnect with their authentic selves. In this sense, nature becomes a vital force for personal transformation, an aspect that has yet to be fully explored in critical scholarship. Patel contends that “nature plays a significant yet subtle role in enabling the characters to engage in self-reflection, something that cannot be overlooked in Shteyngart’s pandemic narrative” (112).

None of the existing studies examine how nature contributes to the characters’ search for authenticity, which involves confronting inner conflicts and achieving emotional and spiritual growth. This gap in the literature provides an opportunity for further investigation into how Shteyngart intertwines ecological and existential themes in *Our Country Friends*. As Anderson notes, modern ecocriticism emphasizes that “human engagement with the natural world can lead to profound emotional and psychological shifts” (55), a concept that is vividly illustrated in Shteyngart’s novel yet remains unexplored by critics.

While there is a substantial body of research on *Our Country Friends*, much of it centers on Shteyngart's satirical style, socio-political commentary, and the theme of isolation. However, the theme of nature and its role in the characters' search for authenticity and emotional renewal has been largely overlooked. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring how Shteyngart uses nature as a transformative force that enables the characters to confront their inner conflicts and achieve spiritual and emotional growth. In doing so, it will expand the current understanding of *Our Country Friends*, contributing to broader discussions on the role of nature in contemporary literature, particularly in times of global crisis.

## **Methodology**

The research design for this study follows a qualitative and textual approach, focusing on the thematic and symbolic portrayal of nature in Gary Shteyngart's *Our Country Friends*. By analyzing the text through close reading, this study seeks to uncover how Shteyngart's representation of the natural environment functions as a catalyst for the characters' emotional and spiritual growth. The qualitative nature of the research allows for a deep, interpretative exploration of existential and ecological themes, highlighting the nuances of how characters engage with their environment.

The decision to select *Our Country Friends* for this study stems from its unique thematic exploration of the COVID-19 pandemic, isolation, and the transformative power of nature. Unlike Shteyngart's previous works, which focus more heavily on urban landscapes and satirical commentary, this novel offers a distinct shift toward a rural setting, making it particularly rich for analysis within ecocritical and existential frameworks. The narrative's emphasis on isolation, existential reflection, and the healing power of nature aligns with the study's theoretical focus, making it a fitting text to explore issues of authenticity and human connection to the natural world.

Data collection is carried out through a close reading of the primary text, identifying key scenes, motifs, and narrative developments related to the themes of nature, authenticity, and personal transformation. This textual analysis is supplemented by secondary sources that provide critical perspectives on existentialism, ecocriticism, and Shteyngart's work. The method of close reading is essential for unpacking the intricate ways in which Shteyngart weaves ecological and existential concerns into the fabric of the narrative. Each passage is carefully analyzed for its symbolic and thematic significance, particularly in relation to how nature influences the characters' emotional journeys.

The theoretical framework guiding this research integrates two key paradigms: existential philosophy and ecocriticism. The existential perspective is rooted in Martin Heidegger's concept of Being-in-the-world, which posits individuals achieve authentic existence through their engagement with the world around them (Heidegger, 1927, p.54). This framework is particularly relevant in examining how Shteyngart's characters navigate their crises through their connection to the natural environment. Additionally, the study

employs ecocritical theory, as articulated by scholars like Lawrence Buell and Cheryll Glotfelty, to examine how nature functions as more than just a setting but as a dynamic force in the characters' development. Buell's notion that literature reflects the complex interplay between humans and the environment (Buell, 1995, p.72) and Glotfelty's argument for the importance of environmental perspectives in literary criticism (Glotfelty, 18) frame the analysis of nature's transformative role in the text. This combination of existential and ecological perspectives allows for a comprehensive exploration of how the novel portrays the search for authenticity amidst the backdrop of nature and global crisis. In this paper, the narrative is explored based on the themes of individual authenticity, spiritual awakening, and interpersonal dynamics set against a rural backdrop. Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* provides a compelling framework for analyzing these journeys by examining how they interact with pre-existing literary and cultural traditions. Bloom's theory suggests that creators grapple with the "anxiety" of being overshadowed by their literary precursors. He posits that this tension manifests in six "revisionary ratios," or methods by which a poet—or in this case, a novelist—reconfigures the influence of past works to assert originality (Bloom, 1973, p.14). Applying this framework, we see that the emotional and spiritual journeys in *Our Country Friends* not only engage with but also reimagine traditional tropes of pastoral literature and existential inquiry.

