

# Transcending Shallow Ecology: A ‘Deep Ecological’ Study of Gary Snyder’s Select Poems

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## Abstract

*Ecocriticism is a field of literary and cultural studies that examines the relationship between literature and the environment, mainly focusing on how human activities have caused environmental damage. It critically explores how literature reflects, influences, and challenges our understanding of environmental issues and encourages a deeper awareness of the ecological consequences of human actions. However, the present study begins with the assertion that simply being ecocritical is not enough, a point also made by Cheryl Glotfelty in “The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology.” In any critical discourse, merely being critical or opposed to something represents only the second phase, which is not mature. For example, Feminism comprises three stages, as described by Elaine Showalter in “A Literature of Their Own.” In the Feminine phase, women imitate men; in the feminist phase, women are highly critical of and oppositional to men; finally, in the female phase, one emerges as oneself. We may only engage in shallow criticism if we focus solely on ecocritical analysis. Our primary perspective would remain tied to the issues we intend to critique rather than allowing environmental wisdom to stand independently. Consequently, it would always be a reactionary critique rather than an independent discourse. By applying Deep Ecology in the select poems of “Regarding Wave” by Gary Snyder, this paper tries to shift from the shallow phase of ecocriticism to a deeper one, which will talk about The Three Ecologies- self, society, and the environment in place of two ecologies - human and non-human. The study promotes going beyond the class-structured civilized society and the integration of Indigenous cultures, emphasizing recycling and reintegrating them into modern consciousness as essential for addressing environmental crises.*

**Keywords:** Deep Ecology, Primitivism, Environment.

The issue of domination has persisted across various aspects of society for years. Even today inequality exists, such as the dominance of man over woman, the wealthy over the impoverished and so on. The exploitation of nature by humans is a significant concern at present time. Born in 1930, Gary Snyder lived throughout the USA; he traveled to Japan, China, India, and even Sri Lanka. He soon turned out to be a significant eco-activist and, at the same time, a poet. So, I want to reflect on his point of view a little, to find out his notion of activism and how he fused it with the idea of poetry writing and created what can be called ‘Deep Ecology’. Deep ecology is an ecological and environmental philosophy. It attends to ecosystems and the connection between man and nature. Snyder strives to

illustrate the intrinsic value of inanimate and animate. In 1968, the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess first delivered a lecture on “Philosophy and Ecology” at the University of Oslo, and in 1972, he coined the term “deep ecology.” Snyder also explores diverse principles of deep ecology and ecocentrism in his writings. Naess characterizes the deep ecological movement as advocating for “biospherical egalitarianism” (Sessions 151); for Snyder (2020), it is the concept of “Primitive Services” (Snyder 176). In *A Place in Space*, Snyder aims to revive old ways of life for both people and their environment on Earth. He offers us the opportunity to learn from primitive cultures.

In an interview in “The East-West Interview,” Peter Barry Chowka said that Snyder defined the word primitive as “primus” or “first” like “original mind,” “original human society,” or “original way of being” (Snyder 115). It suggests viewing the primitive as the “first” closely interwoven with the entire life and things on this planet. The primitive concept represents the earliest life forms and an authentic presence in the environment. Snyder tries to show the primitive people as tribes, the Native people, and prehistoric human beings.

Claude Levi-Strauss’ concept of the ‘savage mind’ influences Snyder’s primitivism. Snyder’s primitivism appreciates the Indigenous knowledge system and its traditions. It considers them a cornucopia of wisdom and ecological harmony. Snyder has been influenced by Eastern philosophy, notably Zen Buddhism, which became a crucial aspect of his life and works. His days in Japan and his zen training immensely shaped his expressions in poetry. His poems coalesce Zen principles, which focus attention on mindfulness and simplicity. Like William Wordsworth, he comprehends nature as a teacher. His love for nature and Zen Buddhism is evident in his writings and way of living. He advocates for a mindful approach to daily life. He stands against the social practices contributing to environmental degradation and favors a sustainable and ecological way of leading life.

