

# Escaped Dreams: Man's Ecstasy Versus Nature's Agony

S. G. Mohanraj

**Abstract:** *Human beings have generally acted the role of the pioneer species in this planet, focusing only on their survival through the destruction of all their competitors and thereby achieving effective dominance over other life forms. As a result of this anthropocentric arrogance, resource depletion and species extinction have gone beyond bounds and the planet today exists in a sickly state. W. S. Merwin, the former poet laureate of the United States and two times Pulitzer Prize winner, has written a number of poems insisting on man's mutual relationship with nature. Moving beyond that, Merwin, in anger and desperation, reacts vehemently to this self-centered nature of man through his poems. He constantly addresses the various forms of interferences that human beings make into the naturally existing ecological systems—methodical deforestation, hunting for pleasure, hunting for profit, extensive fishing, domesticating animals, inappropriate technological advancement, urbanization and so on. Merwin directly accuses man for being the root cause for the shrinking of natural resources and pushing various plant and animal species to the verge of extinction. Merwin's intimacy with the natural world is also prominent in his poems and he appreciates the quality of life rather than aiming for higher standards of living.*

**Key Words:** *W. S. Merwin, ecocriticism, ecopoetry, nature writing, depletion, extinction*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Human beings have generally acted the role of the pioneer species in this planet, focusing only on their survival through the destruction of all their competitors and thereby achieving effective dominance over other life forms. 'Religion and philosophy have usually affirmed the pioneer's faith that only his own kind really counts, and that he has a right—perhaps even an obligation—to destroy and subjugate whatever seems to obstruct his hopes of conquest' (Meeker 1996, 163). Threat to the natural world can be traced through various activities of the human community. Usage of non-renewable energy resources including fossil fuels, expansion of industries, advancement of technology, expansion of urban areas, continuous reduction of total forest area, shrinking of animal habitat, emission of hazardous gases and microwaves, dumping of electronic waste, hunting for profit, hunting for pleasure, taming of animals, exploitation of forests for its resources, extensive agriculture using inorganic pesticides, extensive fishing and whaling using modern technology, poisoning of seas, mixing waste water into the natural water bodies, excessive eco-tourism, etc., are a few examples which stand evident for this fact. The resultant of all these activities may be of different forms including inappropriate climate change, global warming, extinction of plant and animal species, ecological imbalance, threat of a possible apocalypse and so on.

As a result of this anthropocentric arrogance, resource depletion and species extinction serve as the starting point for the destruction of the earth and they have gone beyond bounds and the planet today exists in a sickly state.

### **A. Birth of Ecocriticism**

It is high time for literary scholarship to discuss these most pressing issues and demand our fellow beings to stop these atrocities against nature. Right from the ancient era, we do have evidence of literary texts dealing with the problems of society and nature. Growth of literature and various literary forms are always associated with their capacity to deal with the current social issues. This laid the right foundation for the emergence of literary texts related to the problems of the natural world and the society. There are texts which have changed the human perception in dealing with nature and the society. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), which contributed to the ban of DDT in the United States, stands testimony to the fact. This book made the world to turn its attention towards the texts related to nature. Even though there were other nature writings available in the past, this seemed to be unique. Nature writing usually dealt with the beauty of nature and its usefulness to human beings whereas texts of this sort, which advocated ecology, formed the basis for a new type of literary genre known as ecocriticism. The field of ecocriticism in English literature is serving the purpose and there are many notable literary texts produced in the past few decades advocating biocentrism and voicing out for the more-than-human world. Ecocriticism, as defined in *The ISLE Reader*, 'is primarily a critical and literary tool, a kind of reading designed to expose and facilitate analysis of a text's orientation both to the world it imagines and to the world in which it takes shape' (Kern 2003, 260). It aims at the ultimate rejection of hierarchy and patriarchy of man. It also attempts to study the attitude of man towards the natural world by analyzing the expressions of environment in literary texts. Its capacity to explore and provide solutions to the prevailing ecological problems contributes to its uniqueness among other contemporary literary theories. A group of distinguished ecocritics like Scott Slovic, Aldo Leopold, Patrick D. Murphy, Lawrence Coupe, Lawrence Buell, Leonard Scigaj, Jonathan Bate, Terry Gifford, Cheryll Glotfelty, Harold Fromm, Greg Garrard, William Rueckert and Glen A. Love cohere to the commitment of examining a sustainable ecological relationship between the human and the non-human world in literature. William Stanley Merwin, the former poet laureate of the United States and the two times Pulitzer Prize winner, has contributed much towards ecological literature and a number of his poems insist on the necessity for man's mutual coalition with nature with a warning that if this same trend continues,

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it would pave way for the extinction of various plant and animal species and ultimately to an apocalypse.