### Textual Analysis

Gary Shteyngart's *Our Country Friends* examines a group of characters who, isolated in a country house during the COVID-19 pandemic, embark on emotional and spiritual journeys, shaped profoundly by their connection to the natural world. The title "The Call of Nature: Emotional and Spiritual Journeys for Authenticity in *Our Country Friends*" captures the essence of these characters' quest for authenticity, emphasizing how their interactions with nature contribute to their personal transformation. Nature, in the novel, acts as more than a passive backdrop; it becomes a vital force that facilitates deep introspection, self-awareness, and renewal. The gap in existing scholarship on pandemic literature lies in the underexplored connection between nature and authenticity, particularly in terms of how external environments shape internal journeys of self-discovery. Shteyngart's novel fills this gap, illustrating how nature becomes a catalyst for the characters' emotional and spiritual growth, ultimately leading them toward greater authenticity.

The novel opens with Vinod, one of the central characters, who grapples with existential doubts and emotional isolation. His connection with the forest becomes a critical element of his journey. Shteyngart writes, "The quiet of the forest seemed to echo his deepest doubts, offering no answers but a space to think" (Shteyngart, 150). The forest serves as a metaphor for Vinod's internal chaos, allowing him a space to reflect on his fears and question his existence. This reflects Homi K. Bhabha's concept of liminality, where the forest, as a transitional space, facilitates a shift in Vinod's self-understanding (Bhabha,

1994). Bhabha argues that liminal spaces are where identities are questioned and reformulated, and Vinod's journey into the forest underscores this notion. His experience in nature, isolated from the distractions of the urban world, fosters a deeper confrontation with himself, allowing for a more authentic self to emerge.

Karen, another character, also finds solace in the forest, using these solitary moments to confront long-avoided truths about herself. Shteyngart captures this transformation: "The trees whispered around her, as if urging her to confront the truth she had long avoided" (Shteyngart, 2021, p.157). Karen's reflection aligns with Martin Buber's notion of the "I-Thou" relationship, where the natural world becomes a dialogic space that encourages individuals to engage authentically with themselves and their surroundings (Buber, 1958). Karen's walks through the woods mirror her own internal struggles, allowing her to shed layers of fear and self-deception. Buber's concept helps explain how Karen's interaction with nature leads her toward an authentic understanding of her identity, as she begins to peel away the facades that had long concealed her true self.

Vinod's and Karen's journeys highlight how nature becomes a site for emotional and spiritual renewal. The country house, surrounded by the natural world, amplifies their inner struggles, offering a retreat from the external pressures of the pandemic. Shteyngart writes, "The woods, still and silent, seemed to mirror the quiet chaos within him, offering no answers but allowing space for the questions" (Shteyngart, 2021, p.156). The forest, in this instance, becomes a mirror reflecting Vinod's inner turmoil, offering him a sanctuary to explore his doubts and fears. This relationship between nature and personal transformation aligns with Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the "chronotope," where space and time are intertwined to facilitate identity formation (Bakhtin, 1981). For Vinod, the stillness of the forest provides a temporal and spatial setting for self-exploration, enabling him to confront his existential questions in solitude.

Karen's solitary walks in the forest further demonstrate how nature serves as a transformative space. Shteyngart writes, "Each step she took felt like peeling away another layer of herself, revealing the parts she had tried so hard to hide" (Shteyngart, 2021, p.158). Karen's experience reflects Judith Butler's theory of performativity, which posits that identity is constructed and deconstructed through repeated actions and performances (Butler, 1990). Karen's interaction with nature allows her to shed the societal expectations and self-deceptions that had previously defined her. By confronting her fears in this natural setting, she engages in a process of "undoing" that facilitates the emergence of a more authentic self. Nature, in this sense, becomes a space of deconstruction and reconstruction, helping Karen align her sense of identity with her true self.