For example, Sequoia trees are found on the western coast of California in the Yosemite Valley. These Sequoia trees are very tall, and at the same time, they are more than 250-260 years old. One of the unique characteristics of these trees is that their bark is fire-resistant. The Yosemite Valley is rich in minerals, often attracting light when lightning occurs in the sky and the sky is overcast with clouds. The tall Sequoia trees arrested this lightning. Since the bark was fire resistant, the bark did not burn, but the inside of the trees burned out, and sooner and later, the trees fell. Snyder went up; he loved the trees so much that he did not cut the fallen trees. The bark, being fire resistant, could not be destroyed because although the tree fell, inside of the tree created a sort of funnel through which one could pass because the very breadth of the trees was so extensive that human beings could pass through the cross-section of the tree. Following the Native American way of living, Snyder did not cut the trees in the Yosemite Valley.

Snyder explores the inception of poetry as nature’s expression, illustrating this idea through the Hindu myth where “the goddess Vak transforms into the very essence of the universe, embodying energy.” Sanskrit Vak corresponds to the Latin vox and English voice. According to Snyder, in Sanskrit poetics, poetry initially embodies the resonance of flowing water and the rustle of wind through the trees. So, Snyder’s (1970) “Running Water Music II” in *Regarding Wave* runs:

“Clear running stream  
     clear running stream  
 your water is light  
     to my mouth  
 And a light to my dry body  
     your flowing  
 Music,  
     in my ears, free,  
 Flowing free!

With you  
in me.” (Snyder 69)

Here, Snyder talks about the stream, its rhythmic flow, and how it enlightens his dry body. The poem depicts the musical harmony between humans and nature. It focuses on the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman. The poem calls its reader to be connected with it. Only then human civilization can flow freely like the stream without any obstacles. While shallow ecology screams at the surface level of ecology, the poem encourages its readers to think in depth. The poem calls its readers to mingle with nature. The connection between the poet and the stream is evident. Hwa Yol Jung and Petee Jung describe, “Here the music of the stream’s flow and the mood of the poet interpenetrate: ‘Without’ and ‘Within’ are the two reversible or chiasmic sides of the same happening, they are two moments of one process or unity” (Jung and Jung 3).

Snyder upholds that the stream flows within himself. The narrator and the stream become one. As deep ecology believes that human life forms are integral to the earth, Snyder promotes the mutual relationship between humans and nonhumans. Here, the poet addresses the stream as an equal. The poet never regards himself as superior to the nonhuman. The life-sustaining force of water is celebrated as an indispensable element of the ecosystem. Deep ecology rejects anthropocentrism and celebrates ecocentrism. Anthropocentrism places humanity at the centre so that other life forms will be regarded as resources to be consumed by human beings. On the other hand, ecocentrism means attempting to place ecosystems, rather than humanity, at the centre.

Deep ecology, as proposed by Naess, rejects anthropocentrism. The water in the stream is not a resource to be consumed and utilized by humans but a living entity with its music, freedom, and energy. The poem celebrates that nature should not be utilized for its utility purpose only but would be respected for its inherent quality. If living and non-living do not have any utility for humans, they still have the right to exist on the earth. These principles of deep ecology, Zen Buddhism, and the native American lifestyle have influenced Snyder.

Snyder draws inspiration for his deep ecology primarily from the Native American lifestyle and the principles of Zen Buddhism. Snyder states, “Zen represents a quest for the primal state, where the untamed, the sacred, and the virtuous converge, aligning with the concept of prioritizing the earth” (Diamond 35). Snyder views the primitive as ecologically more “mature” and “harmonious” than the modern and civilized, as the former prioritizes preservation, stability, and quality. At the same time, the latter is fixated on production, growth, and quantity. He considers Native Americans as the initial ecopoets. Several essays and poems have been penned exploring the theme of civilization, one of which is the poem “Civilization” by Snyder. It serves as a melodic amalgamation of voices emerging from the scarred earth and the muted populace of the region.