### *B.Hypothesis / Objective*

Hypothesis of this research article is to prove that the poems of W. S. Merwin are filled with ecological underpinnings and concern for nature. This paper will specifically deal with the concern of Merwin towards the animal world and his disquiet about species extinction. This research paper will analyze the poems of Merwin from an ecological perspective and substantiate how his poems advocate well-being of the non-human world and serve as a record of extinct species.

## II. RESULT

With his deep concern for the species on the verge of extinction, Merwin has written many poems highlighting their piteous condition. 'Visitation' is one such poem which registers the fact that even common animals that are found in the mountains have become rare at present. Now, only the hoof prints can be found and not the animals. This poem is constructed in such a way that the natives enquire the poet about the presence of animals. Disappearance of animals is strongly registered by Merwin when he says 'every year they say it's harder to find them / the animals even up here' (Merwin 1997). Even animals like hare and birds like quail and partridge have become rare nowadays: 'had I seen them at all.' Lack of awareness about the extinction of animals among the fellow beings is also hinted at when the poet asks the strangers 'is that true?' when they say that the animals have become rare.

Merwin's catalogue of extinct species continues in the poem 'Before Us':

and the doves of Tanna / when the Laughing Owls have / long been followed by question marks / and honeycreepers and the brown / bears of Atlas / the white wolf and the sea mink have not been seen / by anyone living. (Merwin 1997)

Merwin (2005) succinctly captures the rate of extinction with the phrase: 'dictionaries are full of graves' and 'the brief air the vanishing green.' The list of species rendered extinct because of hunting continues further. Apart from fox and fish, creatures like badgers, boars and owls also find their place in the list. 'Battues,' as the name suggests, highlights the extinction of a few species of badgers, boars, foxes and owls because of hunting. There is a direct mention of place and community as Sand Creek and Seminole where fox hunting is a traditional game. The narrator in the poem affirms that 'the fatal intent of the voices' is clear at present and he could hear them 'out of thickets.' When the poem discusses the natural elements like forests and stones, there intrudes the 'raw metals' signifying the intervention of artificial inventions in the natural world. The phrase that the voices are 'commanding the dogs' indicates the arrival of man with his hounds. In the final couple of lines, the speaker affirms that the person responsible for this mishap is none other than the common man: 'they are calling / names I know words we speak every day they are using language that we share which we say proves what we are' (Merwin 1996). The poem 'Vixen' highlights the loss of many fox species: 'you no longer go out like a flame at the sight of me' (Merwin 1996). In this poem, without considering the

growth of the human community over the years, Merwin laments the death that man causes to other life forms in his progress. Merwin, about choosing vixen as the subject matter of the poem says, 'I love to find a subject that I think everybody tells lies about' (Merwin 2010). He further adds that 'There is no documented case of a wolf having eaten a human being in North America. After all of the nasty things that have been said about to justify the killing of wolves, they don't know anything about it' (Merwin 2010). Man destroys them, just for the sake of pleasure, by hunting. Fox hunting is considered as a traditional game that is being followed in many parts of the world besides strict enforcement of laws and this is prominent in countries like Australia, Ireland and North America. Fox hunting originated in United Kingdom in the 16th century and it has become a part of their rural culture. This controversial game still persists despite the bans and plays a key role in pushing many species into the endangered list. Merwin begins the poem with a number of phrases addressing the nobility of the animal: 'comet of stillness.' The animal's secretive nature is conveyed through the phrase: 'the sentences / never caught in words.' By way of explanation, Merwin states in an interview: 'The fox is interested in us. The fox is fascinated by us and hangs around and plays tricks on us and does all these things. The fox is the only animal I know that can disappear while you watch it' (Merwin 2010). Man's pleasure pursuits have resulted in its extinction: 'princess of what is over,' 'the escaped dreams,' 'the sentences / never caught in words,' 'sibyl of the extinguished,' 'you no longer go out like a flame at the sight of me' and 'when you are no longer anything' express Merwin's desperation. As Bryson rightly points out: 'Vixen becomes a representative of the larger non-human world' (Bryson 2002, 108), and Merwin's dirge is for the non-human world in its entirety. 'Complementary to the process of hunting for pleasure, hunting for profit goes on unabated in different parts of the world' (Sumathy 2009, 47). Hunters use different methods to kill the animals and killing of animals for leather finds its place in W. S. Merwin's poem 'Shoe Repairs'. The death of these animals gets pre-determined by man right at their birth and after their scheduled death, their skin is removed and tanned. After this process, the skin is taken to industries where they are made into shoes through the process of stitching and tempering and are taken to the stores 'to wait in rows in twos' for sales: 'Long after the scheduled death of animals / their skins made up into couples / have arrived here / empty' (Merwin 1993). Man protects his bare feet at the cost of killing an animal: 'We will know the smell / in another life / stepping down / barefoot into this Ark' (Merwin 1993). All these saved pairs in the showroom racks go out to die again for the sake of man.