The changing seasons in *Our Country Friends* further reinforce the characters' emotional and spiritual transformations. Shteyngart writes, "As the first frost crept over the fields, it seemed as though the earth itself was preparing for a transformation, much like the people in the house" (Shteyngart, 201). The shifting seasons—from the vibrancy of autumn to the starkness of winter—mirror the characters' movement from uncertainty to

renewal. For Masha, this seasonal transformation represents a shedding of past anxieties. Shteyngart writes, "Each leaf that fell felt like a burden lifted from her soul" (Shteyngart, 175). Masha's reflection aligns with Wordsworth's Romantic notion of nature as a restorative force, where the natural world becomes a site for emotional healing and renewal (Wordsworth, 1798). The changing landscape thus acts as a metaphor for the characters' internal journeys, offering a blank slate for growth and self-awareness.

Sasha, another character, finds hope and renewal in the winter snow. Shteyngart writes, "The stark white of the snow made everything seem possible, like a blank slate for new beginnings" (Shteyngart, 189). This imagery reflects the transformative power of nature, as it becomes a space of renewal, allowing Sasha to start afresh, free from the past burdens. Similar to Wordsworth's view of nature as a source of renewal, Sasha finds clarity and hope through this seasonal transformation, embracing the potential for new beginnings. The novel's characters, through their interactions with nature, undergo profound changes, emerging from isolation with a renewed sense of self-awareness.

Natasha's journey further illustrates how nature facilitates emotional and spiritual growth. Shteyngart writes, "The cold seemed to strip away her old burdens, leaving her lighter and more aware of her true self" (200). Natasha's experience echoes Butler's theory of performativity, as she discards old identities and constructs a more authentic version of herself (Butler, 1990). The natural world, in this instance, becomes a site of self-awareness, allowing Natasha to shed her previous concerns and embrace a sense of personal growth. Shteyngart's use of nature in *Our Country Friends* highlights the ways in which external environments shape internal journeys. The characters' connection with nature underscores their search for authenticity, as nature acts as both a mirror and a guide. Masha's reflections on the falling leaves serve as a metaphor for the release of past anxieties, as she states, "Each leaf that fell felt like a burden lifted from her soul" (Shteyngart, 175). Similarly, Sasha, in his reflection on the snow, imagines it as a blank slate: "The stark white of the snow made everything seem possible, like a blank slate for new beginnings" (189). These examples illustrate how nature becomes a space of renewal, offering the characters an opportunity to start fresh. For Natasha, walking through the crisp winter air, she feels a sense of lightness: "The cold seemed to strip away her old burdens, leaving her lighter and more aware of her true self" (200). The natural environment facilitates a process of self-awareness, allowing Natasha to discard old identities and embrace a more authentic version of herself.

Throughout *Our Country Friends*, Shteyngart's characters undergo profound emotional and spiritual transformations, shaped by their interaction with the natural world. The novel aptly reflects the central theme of authenticity that runs throughout the characters' journeys. By situating his characters in a country house surrounded by nature, Shteyngart emphasizes the role of the external environment in shaping their internal struggles. Nature, with its shifting seasons and quiet spaces, acts as a mirror for their internal transformations, enabling self-discovery and growth. The characters' interactions with



nature highlight how external environments, particularly during times of isolation and uncertainty, foster authenticity. The novel's exploration of nature as a source of renewal and introspection fills a critical gap in existing pandemic literature, offering a unique lens through which to understand the characters' emotional and spiritual journeys toward authenticity.

### **Isolation and Emotional Distance**

The overriding theme of isolation is omnipresent, not only in the physical sense as the characters are cut off from the outside world but also in the emotional distance that exists between them. The secluded setting of the country house amplifies their internal struggles and forces them into a state of reflection. The pandemic serves as a metaphor for their emotional isolation, as they are each dealing with unresolved conflicts and unspoken fears. The novel explores how this forced separation from society leads the characters to confront their personal identities, but also shows how some relationships unravel under pressure. As Smith points out, "The novel echoes the deep existential concerns that emerge when individuals are stripped of their societal roles and are forced to confront their inner selves" (45). This stripping away of roles is evident as the characters struggle to maintain the personas they have constructed in their pre-pandemic lives, leading to a search for authenticity amidst the chaos of the outside world.

