

The Relationship between Humans and the Natural World in Gary Snyder's *Turtle Island*

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ゲイリー・スナイダーの『タートルアイランド』に おける人間と自然世界の関係

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Abstract

Gary Snyder's poems argue for the protection of nature. The inter-relationship between humans and the natural world is a key ecocritical theme of Gary Snyder's poetry. His poems reference mythical characters of American Tribes as well as the cultural and religious ideas of Eastern Philosophy, reflecting his study of Buddhism in India, China and Japan. In Japan, he practiced Zen Buddhism. In his poetry, human beings are presented as a part of nature, as well as human activities disturbing the harmony of nature. The present paper analyses five poems from Snyder's collection *Turtle Island*, "I Went into the Maverick Bar", "Prayer For the Great Family", "Manzanita", "Magpie's Song" and "For the Children" to illustrate the way in which Snyder shows the relationship between humans and nature, placing humans within nature while also commenting on human activities disturbing it. Snyder's poetry demonstrates a commonality with ecocriticism and environmentalism as it reaches back into human prehistory and mythology and these elements in his poetry are drawn as critical frames herein.

Key Words: Ecocriticism, Environment, Culture, Humans and Development.

Introduction

The Ecocriticism movement emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. However, this new "ism"

attracted the attention of the writers, thinkers and critics at the time and continues to do so. In 1989, at a Western Literature Association (WLA) Conference, Cheryl Glotfelty, a graduate student at Cornell University at the time, urged the use of the term “ecocriticism” instead of “the study of nature writing” (Mukhtar 2017, 317). William Rueckert, in 1978 first coined the term *ecocriticism* (Glotfelty 1996, xx). Glotfelty states that, “Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. It takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies” (Glotfelty 1996, xviii). In the UK, the critic Jonathan Bate is the founding figure of “ecocriticism”, but writers and critics of the UK use the term “green studies” instead of “ecocriticism”. Ecocriticism mainly focuses on the harmonious relationship between humans, nature and other creatures of mother earth. It also discusses how the development of human society directly or indirectly affects nature (Fenn 2015, 114).

If we look back in the history of English Literature, in almost all centuries, nature has always been a subject for writers. But, before the 20th century, nature writing was for entertainment. In those writings, humans were positioned as rulers of the world. During the Middle Ages, the Church and Aristocracy dominated society and promoted a model called *scala naturae* or “Great Chain of Being” which put human beings higher than beasts and a little lower than angels (Manes 1996, 20). *Scala naturae* directly says that the position of *homo sapiens* is highest in a natural order of things (Manes 1996, 21). In the beginning of human civilization, humans were part of nature, but over time, they started to exploit nature (White 1996, 8).

Ecocriticism explores the interconnections between the natural world and human culture, as the latter is connected to the physical world both affecting it and affected by it (Glotfelty 1996, xix). Before the word “ecocriticism” was coined, there was no specific “ism” for writing about nature. Nevertheless, there were writings that championed nature. In 1972, Joseph W. Meeker introduces the term *literary ecology* and undertakes a study of biological themes and relationships which appear in literary works and attempts to discover the role played by literature in the ecological thought of the human species (Glotfelty 1996, xix). In different historical periods different philosophers and writers have had various views on the relationship between nature and humans. The term *ecocriticism* was used in the 1990s in literature while it came into practice around 1970, and the thinkers and writers of this era have put their own stamp on the relationship. While it is not easy to define the term *ecocriticism* in all usages, the main point is that this term shows the connection between humans, their culture and the physical world.

Methodology

Turtle Island, one of the most famous books by Gary Snyder, was published in 1974, won the Pulitzer Prize (1975) and the American Book Award (1984). It is a collection of 58 poems in

three sections, i.e. “Manzanita”, “Magpie’s Song”, “For the Children”, and a section “plain talk” which consists of five prose pieces. “*Manzanita*” consists of 18 poems, “Magpie’s Song” has 31 poems, and “For The Children” has 9 poems. These poems vary in length. From these three sections, five poems have been selected: “I Went into the Maverick Bar”, “Prayer For the Great Family”, “Manzanita”, “Magpie’s Song” and “For the Children”. Discussions of these five poems concern Snyder’s portrayal of the relationship between humans and the natural world, and the types of roles played by human beings in his poems. He often writes about the degradation of the natural world due to human activities. His poems are nature oriented and intend to instruct us by examples that convey his view of how we should treat the physical world around us.