### *A.Beyond the Boundaries – Effects of Extensive Fishing*

Extensive fishing is also another form of hunting for profit which has resulted in the vanishing of many fish species. The endangered marine list includes Bluefin tuna and white sharks.



‘Chinese demand for shark fins is destroying practically every species of shark in the ocean’ (Watson 2012). Merwin strongly condemns this act of man in a number of poems ‘like that of Moore, from “A Grave,” that contends “the sea has nothing to give” to the perceiving human “but a well excavated grave”’ (Bryson 2002, 3).

The readiness of man to pursue the game of hunting can be seen in ‘Some of the Masts’. It pictures a harbour where the fishing boats are stationed. All those boats are fully equipped and are ready to start the game of fishing in the morning. The bulls of these boats are already dark symbolizing that this game of fishing is nothing new to them. The boats are well equipped for the task thus: ‘ladders folded against / tall cranes for unloading / nets dangling from long hooks / no glitter from gulls’ eyes / whirlpools of rope almost full’ (Merwin 1997). Merwin is sure that early in the morning, all these boats will get into the sea for fishing. The aftermath of intrusion into the sea and its effects on blue whale are pictured in the poem ‘The Shore’. ‘The poem hints at the extinction of whales by harpoons—which is abominable enough—but focuses on the consequences for the surviving whale(s)’ (Moe 2012, 43). Merwin portrays the greatness of the blue whale before the intrusion of technology into sea and its piteous condition resulting from the aftermath. Man can never comprehend the creature’s uniqueness. He would not have imagined that a whale could hear another whale even from the opposite end of the earth. The eyesight of the whale in the deep sea is so remarkable that it helps the whale to search for prey or company of its kind: How can anyone know that a whale / two hundred years ago could hear another / whale at the opposite end of the earth / or tell how long the eyes / of a whale have faced both halves of the world / and have found light far down in old company. (Merwin 1997)

The tone of the poem gradually changes when the hazards caused by man are highlighted. The disturbance created by ships as they intrude into the silent atmosphere of oceans is pointed out as ‘the sounds of hollow iron’ by Merwin. Whale hunting is carried out in many ways with the help of ‘the harpoons of humans / and the poisoning of the seas’ (Merwin 1997). All these have disturbed the normal living conditions of the blue whale and as a result of it ‘a whale can hear no farther through the present / than a jet can fly in a few minutes’ (Merwin 1997). ‘In the final two stanzas, Merwin juxtaposes a gathering of blue whales with a solitary wanderer, leaving the reader to infer that something has been lost’ (Moe 2012, 43). Its lifestyle in the past and present is contrasted thus: in the days of their hearing the great blues gathered like clouds / the sunlight under the sea’s surfaces sank / into their backs as into the water around them / through which they flew invisible from above / except as flashes of movement / and they could hear each other’s voices wherever they went. (Merwin 1997)

The sounds of blue whales are referred to as ‘the songs of the Blues’ and Merwin directly accuses man for his act of whale hunting and cruelly cutting short its lifespan: ‘this is what we are doing this is the way we sing oh Blue Blue’ (Merwin 1997). ‘The last two lines emanate a tone of anguish, “this is what we are doing,” but we may wonder, what is “this?” It is not simply driving a species into

extinction; rather, it is how an imminent extinction likewise effaces culture for the survivors’ (Moe 2012, 44).

