

Gary Snyder's *Myths & Texts*: An Appraisal

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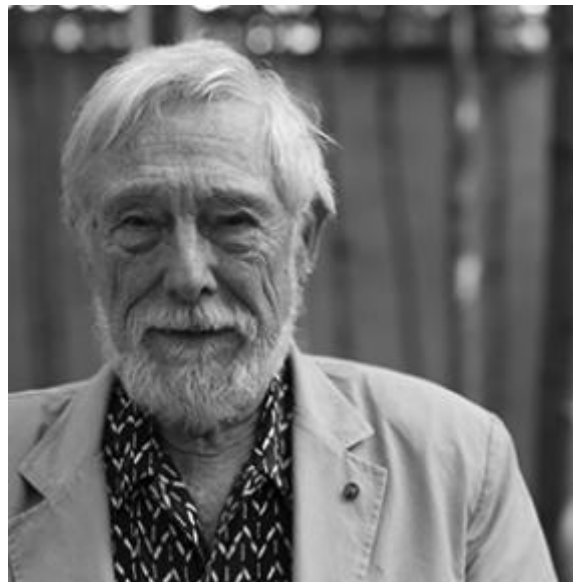
**Abstract**

This paper is an attempt to understand Gary Snyder's stature both as a counter culture figure and an innovative mainstream poet, whose writings generally project an appreciation for the hard work of rural life and the juxtaposition of the past mythical life with the present life of wholeness in order to glorify the primitive cultures and nature by involving with the deep sense of humanity which is suppressed by scientific materialism and all the degenerating aspects of life like corruption, wretchedness and materialism. It also throws light upon the implications in Snyder's *Myths & Texts* where he moves from past to present, from nature experienced to history imagined, from personal to the universal and from the textual to the

mythic by stating that myths are nothing but generalized conceptions of human knowledge and behaviour and ‘texts’ are the modern situations carefully scrutinised through ancient myths.

**Key words:** Gary Snyder, Myths, Texts, counter culture, practical application in real life

### **Gary Snyder: A Counter Culture Author**



**Courtesy:** <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/gary-snyder>

Gary Snyder’s stature both as a counter culture figure and an innovative and significant mainstream poet has, no doubt, placed him in an uncommon position in contemporary literature. Though only slightly involved with the San Francisco Beat movement of the 1950’s, and often linked with them, he has also received extensive scholarly attention. His work is seen richly to embody the influence of such literary giants as Walt Whitman, Ezra Pound and Ralph Waldo Emerson. He is the recipient of several literary honors and awards including a Pulitzer Prize for his poetry collection namely *Turtle Island* (1974) and his reputation as a notable author remains largely secure in the current literary scenario. “His writing generally reveals an appreciation for the hard work of rural life and the closeness it affords with nature, an interest in the spiritual link between primitive cultures and nature, and a deep sense of involvement with humanity” (CLC 386).

### ***Myths and Texts***

*Myths and Texts*, completed by 1956 but published only in 1960, is a poetic creation of Snyder in which he intensifies the notion until it becomes an emblem of the art in general

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 17:2 February 2017

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and human predicament in particular. Though published after his first poetic creation *Riprap*, *Myths & Texts* was his first completed work. The very title of this work was taken from the anthropologist John S. Swanton's *Tlingit Myths and Texts* (Swanton xxxix). *Myths and Texts* is not a group of casual poems collected under an interesting title; it is "an imaginative application of anthropological materials" (Steuding 68).

In Snyder's explanation of the creation of *Myths and Texts*, he stated that "the book grew between 1952 and 1956... its several rhythms are based on long days of quiet in lookout cabins; setting chokers for the Warm Springs Lumber Company... the songs and dances of Great Basin Indian tribes I used to hang around" (Allen 421). This statement shows that the wilderness experience awakened Snyder to the original structure of the psyche of ancient man. He saw people engaged in sizing the unshaped timber from cabins. His living experience amidst the songs and dances of Great Basin Indian tribes deepened his knowledge of human nature. They were people living in close harmony with the natural surroundings and treating labour as a way of life that secured whole-eyed vision of life for them.

### **Ancient Lives and Their Basic Patterns**

The ancient lives followed certain basic patterns. Later on, Jung called them 'archetypes'. There were a certain precious life-motifs in the ancient way of life and so Snyder makes use of myths in his poetry. 'Myth' is after a name applied to a particular type of ancient human behaviour. Myths therefore refer to certain conceptions of ancient human behaviour. A high degree of excellence in human behaviour creates a basis for a myth and a subsequent archetype. Modern life is devoid of myths because the richness of life is absent. 'Myths' are therefore, rich records of past human behaviour and 'texts' are present predicaments more specifically, the title, as Snyder writes, "also means the two sources-of human knowledge-Symbols and sense- impressions" (Allen 421). To Snyder, "myths" are the constructs through which men perceive and understand the "texts", the physical world or what they call reality. Thus, "myths" relates to their physical environment" (Mueller 255) Snyder's life in the woods, is a symbolic withdrawal from an over systematized industrial culture. He is often found in the woods, in certain areas where life prevails in a wholesome sense. Therefore, life in the woods presents a parallel to the ancient life grounded in wholeness. This helped Snyder to recollect the past myths and relate them to the present life situations. There is a positive juxtaposition of the past mythical life with the present life of wholeness found in the woods. This is a

comparison invoked by Snyder in order to glorify the present tribes living in the forests and woods.

