

# Merging Voices in Gary Snyder Poems a Post-Humanist Paradigm

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**Abstract**— This article examines the American poet Gary Snyder’s discourse on eco-poetics through the two poems, “The Great Mother” and “Night Herons,” that has been taken for study from his extensive poetic oeuvre. Here, I wish to argue that Snyder’s notion of a transcultural and “larger” humanism, perhaps a “post-humanism,” emerged out of an engagement with non-Western (especially Asian) religions and modes of thought, especially Zen Buddhism, apart from the influence of Native American. These cross-fertilizing influences form the basis of Snyder’s eco-poetics. For Snyder, traditional humanism ignores non-human others and as an eco-poet, he theorizes ecological disorder and disruption through an environmental imagination, one that is based on his understanding of ecosystems. He is eco-centric in his belief that humans are part of nature and his poetic enterprise includes the pre-modern as well as postmodern or post-human. Nature appears silent and voiceless but nature speaks, though not in human language. As an eco-poet, Snyder merges his poetic tone with the voice of the non-human nature and this oneness makes him a prominent post-human poet. Through his poems, Snyder attempts to sensitize us to the constant disruptions of our environment by rationalized, capitalist and essentially Western technology. His post-civilizational, post-human “culture of wildness” suggests a way of widening our horizon of expectations, to move us beyond the limitations of being purely human. In fact, he wants us to deal directly with our increasingly chaotic ecological situation.

**Index Terms:** Eco-poetics, post-humanism, “The Great Mother,” “Night Herons”.

## INTRODUCTION

Few poets have been able, or willing, to write poetry where the author is not merely an observer of nature, but rather an integral part of it, setting themselves on an equal level with all the natural phenomena around them, and giving nature itself a ‘voice’ (Salovaara 5).

Gary Snyder, the postmodern American eco-poet and environmental activist merges his poetic tone with the voice of the non-human nature and this oneness makes Snyder a prominent post human poet. Snyder’s poems specifically aim at instilling an ecological consciousness in his audience. His poems are remarkable for the creative tension he generates by holding together not only disparate facts and images, but also diverse cultures and world-views. Through his poetry, Snyder makes it clear that humans are just “one of the many animal species interdependently living together in ecosystems on earth” (Thornton 42). This notion resonates well with Snyder’s Buddhist approach to poetry as well as his environmental attitudes. While propagating the emotions of non-sentient beings, Snyder widens the literary horizon so that not only human emotions, but feelings of the non-human including plants and animals find its own place in literature and criticism. He blends physical reality and precise observations of nature with inner insight received primarily through the practice of Zen Buddhism. His poems “The Great Mother” and “Night Herons” categorically portray Snyder’s views on the Buddhist notions of interdependence and interpenetration, the two philosophical notions which have become the crucial need of the hour.

William Rueckert in his 1978 essay, “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” remarks that the biosphere or ecosphere is the home that life has built for itself on the planet’s outer surface. And “in that ecosphere there is a reciprocal interdependence of one life process upon another, and there is a mutual interconnected development of all of the earth’s life systems” (Rueckert 112). But the modern anthropocentric and egocentric developmental strategies demand a paradigm shift for inculcating ecocentric attitudes and behaviour.

Poetry, as an enabler for reflection and emotion, has considerable potential as an innovative approach to educate and transform mindsets. Through his poems, Snyder attempts to sensitize us to the constant disruptions of our environment by rationalized, capitalist and essentially Western technology. Snyder is eco-centric in his belief that humans are part of nature and his poetic enterprise includes the pre-modern as well as postmodern or post-human. For Snyder, traditional humanism ignores non-human others and as an eco-poet, he theorizes ecological disorder and disruption through an environmental imagination, one that is based on his understanding of ecosystems. Nature appears silent and voiceless but nature speaks, though not in human language. As an ecopoet, Snyder merges his poetic tone with the voice of the non-human nature and this oneness makes Snyder a prominent post-human poet. In his seminal manifesto on environmental awareness, Snyder asseverates:

I am a poet. My teachers are other poets, American Indians, and a few Buddhist priests in Japan. The reason I am here is because I wish to bring a voice from the wilderness, my constituency. I wish to be a spokesman for a realm that is not usually represented either in intellectual chambers or in the chambers of government. (*Turtle Island* 106)

Snyder's "The Great Mother" included in the Pulitzer Prize winner anthology *Turtle Island* is a five-line poem compact with dense ecological ideologies. Maternal features are attributed to Earth and she is undoubtedly, the great mother. Influence of James Lovelock's Gaia theory is evident in the poem: "organisms interact with their inorganic surroundings on Earth to form a self-regulating complex system that contributes to maintaining the conditions for life on the planet". He further adds: "Gaia posits that the Earth is a self-regulating system involving: the biosphere, the atmosphere, the hydrosphere and the pedosphere, tightly coupled as an evolving system" ("Interactive Video Lesson Plan"). Snyder portrays Mother Earth as seated on the judgement throne staring at all pass by in front of her. A resonance of the Christian dogma on the Last Judgement is apparent here: "When the Son of Man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: and before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his

sheep from the goats" (*King James*, Matt.25.31-32).

In a similar way, the poet remarks:

Not all those who pass

In front of the Great Mother's chair

Get past with only a stare

Some she looks at their hands

To see what sort of savages they were. ("The Great Mother" 34).