“Those are the people who do complicated things.

they’ll grab us by the thousands  
and put us to work.

World’s going to hell with all these  
villages and trails.

Wild duck flocks aren’t  
what they used to be.

Aurochs grow rare.

Fetch me my feathers and amber” (Snyder 88)

Those in power have always influenced the narratives. They have documented their histories, and in those histories, there is no place for the marginalized and non-living. Like the marginalized people in society, nonhuman beings have been neglected throughout history. Again, by the name of green studies, they are making the narratives to take care of the environment by all and

forcing the marginalized and rural people to take care of nature. The rural people who have never exploited the earth and lived in harmony with nature throughout history are burdened by the name of sustainability. With the narratives and skilful writings, the power structure escapes from reality and asks the voiceless and uneducated to be educated ecologically. So, writing becomes an ideological instrument that immensely influences young minds. Stanley Diamond says, "Writing splits consciousness in two ways—it becomes more authoritative than talking, thus degrading the meaning of speech and eroding oral tradition." (Diamond 4). In his counter-cultural stance against civilization, Snyder flips the role of writing and advocates for the voiceless who are ruthlessly exploited. He emphasizes the necessity of an unconventional way of thinking. Moreover, facts must be documented to break away from conventional knowledge. Primitive and rural people live in harmony with nature and regard animals as fellow beings. Instead of educating the rural people, the civilized society needs to learn from them. In the second stanza of "Civilization," Snyder observes a small cricket occupying a minuscule portion of his typescript.

"A small cricket  
on the typescript page of  
"Kyoto born in spring song"  
grooms himself  
in time with The Well-Tempered Clavier.  
I quit typing and watch his thru a glass.  
How well articulated! How neat!  
Nobody understands the ANIMAL KINGDOM." (Snyder 88-89)

A small cricket blends with the living world, a reminder of nature's melodies. The essence of being alive is expressed through its music, which often goes unnoticed and unheard by civilized society. The poem envisions a mind free from all types of desire and avarice. When civilized society wants more and more from nature, the poem asks to take what is necessary. Hence, reviving the primitive and following the rural way of living, which believes that human forms must expand to include more of the others, would enable a transformative state, Snyder terms post-civilization, advocating a return to the simple way to lead life. Civilized society has promoted a hierarchy between human and nonhuman, man and nature, urban and rural. So, the world has seen enough of civilization. Snyder says, what is after civilization? Post-civilization envisions a utopian space where everyone can live in harmony without hierarchy. This radical concept urges a return to the fundamental path of rediscovering primitivity.

Snyder encapsulates his deep ecology with a term: communionism. This concept is in contrast with humanism. Humanism emphasizes speciesism, prejudice nurtured by the dominant group, called humans, who believe that animals can be exploited just because they do not belong to the species *Homo Sapiens*. On the other hand, communionism represents ecotopia, an ecological utopia. It is defined by Snyder in the poem "Revolution in the Revolution in the Revolution" in *Regarding Wave*, where the repetition of a word, as in mantras, diminishes its potency over time. The only true revolution is transforming the unconscious, transcending class-based societies and mass ego. Snyder says, "Class-structured civilized society is a kind of mass ego. To transcend the ego is to go beyond society as well. Beyond there lies, inwardly, the unconscious. Outwardly, the equivalent of the unconscious is the wilderness." (Snyder 435). Moving beyond the ego entails transcending the self, entrenched as civilization expands and evolves. "Revolution in the Revolution in the Revolution" strives for true communionism:

"The country surrounds the city.  
The back country surrounds the country  
"From the masses to the masses" the most

Revolutionary consciousness is to be found  
Among the most ruthlessly exploited classes:  
Animals, trees, water, air, grasses

We must pass through the stages of the  
“Dictatorship of the Unconscious” before we can  
Hope for the withering-away of the states  
And finally arrive at true Communism.