Such exploitation and destruction of the nonhuman world has been a constant concern in the poems of Merwin. ‘For A Coming Extinction’ is another poem which stands testimony to this fact. Addressing the gray whale, the speaker in the poem decries the cruelty of humans who are instrumental in sending the whale to extinction. Whales serve as a storehouse for carbon with their huge size helping in the reduction of carbon content in the atmosphere, but they are being hunted for commercial purposes. The inhumanity of the whalers who allow the whales to die on board their ships is brought out through the phrase, ‘when you have left the seas nodding on their stalks’ (Merwin 1967). The image, ‘inner mountains’ conveys the mammoth size of the whales, in spite of which they fall prey to man’s evil designs. The narrator tells the whales that the seas will soon be empty of them. They will not get to see the whale calves coming to the surface and trying the light. The gray whale’s lot is thrown along with those already-extinct species like the sea cows and the great auks which were wastefully slaughtered in the nineteenth century, and the gorillas whose habitat loss is pushing them to the brink. He calls these creatures, ‘the irreplaceable hosts’. The plight of the gray whales, as such, proves to be a classic case study. The Atlantic population was hunted down to extinction by the 1700s. Owing to the enforcement of laws, the Pacific population received protection. Even then, the Western Pacific species is still in the endangered list, while the Eastern Pacific ones have shown recovery and hence removed from the list. The narrator’s anger becomes apparent when he mentions god in an accusatory tone—‘That great god / Tell him’ (Merwin 1967). ‘The invocation of deity here is accusatory, immediately condemning humanity for breaking its own civic virtues’ (Thompson 2002, 35). It sounds as if Merwin wants god to take responsibility for man’s selfishness. He also laments the foolishness of man who fails to understand the interconnected web that sustains the universe in the line, ‘Leaving behind it the future / Dead / And ours’ (Merwin 1967). ‘The gray whale represents nature and the future connection to divinity, but the certainty of the whale’s extinction drives within the poem a call for reform’ (Thompson 2002, 35). Sharing his anguish, Merwin states in an interview: If we’re so stupid that we choose to destroy each other and ourselves, that’s bad enough; but if we destroy the whole life on the planet; . . . the destruction of the seas, the destruction of species after species, the destruction of the forests. These are not replaceable. We can’t suddenly decide years down the line that we made a mistake and put it all back. (Bryson 2002, 107)

Kit Wright’s ‘Song of the Whale’ complements Merwin’s ‘For A Coming Extinction’.

The following lines of Wright, ‘Great whale crying for your life / Crying for your kind I know / How we would use your dying / Lipstick for our painted faces / Polish for our shoes’ hits the nail on the head, no doubt. However, unlike Wright, preoccupation with ecological conservation is a persistent factor in Merwin.

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Further, Merwin gives a detailed description about various methods of whaling in his poem 'Whaler.' The poem pictures how whaling is done currently using sophisticated machines unlike older primitive methods. Whaling is legally approved in countries like Japan. It has become a much refined act now. Yet the violence is the same and the victim is also the same. The poem starts with describing the older crude methods of whaling: 'We do not build these ships anymore / In the shape that was so like the bluff-bowed / Rolling tar-colored quarry himself, so / Like his wooden kin or his corpse stiff / Under white sail, that in old whaling prints' (Merwin 2013). Merwin calls this a 'bloody drama.' This method of whaling has been stopped and presently more sophisticated methods using prows and iron are being followed. The methods used 'nowadays / Are sharper; the game can be played out / At greater range, more safely behind steel, / Is cleaner and more swift' (Merwin 2013). The 'cunning has grown in / The hunter' and the whale cannot expect any mercy: 'Yet in the bowels of the craft / The same functions must be rendered, for / The victim is the same, and the prize, and it is / The same heart that knows its mark and kills' (Merwin 2013). There is no exaggeration in Merwin's account as he details these harshest and cruelest realities. 'Surf Casting' is yet another poem where interference of man into the aquatic world and its far-reaching consequences are focused upon:

It has to be the end of the day / the hour of one star / the beach has to be a naked slab / and you have to have practised a long time / with the last moments of fish / sending them to look for the middle of the sea / until your fingers / can play back whole voyages. (Merwin 1988) Man has been fishing for centuries but it is extensive at present with the use of motorized boats. Most fish species have moved into deep sea. Still the game of fishing continues since the deep sea has become accessible with the current technology. The poet foresees that this massive destruction would make fish invaluable in terms of commodity and man may give all his wealth for the sake of fish and a time would come where man will be ready to sacrifice his life for the sake of fish.

