


## Gary Snyder's Deep Ecology and Aesthetics of Poetry: An Appraisal

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### ABSTRACT

The paper deals with the present environmental peril and the dark side of scientific discoveries and technological inventions. All the acts of development were targeted at controlling nature for the maximum benefit of human beings. It is a kind of war in which humans believe in taking control/supremacy over anything and everything. Given the situation, different genres of literature addressing the myriad environmental local and global concerns and issues, assume great importance as they not only assist in redefining/transforming the intricate bond between humans and nature, but the literary works are also the responses to the contemporary climatic changes. The paper delves deep into the American poet Gary Snyder's quintessential ecological philosophy and thought. It is a comprehensive study of the notion of "Deep Ecology" as employed by Snyder in his literary oeuvre. Through a close reading of some of his poems, this paper is an attempt to explore Snyder's perspectives and how his understanding of Indian culture, particularly his deep fascination with Buddhism and the spiritual beliefs of Native Americans embellished his creative impulse.

**Keywords:** *Environmental crisis, deep ecology, harmonious coexistence, eco-conciseness, Gary Snyders.*

The environmental crisis and its alarming declension narratives about extinction, species loss, pollution, global warming, toxicity and deforestation epitomise the Anthropocene (a term coined by atmospheric physicist Paul Crutzen and ecologist Eugene Stoemer). The term indicates a new geological era replacing the Holocene in which human agency has become a significant geophysical force at par with natural forces, modifying the world's ecosystem with a greater rapidity than witnessed in any earlier period of human history. (Rangarajan 1)

### Introduction

The present environmental peril and the dark side of scientific discoveries and technological inventions. All the development acts were targeted at controlling nature for the maximum

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benefit of human beings. It is a kind of war where humans believe in taking control/supremacy over anything and everything. Rachael Carson's very aptly limns in *Silent Spring*:

No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world. The people had done it themselves.....every one of these disasters has actually happened somewhere, and many real communities have already suffered a substantial number of them. A grim spectre has crept upon us almost unnoticed, and this imagined tragedy may easily become a stark reality we all shall know. (Ch. 1)

We are aware of the ecological collapse due to reckless frenzy, technological and materialistic advancement and, our failure to avert it, consequently, we are facing geophysical changes of a very high magnitude which are beyond our imagination. "Finding new ways of responding to this planetary tragedy poses both a conceptual and representational challenge to humanistic scholarship." (Rangarajan 1). The environmental quandary is an exigent problem which needs immediate attention. Given the situation, different genres of literature addressing the myriad environmental local and global concerns and issues, assume great importance as they not only assist in redefining/transforming the intricate bond between humans and nature, but the literary works are also the responses to the contemporary climatic change.

The end of World War II left many writers and poets questioning mainstream politics and culture. These include the names of poets like Gary Snyder, Gregory Corso, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Allan Ginsberg, who later became known as the Beat Generation, who were interested in bringing about change in the conventional style of writing and changing consciousness. These Beat poets were in proximity with the rhizomatic San Francisco Renaissance movement. Gary Snyder born in 1930 is considered one of the most remarkable Beat poets and is also considered a significant environmental- poet. He is known for his profound affinity with both external and internal aspects of nature and the interdependence/interconnectedness of man and the natural world He believed in 'Deep Ecology', (which is an environmental philosophy that postulates the intrinsic worth of all entities regardless of their utility to humankind) and wrote to spread ecological awareness. Snyder's works *Riprap*, *Myths & Texts*, *The Black Country*, *Regarding Wave*, *Turtle Island*, *Mountains and Rivers without End*, *The Practice of the Wild*, *The Earth House Holds*, *The Cold Mountain*, *Axe Handles*, *No Nature*, reveal his eco-philosophical ideas and thoughts which have been instrumental in the development of the environmental movement, environment amelioration and have inspired many people to reexamine their relationship with nature.

Snyder was raised in the Pacific Northwest. He graduated from Lincoln High School in 1947 and later attended Reed College in Oregon to study literature and anthropology. During this time, he developed a deep fondness and love for the natural world around him. After college, he spent several years travelling to various places, especially southwest Asian countries and was distinctly impressed by the culture and tradition of the places. It was on the trip east to Indiana that Snyder had a revelation that constituted a real turning point in his life. His multicultural living experience is evinced in his gamut of writings. He published his first poems in the campus literary magazine, Janus.