To analyze the presentation of humans and their activities, these poems are separated into two groups. One is, the role of human beings in favor or in support of nature, i.e. a positive attitude towards nature. The poems “I Went into the Maverick Bar”, “Prayer For the Great Family”, and “For the Children” take positive views of nature and the poet presents humans as being part of nature. The other portrayal is that humans are against nature or play a destructive role: “Manzanita”, and “Magpie’s Song” take negative views and humans are presented as having a negative impact on nature.

Ecological Consciousness in *Turtle Island*

In the poem “I went into the Maverick Bar”, the speaker goes to visit a bar in Farmington, New Mexico. The bar is full of different people who are drinking and enjoying live music. But the speaker can not keep his mind from recalling his past work in the woods. The speaker reminisced about his past alone with his friends working day and night in nature.

We left-onto the freeway shoulders-
under the tough old stars- (Snyder 1974, 9)

The next poem. “Prayer For The Great Family”, expresses gratitude to the earth, plants, air, wild beings, water, the sun and the sky. In the poem, the speaker states his gratitude to all the members of the “great family” with whom human life is possible. Human beings should always be indebted to these “family members” because if any one member vanished, it would be a catastrophe for the earth. But, if human beings vanished from the earth, events on the earth would go virtually unchanged for the other creatures of the earth (Manes 1996, 24). In all six stanzas, the last line is “in our minds so be it.” But in the seventh stanza the last line is “so be it.” because in this stanza the speaker says:

Gratitude to the Great Sky

who holds billions of stars-and goes yet beyond that-
beyond all powers, and thoughts
and yet is within us-
Grandfather Space.
The Mind is his Wife.

so be it. (Snyder 1974, 25)

Our mind plays a vital role to control our body. If our mind is positive towards nature we can have a positive attitude towards these members of “the great family”, i.e. to nature.

The poem “For the Children”, addresses the whole human community of the world thorough the children. In the poem, the speaker talks about the ups and downs of human life in terms of landscape.

The rising hills, the slopes
of statistics
lie before us. (Snyder 1974, 86)

The speaker also asks the children to be ready to face the coming problems in the world. He predicts the future of the world but also provides his suggestions how to tackle these problems.

To climb these coming crests
one word to you, to
you and your children:

stay together
learn the flowers
go light (ibid)

Through the last stanza, the speaker appeals to the present generation and the future generation to stay together with each-other and with nature. We should live our life like flowers and light without being selfish. Flowers give joy and happiness equally to everybody. The light from the sun does not differentiate between living and non-living things. Only a selfless and harmonious life can bring peace in the world.

Here, in these three poems, the relationship between human beings and the natural world is very peaceful and harmonious. The poet has presented human beings as a part of nature and demonstrating a positive attitude towards nature. For a peaceful life, we must have friendly relationship with nature. To establish a harmonious relationship with nature and other species of the world we, *homo sapiens*, must give up the idea of “lower” and “higher” ranking of all the species of the world (Manes 1996, 23).

Human being having a negative impact on nature

The human attitude in “Manzanita” and “Magpie’s Song” is not so positive, however. If we look at the title, manzanita is a plant and magpie is a bird. The content of these poems is not against nature, but the similarity is that the activity of human beings is disturbing nature and other creatures.

In the poem “Manzanita”, a hunter hunts coyotes in a forest of Manzanitas. Because of this action, members of a tribe living in that forest catch “coyote illness”. Coyotes are sacred so there would be repercussions for hunting them. This might seem like superstition, but “old ways” are valid in Snyder’s view and close to mythology. This hunting disturbs daily life of the people of that tribe and to cure the illness, they perform a mythical ceremony. Coyotes are prominent as the tutelary spirit of a Navajo curing ceremonial called Coyoteway, and falling into the Holyway group of Navajo ceremonials; those aiming to restore harmony with an offended “Coyote People”.¹⁾

Before dawn the coyotes
weave medicine songs
dream nets-spirit baskets-
milky way music
they cook young girls with
to be woman;
or the whirling dance of
striped boys- (Snyder 1974, 27)

The poem begins with the cultural ritual of a tribe and ends with praising manzanita tree for its fruits. The presence of the hunter is shown only in the first line of fifth stanza “*One man draws, and releases an arrow.*” The third stanza describes the activity of a dog.

¹⁾ The ceremony has to do with illnesses resulting from attacks that offend the “Coyote People”. Coyote illness most obviously caused by killing a coyote (Cooper 1987, 185-186).

