
*An Ecological Study of Selected Poems by W. S. Merwin**Asst. Prof. Aseel Abdulateef Taha, (Ph.D.)**Dept. of English, College of Languages, University of
Baghdad**Specialization: (English Literature)**Email: aseelateef@colang.uobaghdad.edu.iq***DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.31973/aj.v1i148.4180>**ABSTRACT:**

The American poet W. S. Merwin (1927-2019) is one of the most important enthusiastic ecopoets. He protests against the maladies of modern life which viciously damage our environmental health and causes imbalance in the ecosystem. Merwin makes man aware of the consequences of being out of the natural order, and of making the ecosystem vulnerable to collapse. His ecologically-minded poetry, which is rich with the sublimities of the landscape, profoundly influences man's ideas about the relation with the other natural creatures, to bridge the gap between man and the Mother earth. He helps man perceive his proper place in the natural order. Industrialization and urbanization toxify man's bodies and environment. Besides, political crises and wars lead to ecological disasters. The poet artistically embodies these unnatural devastations which threaten the whole planet. His poetry is a call to maintain endangered species of plants and animals. Not only his poetry but also his life are dedicated to protect wilderness which is essential to preserve the human life. Most of his ecological poems spring from the Hawaiian rain forest for which Merwin was fighting to preserve.

Keywords: deforestation, ecology, ecopoetry, ecosystem, endangered species

1. Introduction

W. S. Merwin grew up in New Jersey. After moving to Hawaii in the late 1970s, he encountered new views that brought him into contact with wilderness. During the last forty years of his life, he cultivated many species of palms, creating a fertile garden on an unfruitful commercial pineapple farm. This land has served as Merwin's source of inspiration, appearing as a recurrent image in his poems and his essays on conservation. For many years, he composed his unpunctuated poems in a palm forest. He devoted his life and his

writings to regaining the lost paradise of Hawaii's rain forest. Merwin is considered one of America's most enthusiastic environmental poets. The Pulitzer Prize-winning poet has been the voice of the natural world. He has led a life of simplicity in a small house on shore of Maui. He is one of the most active eco-poets who worked hard to preserve nature (Italie, 2019). Eco-poetics is interdisciplinary, it is a mixture of ecology and poetry, and the eco-poets are concerned with "the theory and praxis of deliberate earthlings" (Skinner, 2001, p. 7). They, through the power of art, try to make people aware of the environmental well-being of our "house." Jonathan Skinner, in the journal, *Eco-poetics*, says:

"Eco" here signals—no more, no less—the house we share with several million other species, our planet Earth. "Poetics" is used as poesis or making, not necessarily to emphasize the critical over the creative act (nor vice versa). Thus: eco-poetics, a house making (Skinner, 2001, p. 5).

It is worth noting that eco-poetics is different from conventional nature poetry which is "meditating upon a natural object-landscape-animal that is supposed to function as a doorway into meaning of the human subject's life" (Durand, 2010, p. 116). It is related to the Romantic sublime view of nature. The eco-poet is aware of her/his larger role in the ecosystem. The activist Rebecca Solnit recognizes the interrelation between the sublime and ecological thinking. In her book *Savage Dreams: A Journey into the Landscape Wars of the American West*, she defines the sublime as

a category distinct from beauty: the sublime as the aesthetic of vastness, magnificence, power, and fear....politics has invaded the landscape...the landscape is now a victim of history...history is not only the history of human actions, of causes, but the history of effects, of ecological damage. Thus, we see not the soldiers bombing the landscape—action pictures—but the landscape shattered by bombs.... Our morality is complicated by the fact that the sky above even the most demonic folly is often exquisitely colored, and its clouds as breathtakingly pure. (1994, p. 47)

Accordingly, the concept of the sublime is turned upside down, as it can be perceived in an awe-inspiring scene in which natural splendor is distorted by vicious human intervention. Almost, there is no spot which has been unaffected by the regressive progress of humanity. Ecological poems often have political dimensions, for environmental deterioration is the result of political invasion. Solnit explains that the eighteenth-century sublime

came from natural phenomena or artistic representations of natural phenomena; the unnatural disasters of the present offer no such containment within the bounds of the natural—the oil fields afire in

Kuwait, the mushroom clouds above Yucca Flat, the blood-red sunsets of Los Angeles—though they still compel attention. The atomic bomb...is both the principle metaphor and fact of the problematic relationship between our power, desire, and limits. (p. 46)

Ecological thinking produces a kind of political resistance. It is a byproduct of environmental crises. Thus, ecopoetry becomes a kind of "politicized discourse" which is not different from such modes of thinking as "feminism" and "Marxism" (Arigo). The speaker in many of Merwin's poems, caringly listens to the silence of the environmental surrounding. Through the art of poetry, he explores man's relation to nature, trying to make us aware of ecological damage. Merwin declares: "I begin, after about a week in university, I begin to feel the oxygen's going out of the air very fast and I have to go somewhere else" (Wutz & Crimmel, eds., 2015, p. 250).