### ***B. Merwin's Anxiety for the Avian World***

Merwin also shows how man-made inventions have damaged the ecosystems and resulted in extinction of numerous birds in his poem 'Distant Morning'. The poem begins with a scene in an unspecified time where a redstart was sitting '... on the handle of the fork left alone for that moment / upright in the damp earth ...' (Merwin 1996). The voice of the black kite could be heard high over the river, 'there was one wryneck pretending to be a shadow / on the trunk of a dead plum tree ...' (Merwin 1996) and the owl clenched itself in the oak. The knocking of the nuthatch, the gray adder and the ringing of the cricket suddenly disappeared. The hedgehogs, badgers and foxes in their places and the bats in crevices of the mountains could not be summoned. The whole poem pictures the destruction of species along with their habitats and Merwin ends the poem stating '... none of it could be held or denied or summoned back / none of it would be given its meaning later' (Merwin 1996). 'Shore Birds' is about the disappearance of migratory birds. 'This late work combines the poet's feeling for the

evolutionary force that sends birds on their innate journeys with his intimation that this mysterious inheritance could disappear forever with its species' (Stocking 2010). The poem begins with the lines 'While I think of them they are growing rare / after the distances they have followed' (Merwin 2005). These birds flock together during migration, but even then they have to face their difficulties individually: 'the glass curtains kept falling around them / as they flew in search of their place,' here the phrase 'glass curtains' stands for man's inventions. When the birds pass through the man-made towers, some of them vanish: 'they flew among the places with towers / and passed the tower lights where some vanished / with their long legs for wading in shadow' (Merwin 2005). A few more birds are caught in the nets and a few others are fastened in the lime twigs whereas some of them are shot dead by the guns. The phrases 'glass curtains,' 'tower lights,' 'countries of the nets' and 'countries of guns' ring a jarring note contrasting human presence in the avian world. Due to this meddlesome presence, only a few birds reach their destination. Extinction of oriole and similar birds is discussed in 'Orioles.' Birds like oriole have become rare and the poet wonders whether he heard its song recently: 'but this year it was not heard afterward / or before or at all ...' (Merwin 2005). Cuckoo was also there in the list, but a few could be seen lately whereas goldfinch joins the list with oriole.

### III. FINDINGS

In this article intimacy with trees does not end here. Apart from being a writer, his activist self has contributed to the development of the non-human world. He has consistently voiced for the sake of nature and against war. Merwin has spent his entire life in reconstructing a devastated palm forest in Maui, Hawaii. These sorts of texts would definitely serve the society and the nature in safeguarding this universe by creating awareness among the readers.

### IV. CONCLUSION

Merwin is agonized by the extinction of not only the fauna but also the flora. Merwin expresses his intimacy with trees in 'Trees.' At this age of deforestation, he writes that 'they may be one of the things I will miss / most from the earth' (Merwin 1997). His stand gets upheld when the speaker regrets that he has forgotten many trees that he has seen, but embraces the ones he remembers. He also makes it clear that man has given them names for his convenience and 'their names have never touched them' (Merwin 1997). The speaker is also certain that there is a good relationship between him and the trees and even at difficult times, they have been together: 'they have stood round my sheep / and when it was forbidden to climb them / they have carried me in their branches' (Merwin 1997).

Thus, it can be witnessed that the poems of W. S. Merwin are filled with ecological concerns and the concerns for the well being of nature. The entire list of extinct species of flora and fauna can be obtained from his poems.



His ecological wisdom and his care for the natural world in his writings keep the readers informed about the current situation and warrants immediate action. Such texts would provide the basis to promote a sustainable living in future.

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