In this short but powerful poem, the poet invites our attention to the savage deeds of contemporary consumerist society. Under the label of progress, development, and modernization, human beings treat their immediate environment as "the other" and show enmity and rivalry. Their heedless acts such as pollution, deforestation, and species extermination have brought forth ecological calamities like global warming, water scarcity, climate change, deluge, and draught. This has prompted Paul Crutzen to call this age "Anthropocene," as ecological hazards and environmental crisis looms large all over the world. Snyder believes in the interdependent co-existence of human beings with other flora and fauna. He observes in *Four Changes*:

The Buddhists teach respect for all life, and for wild systems. Man's life is totally dependent on an interpenetrating network of wild systems...Some American Indian cultures have "mature" characteristics: protection as against production, stability as against growth, quality as against quantity. In Pueblo societies a kind of ultimate democracy is practised. Plants and animals are also people, and through certain rituals and dances, are given a place and a voice in the political discussions of the humans. They are "represented." (*Turtle Island* 104)

Snyder vehemently criticizes the modern materialistic culture that has led to the annihilation of the web of life. It has been widely documented that materialism is detrimental for individuals in many aspects of life, especially ecological attitudes and behaviours. Undoubtedly, there is an intricate link between consumption and pleasure but this materialistic consumer culture is now seen as "socially, ecologically and personally destructive" (Wilk 246). Globally there is a wide spread disenchantment about the hedonic models of consumption and the deleterious consequences of overconsumption on the environment. Clearly, materialism is in conflict with environmentalism. Studies have shown that when

individuals hold materialistic values, they will care little about their immediate environment. It is evident that less attention has been focused on how to mitigate the negative effect of materialism on pro-environmental behaviours. Snyder's post-civilizational, post-human "culture of wildness" suggests a way of widening our horizon of expectations, to move us beyond the limitations of being purely human by urging us to deal directly with our increasingly chaotic ecological situation.

The poem "Night Herons" beautifully presents the need for the coexistence of nature and industrialization. Night herons are long-legged fresh water birds which tend to nest in odd places. In Snyder's poem they nest on the cypress tree by the river San Francisco. But the poet in a startlingly abrupt manner introduces hazardous machinery that adversely affects nature, natural resources, and habitats:

stationary boilers  
 with the high smoke stack  
 at the edge of the waters  
 a steam turbine pump  
 to drive salt water  
 into the city's veins  
 mains  
 if the earth ever  
 quakes. (p.35)

The poet points out that in most of such developmental activities, it is nature and non-human elements which readily adapt to changing situations. Night herons represent wildness. The poet here seems to imply that the Night herons have become accustomed to urbanised areas which were once their home land. There is wildness all around us. But materialism in the form of technology like the machinery mentioned in the poem has intruded to vandalise nature from its pristine state. Consequently, the wilderness is rapidly disappearing, and Snyder, as an eco-poet and environmentalist feels compelled to speak for nature and the wild species which need urgent intervention from their human counterpart.

Anthropocentrism dominates American culture and there are widespread attempts by humans to conquer and control wild nature. The city of San Francisco, in the poem, is represented to the reader with an eye for the wild which is to be experienced within it. For Snyder, living, or dwelling, is a mode of existence with its own particular 'situatedness' - a clear physical

and geographical placing- of staying with things. The basic character of this process of co-existence is not exploitation but safeguarding which entails an understanding of nature and ecology.

In the poem, "Night Herons," the initial contrasting imagery of the eponymous birds living-dwelling in the West Coast cityscape is gradually revealed as home to the migratory birds. This wildness area has now been encroached upon by humans with his strategic development plans. But both the birds and the speaker seem to have accepted such a life together, although exposure to excessive noise can seriously harm human health and is an invisible threat to other organisms. Snyder, the advocate of ecocentrism concludes the poem with the striking lines:

How could the  
 night herons ever come back?  
 to this noisy place on the bay.  
 like me. (P.36)

Here the human agent is placed in a similar position to that of the wild creatures. The repeated return to the San Francisco Bay area, despite the region's industrial noisiness clearly indicates that the wild or wildness as Snyder calls it resides even in civilization. His poems reveal a dismantling of clear-cut binaries of nature (good) vs. culture (bad). In fact, it is often seen that culture is a site of co-existence (and interdependence) with the natural. Snyder's ability to maintain a meditative distance from either side of the binaries is further visible in the techniques he employs. The images and arguments in the poem testify the peaceful overlapping of the seemingly distant opposites. Wilderness or the wild, is no longer the opposite to the natural, but something which is closer to home. Snyder's poems thus contribute in making us see the complexity of things frequently taken for granted. Visible in his poems is a willingness to embrace disparate forms of otherness.

## CONCLUSION

The tortured and tormented Mother Earth and the shattered familial bond are represented in "The Great Mother" and "Night Herons" respectively. Snyder, through these poems, points out that humanity's connection to the natural world has been severed through generations of pillaging of natural resources. He, therefore, offers humanity a non-dualist

perspective and shows how this approach could heal the damage that has been done by returning to a rooted culture that is based on living in harmony with nature, and not in opposition to it. He warns that species extinction and biodiversity loss will bring incalculable loss to humans. He, therefore, hopes that the attachment to material possessions and the consumerist culture will wane and what will develop is a nurturing, interconnected world.

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