Hawaii's monetary gain increase came at the expense of the destruction of the forest. Merwin decided to be the voice of the damaged forest, to expose the catastrophic consequences of that environmental devastation. Throughout his literary career, he dedicated himself to preserving ecosystem. In his own life and poetry, he exposes the destructive endeavours to dominate nature and to manipulate its resources (Hix, 1997, p. 124). He tries to show the way to environmental balance, "disseminating ecological awareness among the public concerning the damage man is doing to nature" (Ali & Ismael, 2019, p.67). Man must secure environmental health "as part of his own healthy existence; otherwise, nature's reaction can be very challenging to determine not only the life of humanity but the future of the Mother Earth" (Farajallah & Lewis, 2021, p. 78).

2. Discussion

Merwin was carefully observing the destruction of nature not only in Hawaii but also in many parts of the world which were supposed to be civilized. Furthermore, in man's endless running after materialistic gains, many animal species are being destroyed. Consequently, man becomes out of the natural tune. (Hix, 1997, p. 72). Merwin tries to regain that lost link with nature and the other species which is extremely essential for "human health ecology" (Hammoud & Rabee, 2017, p. 1610) He seeks to present poetry that would help us recognize our appropriate place in the world. He shows the falsity of our belief in human superiority over the other natural creatures which disturbs the natural balance of the universal harmony (Christhilf, 1986, p. 18). The dangers which threaten our existence are the consequences of the materialistic progress that came at the expense of the safety of our planet. We believe that we are changing the world for the better. But, we continue damaging our environment, causing death to many species of plants and animals.

Merwin, in "To the Insect," illustrates that Man has an illusory sense of supremacy: "we have been here so short a time / and we pretend that we have invented memory" (ll. 2-3). Man thinks that she/he has the right to dominate the natural world and annihilate some natural creatures, like the insect: "we kill you again and again" (l. 10). Man is unable to see that he is damaging nature more than insects. We continue "eating the forests / eating the earth and the water," (ll. 12-13) until we forget our true self, "departing from ourselves" (l. 15).

Merwin shows that man has lost his place in the natural order, he has become out of the natural tune. We cannot be in pure communion with nature. For man, the natural elements have become commercial commodity to be sold and purchased (Christhilf, 1986, p.49). Through his poetry, Merwin sheds light on the uselessness of man's endless pursuit of the materialistic gains which makes him lose his esteem for sublime nature. Merwin rejects the notion that all the natural elements and creatures are created for man's benefit. In "Plea for a Captive," Merwin exposes the meanness of such a belief. Man thinks that he has the right to hunt and tame undomesticated animals for his own interest.

In the poem, Merwin explains how man is not aware of the instinctive nature of wild animals, ignorantly keeping "the caught fox" (l. 1) as a pet that "Dog[s] your heels, sleep[s] at your feet,/ Be happy in the house" (ll. 8-9). The captors are bewildered when their "Captive" behave wildly sometimes, although they "entice it with fat ducks" (l. 4) and treat it with "dulcet love" (l. 6). This reflects man's vanity which makes him believe that he is able to change the system of the natural environment. This "twisting" (l. 14) would certainly lead to the decay of wilderness and wild animals: "In your delicate meats tasting/ Nothing but its own decay" (ll. 17-18). The speaker of the poem pleads for the freedom of wild animals "with vacant eye" (l. 12) that suffer in domestic atmospheres. For these natural creatures, death is better than being domesticated: "Kill it at once or let it go" (l. 20).