The dog hastens into the undergrowth
Comes back panting
Huge, on the small dry flowers. (ibid)

There is a connection between these stanzas, which pictures a hunter with his dog coming into the forest to hunt coyotes. This activity violates the old way of living of the people of that tribe. The remaining stanzas of the poem describe the beauty of the forest, the calm meadow and manzanita tree with its fruits. In the poem, the hunting activity bothers the daily life of animals living in the woodlands and people living near the woodlands. The unwanted action of human beings causes an imbalance in nature.

In the poem “Magpie’s Song” there are two speakers, one tells us the background where a Magpie is delivering a message, and another speaker is delivering a message to humans. The first stanza describes a construction site.

Six A.M
Sat down on excavation gravel
by juniper and desert S.P. tracks²⁾
interstate 80 not far off
between trucks
Coyotes-maybe three
howling and yapping from a rise. (Snyder 1974, 69)

In the second stanza, the Magpie is asking humans to be more thoughtful while carrying out their construction. The bird itself is a mythical character in the culture of numerous American tribes³⁾. The Magpie is praising the human mind and comparing it with turquoise blue:

*“Here in the mind, brother
Turquoise blue. (ibid)*

²⁾ S.P track: The Southern Pacific (SP) was one of America’s most successful and widely recognized railroads. Founded in 1865 by a group of businessmen in San Francisco, the Southern Pacific was created as a rail line from San Francisco to San Diego. By 1883, the line extended all the way to New Orleans. Over time, it blossomed into the most far-reaching of all the classic American railroads with a network totaling 17,000 miles after its 1988 merger with the Denver & Rio Grande Western. The Southern Pacific merged with Union Pacific on Sept. 11, 1996. Today, given Southern Pacific’s impressive size and scope most of its principal lines remain in regular service.

(https://www.up.com/aboutup/special_trains/heritage/southern_pacific/index.htm)

The Magpie asks the human to use his brain as turquoise stone⁴⁾, the stone was used by different tribes of Native Americans as a healing stone. The bird is comparing the human brain with the healing stone and asking the humans to carry out development in an environmentally friendly way, without disturbing and destroying the environment. With the help of the Magpie, the poet delivers a message that human beings are not paying enough attention to nature while carrying out their development work. After the Industrial Revolution in the West, Westerners forgot that nature can not be tamed (Fromm 1996, 30), but modern technology artfully concealed the connection between human beings and nature (Ibid, 33).

Conclusion

In these poems, there are two types of relationships between humans and the natural world, one is humans having a positive attitude towards the nature and other is a negative one. But in these poems, the presence of human beings is different from one to the other. In “I Went into the Maverick Bar”, “Prayer For the Great Family”, and “For the Children”, human beings demonstrate positive interaction with nature and in the poems “Manzanita” and “Magpie’s Song” they demonstrate negative attitudes.

Human beings are a part of nature, our activities, either good or bad, directly or indirectly affect nature and, vice-versa. Human beings are like other creatures on this earth and one day we could just inexplicably vanish (Manes 1996, 26). Snyder saw humans as a part of nature. In Snyder’s poetry, he argues that humans need to adjust their thinking to very long timescales, especially when judging the consequences of their actions. His poetry examines the gap between nature and culture, to point out ways in which the two can be more closely integrated. Snyder rejects the perspective which portrays nature and humanity in opposition to one another. He chooses to write from multiple viewpoints, and purposely sets out to bring about change on the emotional, physical and political levels by emphasizing the ecological problems faced by today’s society, and pointing out human traditions past and present that may be the solution.

³⁾ Magpies play different roles in the folklore of different Native American tribes. In the legends of some tribes, the Magpie is portrayed as a gossip and busybody who annoys the other animals. In other legends, the Magpie is a loyal friend of humans who warns them of danger or takes up their cause in times of trouble. In Cheyenne tradition, the magpie is considered a sacred messenger of the Creator. The Hopi and other Pueblo tribes see the magpie as a directional guardian (native-languages.org).

⁴⁾ Turquoise is a blue to blue-green mineral made up of aluminum and copper, considered as a gemstone and used in jewelry in its polished blue form. In the United States’ South West, the Apache believed that turquoise helped warriors and hunters to aim accurately. The Zuni believed that it protected them from demons. Another belief was that turquoise had the power to protect the wearer from injury from falling, especially falling from horse-back, and that it made the horse more sure footed (gembrokers.org).

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