If the capitalists and imperialists  
Are the exploiters, the masses are the workers,  
and the party  
is the communist

If civilization  
is the exploiter, the masses is nature,  
and the party  
is the poets.

If the abstract rational intellect  
is the exploiter, the masses is the unconscious.  
and the party  
is the yogins.

& POWER

comes out of the seed-syllables of mantras.” (Snyder 44)

Snyder’s deep ecology is guided by communionism, a philosophy that revolves around the simple way of living. Communionism strives for an emotional relation with and response to nature, not merely rational and intellectual one. Sherman Paul notes, “Inhabiting a place and taking a stand creates a political act in Snyder’s poetry” (Jung and Jung 7). Communionism, as envisioned by Snyder, strives for a harmonious connection with the natural elements of our planet.

Snyder’s poetry transcends shallow ecology and embodies an ecology that brings out reality by digging deep. When shallow ecology deals with the living and nonliving things which can be utilized, Snyder values its intrinsic value. Shallow ecology talks about two types of ecology: human and nonhuman. However, Snyder incorporates three ecologies: self, society, and the environment. Without understanding the social hierarchy, environmental consciousness will be a burden to the lower section of the society. He integrates concepts from Native American tradition, Zen Buddhism, and the deep ecology movement. His poems reflect a return to primitive or more straightforward living, free from civilized society’s destructive forces. Snyder’s vision of communionism urges humanity to follow sustainable practices that restore balance and respect for the natural world.

This study of Snyder’s select poems clarifies that his environment philosophy challenges conventional narratives about civilization and post-civilization. His works shift from an economic man, an individual who wants more and more economy and is celebrated in society, to an ecological man, an ecological individual who lives in harmony with nature. Snyder invites his readers to move beyond reactionary ecocriticism. Reactionary ecocriticism reacts when something happens here and there. He suggests embracing a new ethical framework that prioritizes environmental wisdom and the independence of all living beings. His poetry guides the ecological transformation, which is necessary to address the environmental crises of the present time. Ecocriticism is the general discourse of being conscious of the environment. However, if ecocritics are just ecocritical, they would be doing only shallow criticism. Somehow, we have to move on to the phase where our

environmental consciousness is not just reactionary, oppositional, or shallow but something that is the substratum of thought, a shift from ecocriticism to deep ecology. Environmental wisdom will come of its own rather than only opposed to something.

Snyder's deep ecology is rooted in a profound respect for the environment and the complete rejection of anthropocentrism. His poems critique the exploitative nature of civilized society and hopes for a more harmonious relationship. Drawing ideas from Eastern philosophy, indigenous culture and Zen Buddhism, Snyder suggests that the path forward is not the domination over nature but of co-existence. This shift requires dismantling the ingrained capitalism that prioritizes short term gains over sustainability.

The central theme in Snyder's poetry is the idea that human beings are not separate from nature but rather an intrinsic part. His work consistently portrays a world where rivers, mountains, forests, and animals possess their agency and intrinsic value. In his poems, Snyder celebrates the wilderness's beauty while emphasizing the need for humans to tread lightly upon the earth. His poetic landscapes are not merely scenic backdrops but active participants in the ecological web of life. This recognition of nature's agency is a fundamental principle of deep ecology, which seeks to decentralize speciesism and foster a more holistic view of existence.

Snyder's call for an ecological rather than an economic man to challenge civilized society's capitalism. The economic man operates within a framework of commodification and consumerism, whereas ecological man embodies a mindset of sustainability and interconnectedness. He celebrates the wisdom of ancient cultures, many living in harmony with their environments. Indigenous traditions offer insight into sustainable living and communal responsibility, contrasting with industrial capitalism's exploitative mechanisms.

In moving beyond reactionary ecocriticism, Snyder's poems present a constructive future. His works encourage how the three intrinsically connected systems of self, society, and environment always interfere. How self is entangled with society and how society is entangled with the environment. We cannot talk about the environment without social history. Deep ecology makes environmental wisdom a substratum of knowledge, a connection among self, society, and environment.

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