In "The Coin," Merwin depicts a fair in which people take advantage of many natural creatures. Birds and plants are treated as merchandise for sale: "cut flowers" (l. 17) which are "rolled in wet newspaper" (l. 22) and "turtledoves eating in a cage" (l. 25) which are "dyed pink/one pale blue" (ll. 27-28) are offered "in the tented market place" (l. 2). Then, the poet recognizes the "pigeons" (l. 30) that are "watching from the church windowsills. (l. 31). These "flying" (l. 32) creatures stand in sharp contrast to those that are subject to the human control. The narrator mentions that at that place he could view the "balconies" (l. 4) from which many men were hang during "the occupation" (l. 5) and their "bodies were in full view/of the women

who had been their wives" (ll. 8-9). Merwin shows that atrocity in that place is manifested in the abuse of nature and its creatures.

Merwin illustrates that man should intermingle with the natural wild world, instead of manipulating or commercializing it. In his poem, "Little Horse," he emphasizes the importance of esteeming the life of wilderness. Merwin believes that we should accept such creatures as we encounter them without trying to manipulate the situation. The feeling of peace that this encounter brings to the narrator comes about because he has made no attempt to dominate it. Merwin looked for a way for restoring our natural harmony. "The Wilderness" shows that life continues without human intervention. We have to realize that we are not superior to the other natural creatures. We should not try to control them. We must not violate the natural order, we do not have to change a forest into a garden (Byers, 1989, p.89).

Our demolition of nature brings about many evils and. We redirect "aquatic ecosystems" (Alzurfi et al., 2019, p. 4391) and spoil rivers, creating false bionetwork that constantly rely on human interference. We wipe out not only certain ecosystems, but also the civilizations which are related to them. Merwin illustrates that replacing fauna and flora with urbanized Western systems in many parts of the world is one of the consequences of colonization. It is the "destructiveness of human economic and technological ambitions" (Hix, 1997, p. 127) that causes environmental imbalance. The Western money-oriented evolution, which overcomes many parts of the earth, displaces and destroys the ecological systems. Many green meadows have changed into sooty places because of "growing technology and industrial production" (Sheriiff & Delool, 2001, p. 721) Many creatures have lost their homes due to deforestation, these creatures finally face extinction. Furthermore, many native cultures have been exterminated. Merwin shows how the American territorial expansion and capitalism have displaced the Native, and eradicated their cultures. He declares that "The Indians represented to me a wider and more cohesive world than the one I saw around me that everyone took for granted" (As cited in Wutz & Crimmel eds., 2015).

Merwin is aware of the fact that the most evident, essential truth are frequently the ones that are difficult to perceive. "Neither Here nor There" presents bleak unseen truth which is the air. An "airport" is a port for air or "what is called air" (l.15). Merwin depicts this air, in "Flight Home," as "organized and sterilized and herded and heated and air-conditioned" and considers how on the plane "the voices" are "coming from far away, as through the sleep of a child, over the noise of the engines; the pressure of everything seeming to build up in the plane" (Merwin, p. 1957). Men do not recognize this truth, they are

similar to “the flying birds” (l. 3), in “Still Morning,” that “know / nothing of the air they are flying through” (l. 4). The unseen air is constantly polluted and “the pollution resulting from the use of traditional energies.” (Jebur &Almaaeny, 2018, p. 354)

“The Widow” is a poem about how the earth is widowed as a result of the death of humans. However, the extinction of her men does not affect her natural cycles: “There is no season /That requires us” (ll. 4-5). In this poem, Merwin mentions that men are those “Not seeing the irony in the air” (l. 24). Yet, the worsening feature of the air enables men to see the polluted air or the smog they are breathing. We have to breathe the iron in the air that slowly destroys our body and environment. Ironically, that toxic visible air or smog is one of the disastrous results of our glorious materialistic progression that started in the eighteenth century. “When the War Is Over” is another poem from *The Lice*. It is an ironic poem in which Merwin sarcastically describes the air after war:

When the war is over
 We will be proud of course the air will be
 Good for breathing at last
 (ll.1-3)

The poem shows the absurdity of the statements of the politicians' call for a certain war to end all wars, while they are planning for another one: “And we will all enlist again” (l.8). Paradoxically, the war is necessary for bettering the conditions of humanity and purifying the environment. They exploit the earth and its resources to make up destructive and polluting devices with which they can protect the earth. The air is too filthy to breathe, as it is polluted by the toxicity of their wars and their false claims.