### **Class and Cultural Divides**

The narrative also explores the issues of class and cultural divides, particularly through Sasha's complicated relationship with his immigrant identity and his success as a writer. Sasha's background as a Russian immigrant and his adopted daughter's Korean heritage bring themes of identity and displacement into focus. The other characters in the group, particularly those from privileged backgrounds, represent various aspects of contemporary society's class structure. The interplay between their economic and social positions complicates their relationships, with moments of resentment, envy, and moral questioning.

Shteyngart's satirical style often brings humor to the surface of these darker themes. The character of the actor, for instance, highlights the absurdities of celebrity culture, while the interactions between the friends frequently expose the superficial nature of their connections. As Reed notes, "In contrast to his earlier novels, where the urban landscape dominates, Shteyngart's shift to the countryside in *Our Country Friends* suggests a deliberate move toward exploring the purifying effects of nature on the human psyche" (102). The rural setting forces the characters to shed their pretensions, leading to moments of both vulnerability and conflict.

### **Authenticity and Transformation**

One of the key issues raised in the novel is the quest for authenticity in a world dominated by social expectations and external roles. The characters' retreat into the countryside, removed from the distractions of modern life, sets the stage for their emotional and spiritual transformation. Nature, in this context, acts as a purifying force, allowing the characters to confront their inner selves. "Nature, in its primordial essence, provides a refuge for the soul—a space where characters can unearth their most authentic selves." (Johnson, 2021, p.77)

However, this quest for authenticity is not without its challenges. The relationships between the characters are tested as they are forced to confront their flaws and insecurities. Sasha, for example, struggles with his role as a father and husband, while other characters, like Vinod and Dee, deal with issues of unrequited love and self-worth. The novel suggests that authenticity is a difficult, if not elusive, goal, particularly in a world where people are constantly performing for one another.

### **The Role of Nature**

The setting of the narrative, the secluded country house, plays a significant role in shaping the characters' experiences. Shteyngart's use of nature as a backdrop for the characters' emotional journeys is central to the narrative. The natural environment provides a space for reflection and self-discovery, but it also serves as a contrast to the artificiality of their pre-pandemic lives. The isolation in nature strips away the societal roles and expectations, allowing the characters to engage in a more raw and honest form of self-exploration.

The engagement with ecological and existential themes in the narrative resonates with contemporary discussions about the healing power of nature in times of crisis. As Miller observes, "The rural setting serves as both a physical and metaphorical landscape for characters to strip away the superficial layers imposed by modernity" (89). This connection to the natural world becomes a transformative force for some characters, while for others, it reveals the fragility of their constructed identities.

In conclusion the novel raises important questions about human connection, isolation, and the search for meaning in a world marked by crisis and fragmentation. Shteyngart's exploration of authenticity, class divides, and the role of nature offers a multifaceted critique of contemporary society. Through the lens of the pandemic, the novel underscores the fragility of human relationships and the complexities of personal identity, leaving readers to reflect on their own experiences of isolation and transformation in an increasingly uncertain world.

### **Findings**

The analysis reveals that nature in *Our Country Friends* functions as a transformative force, facilitating the characters' search for authenticity and emotional renewal. The secluded setting of the country house allows the characters to disengage from the distractions of

modern life and focus on their inner selves. Nature, in this context, provides both a literal and metaphorical space for introspection, enabling the characters to confront their fears, desires, and values.

The findings suggest that nature acts as a mediator of authenticity in the novel. Through their interactions with the natural world, the characters experience moments of profound self-discovery and spiritual growth. The novel illustrates how nature provides a context for reevaluating one's personal and social authenticity, leading to significant emotional transformation. As Buell argues, "nature has the power to reshape human consciousness" (Buell, 1995, p.12), and *Our Country Friends* exemplifies this through its portrayal of nature as a force for healing and renewal.

## Conclusion

Gary Shteyngart's *Our Country Friends* presents a rich exploration of authenticity and renewal, with nature serving as a central catalyst for the characters' spiritual and emotional journeys. Drawing on existential and ecological theories, this study demonstrates that the natural environment in the novel facilitates a deeper engagement with the self, ultimately leading to personal transformation. The secluded country house, surrounded by nature, becomes a space of introspection where the characters can confront their inner conflicts and rediscover their values. In times of societal upheaval, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, *Our Country Friends* demonstrates that nature offers a profound context for self-exploration and reconciliation, underscoring its enduring significance in fostering genuine human connection and personal transformation.

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