Snyder's quintessential ecological philosophy is based on the idea that humans are part of a larger, interconnected web of life and that our actions can either develop this ecological balance or destroy it. He believes that we must develop a deep sensitivity to the natural world and work to protect it for future generations. This theme pervades most of his verse and prose writings.

### **The concept of "Deep Ecology"**

The word 'ecology' is frequently used in connection with the 'green' movement. Deep Ecology, for example, is a radical version of environmentalism, conceived in the early 1970s by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess and developed in the 1980s by US environmentalists Bill Devall and George Sessions. Deep Ecologists reject merely technological and managerial solutions because these constitute yet another form of human dominance. ....Deep Ecology proposes drastic changes in our habits of consumption, not only to avert catastrophe but as a spiritual and moral awakening. (Waugh 536)

Arne Naess interpolates in *The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement* that, life forms and individuals should not be viewed as isolated entities, but rather as interconnected elements within a "general field in which they are mutually related." Naess championed equal rights for all living beings within the ecosystem.

The vast panorama of Snyder's work is rubbed with the concept of "deep ecology". Snyder argues that humans should see themselves as just one part of a complex and interconnected ecosystem, where every living being plays a crucial role in maintaining the balance of nature. In his Pulitzer Prize-winning work, *Turtle Island* (published in 1974) he presents the idea of interconnectedness and enduring cohabitation between humans and the environment. With the glaze of his proficient poetic adroitness, he makes an imperative and powerful plea not to use and see nature as a resource to exploit, but to consider it as a beautiful planet of diverse beings

with whom we share this planet. The sooner we understand this we can create a deep sense of empathy for the world around us and profound respect for its many complexities.

Snyder's concept of deep ecological sensitivity has been instrumental in revamping and designing environmental policies. It has given a fresh outlook to view the natural world in a new light, one that is more attuned to the delicate balance of life on the pristine Earth. The poems in *Turtle Island* convey Snyder's concern for the degradation of the natural world in the face of societal advancements. The rich imagery, contemplative tone, and metaphors compel the readers to ponder on the intricate interconnectedness between development and ecological sustainability. Throughout the collection, he urges the reader to comprehend the significance of all living beings. He advocates that human survival is possible only with the harmony of nature and considering all beings as co-sharers with us on the planet. Snyder brings to our attention that nature encompasses microscopic organisms, animals, plants and human societies. He advocates for safeguarding nature from the detrimental effects of civilization, industrialization and globalization.

Snyder's views and his understanding of nature resonate with his learning of Indian culture especially his keen interest in Buddhism and Native American spirituality. For some years Snyder lived in Japan, in the old capital of Kyoto. He went there to study Buddhism. K. C. Pandey writes in *Ecological Perspectives in Buddhism*:

Throughout human history, man has been warned from time to time to protect the environment and maintain ecological balance. Buddhism believes that the universe is an integrated whole. It has no beginning or end, and galaxies as numerous as sands of the river Ganges existed and passed way across vast aeons of time. Man is not alone forlorn in this vast stretched universe. Human existence, according to Buddhism, is just one of six forms of life spread throughout the universe. (93)

Snyder was highly inspired by such Buddhist thoughts which fleshes out the interdependence/interconnectedness of the universe and the fact that man is not the only species inhabiting this planet. Buddha never discriminated among man, animals, plants and trees. He believed that all biotic beings including man and trees have the same origin and are made up of the same elements. This forms the very basis of the concept of deep ecology, which Snyder not only practised and demonstrated but also tried to communicate through his creative works. He also visited South Korea and Taiwan, the mainland zones of both the Ho and the Chiang – the Yellow River and the Yangtze, India and Sri Lanka and many other countries. Snyder's poetry reflects his deep connection to nature and his years of study of Eastern philosophy and culture.

His work explores a wide spectrum of themes related to ecology, spirituality, and social justice and social ecology.