“For a Coming Extinction” (1967) reflects Merwin's bleak future vision: “the future / Dead” (ll. 19-20). The poem is centered on the gray whale that symbolizes all species in danger of extinction. The poem opens with addressing the whale which is on the verge of extinction because, as the poet says, “we are sending you to The End” (l. 2). Immediately afterwards, the poet meditates on the notion of “forgiveness,” recognizing that “we . . . invented forgiveness / And forgive nothing” (ll. 5-6). So, he thinks that the idea of “forgiveness” is proposed by man “only as part of our need to invent a field for our collective grief” (Gordon, 1972.). The poet grieves for the loss of the gray whale. This valuable species will be found only in “the black garden” (l. 24). The poet here refers to the natural science museum where “The irreplaceable hosts ranged countless” (l. 27). The gray whale will be accompanied by the other extinct beings: “The sea cows the Great Auks the gorillas” (l. 26). It has become part of “the realm of words and hence of history symbolized by the museum” (Gordon,

1972). The poem ends with the repetition of "Tell him." The poet asks the extinct whale to tell "That great god" (l. 3) that all these creatures, that are "fore-ordaining as stars" (l. 28), are "Our sacrifices" (l. 29) to "him." The poet foresees the ultimate loss of the natural world because of our belief "That it is we who are important" which changes "the gods we must pray to--from gods of life to gods of darkness and death" (Altieri, 1987). Merwin emphasizes man's guilt as the demolisher of nature.

The speaker of the poem declares that "we were made/ On another day" (ll. 13-14). Merwin illustrates that we should not separate ourselves from the other natural beings and elements. We place ourselves at the top of the creation, we believe that we have the right to exploit other creatures, causing their extinction. Merwin shows the importance of being humble to recognize "the oneness of the universe." We need to experience such insightful moments of "precognitive illumination" (Davis, 1981, p. 92). Our self-centered consciousness leads to our separation, and makes us blind to the fact that our greed might finally cause our extinction. Merwin believes that this extinction can be avoided by realizing that nature "was not created for, and does not culminate in humanity" (Hix, 1997, p. 61).

In Merwin's "The Last One," man is depicted as a self-centered being: "they'd made up their minds to be everywhere because why not" (l. 1). Man's disrespect for the natural creatures and elements brings about the annihilation of the earth as well as of human kind. Man is unaware of the ruinous outcomes of cutting down the trees: "Well they cut everything because why not" (l. 6). He is blinded by his selfishness: "Everything was theirs because they thought so" (l. 7). By wiping out the forest trees, he deprives the birds of their homes. He has lost his link with the natural world and this is indicated by the bird's hatred of man: "they whom the birds despise" (l. 3). Man's is unsentimental to other natural creatures, he becomes a stone-headed being: "In the middle of stone they made up their minds" (l. 4).

The shadow of the trees is used as a symbol of the permanent power of nature: "its shadow stayed on the water" (l. 20). The shadow and the night are personified as vengeful beings that are together to punish man: "The night and the shadow put on the same head/ And it said Now" (ll.15-16). The shadow of the cut trees symbolizes man's dimness: "It got into their eyes the eyes went blind" (l. 56). It also indicates the downfall of mankind: "Then it swallowed them too and they vanished" (l. 61). By cutting the last tree, Man causes damages to himself, as the trees are indispensable sources of numerous things which are essential for human existence, like oxygen and food. Furthermore, deforestation affects "the environmental balance" (Al-

Bahadili et al., 2022, p. 1399). Thus, life itself might perish on this planet.

3. Conclusion

Merwin is known for his lifelong advocacy for ecological causes. In his review of Merwin's "The River Sound," Jerry Bass states that "In an age of loss on every side, the loss of biological, cultural, and experiential diversity, no poet has more to offer us than W.S. Merwin" (1999). Merwin's ecopoetry springs from personal history with his palm garden. Most of his poems were written from a palm forest on the remote north shore of Maui. Since 1977, he lived in the Maui conservancy [where he planted](#) more than 3,000 trees of endangered palms. He regained the lost paradise of the palm trees which were damaged by the commercial pineapple and sugar farmers. His aspiration is "that the whole of this land can eventually become a palm garden, a palm forest and sanctuary" (As cited in Imada, 2017). He declares that he will "try to grow as many species as possible of the world's palms, wherever they can be acquired" (As cited in Imada, 2017). Merwin is rich with insights into the spirit of the place that has inspired his poetry. Poetry can "facilitate to humans the achievement of a better connection with the environment and its components" (Challab, 2022, p. 72).

Merwin's ecologically-minded poetry, reshapes our thinking about man's relation to other natural creatures. Since we assume that we have supremacy over other natural creatures, we have created gaps in the ecosystem and separated ourselves from the Mother earth. We manipulate the planet to our advantage, perverting and destroying the earth (Byers, 1989, p. 85). We have forgotten that we share this planet with other creatures. We cage most of these creatures in zoos while causing the extinction of some of them. Merwin attempts to find a poetry that extends to the planet and its creatures, to reclaim our lost connection with the wild world. He advocates a kind of "environmental ethic" (Khalid, 2021, p. 107) that attempts to improve the relationship between humans and nature. The poet John Frazier (1939-), in his ["Lost Origins: W. S. Merwin's Poems of Division,"](#) explains that "To Merwin, the ideological and physical distance between ourselves and nature that we have increasingly created has divided us from our most important psychic resource and the basis of our Being"(1997).

Merwin's ecological consciousness stems from his interest in [Buddhism](#). Merwin's profound respect for all the living beings epitomizes the notion of "Buddha nature." Moreover, in his ecopoetry, the motifs of "oneness," "connections," "silence," "emptiness," "disembodiment" and "karmic repetition" signify the "Selflessness" and wisdom in Zen Buddhism (Geng, 2012).

The [Merwin Conservancy](#) with the strange silence of the palm forest is a place of tranquility and meditation. The Zen student Susan Dunlap points out that “Merwin’s intriguing phrases are mysteries, or perhaps almost koans” (2019). To grasp the inner meaning of his poem, one have to continue “reading it again and again and letting meanings emerge” (2019). As a Buddhist practitioner, Merwin was deeply interested in the practice of meditation which depends on breathing. This serene meditative mood is infused into Merwin's poetics. As Ian Tromp explains that " Merwin’s poems have relied on the breath as their fundamental measure, and his work is best read aloud" (2010).

In Merwin's ecopoetry, we can see the image of an environmentalist and a poet, raging passionately against all the evils of modern life which damage nature. He is intimately connected with landscape and language which intermingle, producing a poetry of exquisite beauty. He believes that “A lot of people who love palms have that feeling that you’re dealing with our elders—with great, great antiquity—that have been here a long time, and they know more about the Earth, in some ways, than we do” (As cited in Cep, 2015). He declares, in his poem “Place” that: “On the last day of the world / I would want to plant a tree” (ll. 1-2). For forty years, he planted and protected a palm forest. Like that forest, his poems will be permanently alive; his poetry is as outstanding as his palms.

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الخلاصة

يعد الشاعر الامريكى ويليام ستانلي ميروين (١٩٢٧-٢٠١٩) من اهم الشعراء الذين تبنوا بحماس قضايا البيئة، فقد احتجى على امراض العصر الحديث التي الحقت بالصحة البيئية ضرر كبير وحدثت خلل في توازن النظام البيئي. جعل ميروين الانسان يعي عواقب فقدان مكانه في التناغم الطبيعي، وجعل النظام البيئي معرضا للانهايار، فان شعره متأثر بشكل عميق بفلسفة الايكولوجيا، وغني بجمالية المنظر الطبيعي، ويؤثر بشكل كبير على تفكير الانسان حول علاقته بمخلوقات الطبيعة، لمعالجة الخلل في العلاقة بين الانسان والطبيعة الام. فالشاعر يساعد الانسان ليدرك مكانه المناسب في نظام الطبيعة. الصناعة والتمدن سممت جسد وبيئة الانسان، بالإضافة الى الازمات السياسية والحروب التي ادت الى كوارث بيئية. الشاعر يجسد، من خلال فنه، الدمار الغير طبيعي الذي يهدد الكون بأكمله. شعره هو نداء للحفاظ على فصائل الحيوانات والنباتات المهددة بالانقراض، ليس فقط شعره وانما ايضا حياته مكرسه للدفاع عن الحياة البرية التي تعتبر اساسيه للحفاظ على الحياة البشرية. اغلب اشعاره التي تتناول قضايا البيئة تم نظمها في غابات هاواي الممطرة التي كان ميروين يحارب للحفاظ عليها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الشعر الايكولوجي، الايكولوجيا، النظام البيئي، البيئة، ازالة الغابات، البرية، الاصناف المعرضة للخطر، الانقراض