### **Eastern philosophy and Native American spirituality**

Snyder's work has a lasting impact on his stay in Asia from 1956 to 1968 studying Buddhism in Kyoto, later travelling to India, and returning to America periodically to disseminate the new knowledge he had gained overseas. Snyder was the founding member of the "Ring of Bone" Zendo, an indigenously based Mahayana Buddhist sangha, located on his property on San Juan Ridge. Snyder travelled extensively to deliver talks and indulge in discourses and debates. His work is deeply rooted in Eastern philosophy and Native American spirituality, which has had a profound impact on his ecological thinking and environmental activism. Snyder's early experiences in Japan studying Buddhism and practising Zen meditation helped shape his worldview. He became fascinated with the interconnectedness of all things in nature, which is at the core of Buddhist philosophy. "While talking about the similarity between man and nature, it is accepted in Buddhism that humans as well as non-human beings are made up of rupa and arupa dhatu. Similarly, they have the same characteristics like having form, warmth and consciousness. In this way, Buddhism also accepted there is similarity between man and nature. (Pandey 47) Snyder was highly inspired by Buddhist philosophy which stated that it is the nature of man, which is responsible for environmental crisis as well as the removal of the crisis. This thought reverberates in almost all his corpus.

Snyder's interest in Native American spirituality also played a significant role in his ecological sensitivity. He spent time living on a reservation in California, where he learned about traditional Native American beliefs and practices.

Snyder's poetry often reflects his connection to nature and his belief in the importance of living in harmony with the environment. His work celebrates the natural world and encourages readers to develop a deep ecological sensitivity, which involves an appreciation for the interconnectedness of all living things. His work reflects that we need to conquer ourselves and live in peace with the natural world. He wants to reach inside as well as move outside in a non-possessive way. That reminds us of Gandhi's trusteeship.

He studied Zen Buddhism which preaches seeing into one's ownself. This philosophy had a lasting impact on Snyders thereby he was drawn towards the concept of 'wilderness', which was not any space but a place of deep spiritual significance. Furthermore, Zen Buddhism

emphasises meditation which aims at gaining a clear perception of the self and the external world. Zen Buddhism also advocates physical labour. Overall, Snyder's roots in Eastern philosophy and Native American spirituality have had a profound impact on his thinking and have helped shape his vision of a more sustainable and harmonious world.

### **Snyder's Aesthetics of Poetry**

Gary Snyder's poetry is truly a reflection of his deep ecological sensitivity and his profound connection to nature. *Riprap* was Snyder's first published book (1959) The collection deals with a variety of experiences he had with forests and at sea. Most of the poems are written in the lyrical mode. The collection reflects a skilful grasp of subtle implications worthy of the Japanese haiku tradition or the Chinese lyric.

Snyder points out this in his 'Statement on Poetics' for Allen's anthology, *The New American Poetry*:

"Riprap" is a class of poems I wrote under the influence of the Sierra Nevada and the daily trailcrew work of picking up and placing granite stones... "What are you doing?" I asked old Roy Marchbanks. "Riprapping", he said. His selection of natural rocks was perfect.....I tried writing poems of tough, simple, short words, with complexity far beneath the surface texture. In part, the line was influenced by the five-and seven-character line Chinese poems I'd been reading, which work like sharp blows on the mind. (Amon 23)

Gary Snyder wrote in the introductory remarks of *Turtle Island* that he has used *Turtle Island* for 'North America'. The collection consists of almost five dozen poems divided into four parts, the first three parts are written in poetry, ranging from lucid, lyrical, and mystical to mytho-biotic. A few poems are political, and the fourth part is written in prose. *Turtle Island's* first section *Manzanita* opens with the poem titled *Anasazi*. This poem manifests Snyder's deep admiration for the indigenous culture of the Native Americans, specifically the *Anasazi* tribes.

"Anasazi,  
Anasazi,  
tucked up in clefts in the cliffs  
growing strict fields of com and beans  
sinking deeper and deeper in earth." (Snyder 3)

He very poignantly expresses his appreciation for the *Anasazi* tribal populace's act of peaceful coexistence with their natural surroundings. He further describes their craftsmanship and

unparalleled skills in horticulture, pottery-making, basket-weaving, gardening and architecture, especially their skill in making houses on the sides of the steep cliffs.

Trickling streams in hidden canyons

Under the cold rolling desert

Corn-basket wide eyed

Red baby

Rock lip home,

Anasazi (Snyder 1976 3)

Here what Snyder is trying to validate is the fact he firmly believed all his life that human existence is completely connected and mutually dependent on the surrounding natural world. He with the help of the Anasazi tribe tries to lay forth that we people of modern civilization must learn lessons of sustainable living from these tribal people and live a life of non-aggressive attitude towards nature. He condemns humanity's unbridled greed for pleasure and the acquisition of wealth and teaches us through the Anasazi tribe to follow the path of simple life. Sustainable agriculture, sustainable architecture, low-impact life, water conservation and love for the natural habitat are what these tribal people exemplify.

Tomorrows Song from the third section of Turtle Island is an exclusive ecopoetry where he advocates that even mountains and rivers must be given the right to vote. This in itself is a unique thought, the basis of which is perhaps the fact that we all are interdependent.

The USA s

lowly lost its mandate ...

it never gave the mountains and rivers,

trees and animals,

a vote.

all the people turned away from it (Snyder, 1976 lines 1-6).

He goes to the extent of saying that if America wants to retain its power and status it must signify animals and plants in its government. It may sound bizarre to many, but Snyder thought that the real solution to all destructive consequences to the nature and natural world could be mitigated by giving each one their own space to live and considering them as an inevitable, indivisible part of us and Mother Earth. He discusses in Four Changes the decay and destruction of the environment and the natural world not only because of the destructive activities of human

actions but also because of overpopulation. This collection establishes Snyder as one of the most remarkable environmental writers of the twentieth century and a central figure in environmental activism and spreading awareness towards the natural world. His body of works is a unique blend of Buddhist philosophy, Native American spirituality, and deep ecology. He often writes about the natural world, the environment, and the interconnectedness of all things in nature. He has inspired his readers to, "find (their) place on the planet, dig in, and take responsibility from there." (Snyders 101)

Snyder's poetry has garnered attention because it reflects his ecological sensitivity. Its rootedness in deep ecological thoughts and philosophy is also a call to action. His poems inspire readers to take action to protect the environment and develop a deeper connection with nature. He urges us to look beyond ourselves and consider the impact that our actions have on the natural world.

He also emphasizes the importance of preserving nature for future generations. Snyder translated in 1950's *The Cold Mountain* poems from Chinese to English. His stay in Japan is recounted in the poem collection *The Back Country* (1968). The poems are divided into four sections. The first section is *Far West* which represents the American Wilderness. The second section titled *Far East*, is all about his recollection of Japan. The third section entitled *Kali* contains very poignant and robust poems. The setting of the poem is India and in this section distress/ suffering predominates. Snyder tries to strike a balance by writing about the anguish, poverty and misery rampant in India but at the same time, he speaks about the invigorating and energising spiritual richness. "And Kali is as an aspect of the Great Mother, an embodiment of life as well as death." (Alman 28)

In *American Poetry in the Twentieth Century*, Kenneth Rexroth observed that although Snyder proposes "a new ethic, a new esthetic, [and] a new lifestyle," he is also "an accomplished technician who has learned from the poetry of several languages and who has developed a sure and flexible style capable of handling any material he wishes." (Biography) Snyder's poetry is so terse and refreshing on one hand and on the other serves as a powerful tool for raising awareness about environmental quandry and inspiring action.

### **The impact of Snyder's work on the environmental movement**



Gary Snyder is known for his contributions to the environmental movement and his influence on the development of deep ecological sensitivity. His work has had a significant impact on the way we approach environmentalism today.

Snyder's poetry, essays, and activism inspired many people to take action to protect the natural world. He was one of the first writers to draw attention to the interconnectedness of all living things and the importance of preserving the environment for posterity. His ideas about the relationship between humans and nature helped to shape the environmental movement and led to the development of the concept of deep ecology. His practice of Buddhism, appreciation for Native American cultures, experience with physical labour, keen observations of nature and immersion in family and community, shape his writing.

Today, Snyder's work's impact can be seen in the actions of environmental activists around the world. His ideas continue to inspire people to protect the planet and work towards a more sustainable future. Snyder's work reminds us that we have a responsibility to care for the natural world and preserve it for generations to come.

### **Ecological activism, spirituality and mindfulness**

Snyder believed that the relationship with Earth must be like a relationship with Mother. The Mother Earth provides us with food, shelter, air and the requirements of life. As a poet, essayist, and environmental activist, Snyder has long been associated with and practitioner of deep ecology.

In *American Poetry since 1960: Some Critical Perspectives*, Alan Williamson wrote that Snyder's canon "suggests a process of meditation or spiritual exercise, clearing the path from temporal life to the moment of Enlightenment—the sudden dropping-away of the phenomenal world in the contemplation of the infinite and eternal, All and Nothingness." (Biography) Overall, Gary Snyder's approach to ecological activism emphasizes the importance of developing a deep spiritual connection with nature and using mindfulness practices to cultivate ecological sensitivity. By doing so, we can become more attuned to the natural world and more committed to protecting it for future generations.

### **Community, Collaboration and the Natural World**

...ecologism is based on the belief that nature is an interconnected whole, embracing humans and non-humans, as well as the inanimate world. This has encouraged ecological thinkers to

question the anthropocentric, or human-centred, assumptions of conventional political ideologies, allowing them to come up with new ideas about, among other things, economics, morality and social organisations. (Heywood 206)

Gary Snyder's literary creations comprising poetry, prose, memories, essays, lectures etc. embody his firm belief that community and collaboration play a vital role in protecting the environment. He believed that the ecological quandary cannot be solved by individuals alone, but rather requires collaborative activities and coordinated endeavour. His early works talk of the repercussions of too much growth of industries and the negative impact of modern civilization. After his travel to various places and experiencing firsthand experience staying adjacent to nature he felt the interdependence of all things of the natural world. He realised each object/entity of nature is dependent on others and thus his belief in deep ecology became firmer.

In his book, *The Practice of the Wild*, Snyder writes about the importance of collaboration and cooperation in protecting the environment. He emphasizes the need for people to work together and share knowledge, skills, and resources to create a more sustainable future. The belief that human beings are the pivotal point of all existence is the biggest mistake we create. "David Ehrenfeld (1978) called this "the 'arrogance of humanism'." (Heywood 208). Snyder's vision of community-based environmentalism is more relevant today than ever before.

## Conclusion

...nature really exists, out there beyond ourselves, not needing to be ironised as a concept by enclosure within knowing inverted commas, but actually present as an entity which affects us, and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we conceive as part of our cultural practice.... (Berry 243)

The contemporary world is grappling with an unprecedented environmental crisis, and authors, poets and writers are writing and focusing on the pressing issues concerning environmental degradation through their seminal works. Such works then become more than mere academic interest but a clarion call for all of us. Snyder's poetry has been a catalyst for environmental awareness and ecological sensitivity, and his love and understanding of nature are evident in his writing. He has been a voice of advocacy for the natural world, and his work has inspired many to see the world through a different lens. Gary Snyder through the lens of his work had a grand vision of challenging anthropocentrism. His main focus was to bring at the centre the interrelationship between humans and the natural world for resolving all environmental

problems. His work offers critical insight and highlights the significance of ecological symbiosis. Altieri in *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry during the 1960s*, Snyder's achievement "is a considerable one. Judged simply in aesthetic terms, according to norms of precision, intelligence, imaginative play, and moments of deep resonance, he easily ranks among the best poets of his generation. Moreover, he manages to provide a fresh perspective on metaphysical themes, which he makes relevant and compelling." What is required is the reevaluation of the core values as laid down by deep ecology. His work is an exploration and an endeavour to emphasise the responsibilities of each individual towards ecological awareness. His literary oeuvre has forewarned us of an impending environmental crisis, drawing our attention towards anthropocentrism, scientific advancements and industrialization are the root causes of all environmental crises. Snyder's body of work expressed his underlying vision and commitment to deep ecology.

Snyder's work serves as a reminder that we are not separate from nature, but rather an integral part of it, and that we have a responsibility to protect and preserve the natural world for future generations. As we move forward, we must continue to draw inspiration from Snyder's teachings and work towards a more sustainable and environmentally conscious future. Snyder's work has been influential in shaping the environmental movement, and his writing contains valuable lessons for anyone interested in living in harmony with the natural world. By understanding his philosophy, we can begin to see the world differently and take steps to become more sensitive.

There is no denying the fact that the world has changed with the change in the consciousness of the people which inhabits it. The recent pandemonium which engulfed the world demonstrated the fact that with harmonious coexistence and collective endeavours, we can strive to make this world a better place to live in.

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