### **Imaginative Modes of Consciousness**

All imaginative modes of consciousness are not duly recognized in modern days owing to overwhelming materialism and commercialism coupled with mere scientific and external pursuit of things. It is in this context that Snyder pleads for the value of myths and its healing touch for the modern man. Human sensibility becomes dismal in the absence of the aid of imagination. What is suppressed by scientific materialism is nothing but ‘imagination’ and what is required to purify this tragic condition is nothing but the store house of ancient myths in which the richness of imagination gets embodied. Snyder’s interest in imagism must not be over-emphasized. For some time, the imagistic creed of Ezra Pound offered some poetic relief. But the real soul of Snyder was longing for a revitalizing of other elements in his consciousness. Poetry must bring the whole soul of man to activity. But it is usually the most profound and comprehensive poetry which stirs the entire human consciousness in its totality.

### **Excessive Rational Sophistication**

The modern life is covered with excessive rational sophistication. Life lived at a rational level does not reveal the depth of its mystery. Snyder realizes the inadequacy of reason to explore all levels of life. Many events of life can be understood only by a man who is filled with an imaginative mode of consciousness. The depth of life is hidden by many superficial elements. Snyder’s poetic career involves an inward journey into the depth of life. His creative mission begins with the examination of primitive forms of life. The poetic urge in him remained insatiable. This is the reason which explains his interest in different writers like Thoreau, Whitman, D.H. Lawrence and T.S. Eliot. Snyder’s revolutionary career becomes evident in his acceptance of Zen Buddhism as a valuable resource for the integration of human consciousness. Snyder’s greatest asset lies in his virtues of openness and sincerity. He evinced his interest in the freshness of life. Nature exhibits its vitality in many ways. The deterministic science made nature a dead matter while the Romantics presented ‘nature’ as a living organism. In his conception of nature, Snyder was one with the Romantics in his spirit.

### **Primordial Consciousness**

‘Myths’ represent, according to Snyder, the primordial consciousness of the primitive people. There is no division between rational consciousness and intuitive awareness in them. In modern days, rational consciousness is emphasized at the cost of imaginative mode of awareness. Therefore, ‘myths’ have a function to invoke a pre-logical or non-logical modes of awareness in apprehending things as parts of an integrated whole. The modern man without the knowledge of myths is placing himself in a Sahara Desert according to Snyder. For Snyder, life in the city presents a contrast to life in the past. The present “texts” are the present problems and situations that appear in frightening proportions. All the degenerating aspects of life like corruption in sensibility, wretchedness in human behaviour, too much interest in money and materialism, as Snyder says, form the “texts” leading to mechanisation of mind and feeling. This is the present text or record of human degeneration. Snyder’s poetic mission lies in making an enquiry into the origin of all problems. The suppression of the imaginative mode of consciousness is responsible for the present degradation. A corrective to this corrupt text is to be sought in ancient myths.

### **Create a New Awareness of the Existing Crisis**

A casual glance at the present situation with the rich consciousness of the past myths will create a new awareness of the existing crisis. This act itself is a whole someone. Snyder in the spirit of a Romantic poet has understood man in terms of nature and nature in terms of man imagination in man helps him to project into objects of nature. This vital link between man and nature creates a great bond of affinity and depth. Perhaps Snyder sees such depth and affinity in ancient lives. This may be one reason why his interest in myths gets a new significance and dimension.

‘Myths’, according to Snyder, embody a vital link between man and nature. Bob Steuding states as: “The central themes of *Myths & Texts* are the result of Snyder’s studies at Reed College and his observations of and meditations upon the relationship between man and nature” (Steuding 66). In other words, Snyder’s work *Myths & Texts* reveals an ancient mode of life based on joy, primal sympathy and deep participation amidst natural surroundings. It is very clear from the given passage that man loves living in close harmony with nature:

“Green Comes out of the ground  
Birds squabble  
Young girls run mad with the pine bough” (MT3)

The picture of ‘birds hum and squabble’ and ‘girls run mad with the pine bough’ evokes the very origin of human emotions which are found in a state of rhythm and harmony. This is the reason why Snyder takes a journey to explore and discover the deeper sources of wisdom revealed in such simple ways of life.

### *Myths & Texts*

*Myths & Texts* has three sections namely “Logging”, “Hunting” and “Burning”. It is quite possible that Snyder was deeply disturbed by the dehumanizing process of mechanisation. The complexity in modern life is directly traceable to the overwhelming importance given to reason. Snyder wants to provide a balance to the human psyche which is now under the spell and orientation of reason. The point to be noted here is that when the machine-oriented civilization becomes very dominant, naturally man is dead and nature loses its charm and vitality. The human psyche looks for relief. The poet undertakes this predicament of the human mind and believes that man has to separate himself from these soul-killing surroundings and undertakes a quest for wisdom. Thus, “logging” deals with man’s separation from the primal sources of human consciousness, “hunting” with the discovery of the deeper psyche through journey and “burning” with a return to social life with a newly gained wisdom. The very first section “Logging” of *Myths & Texts* does portray the actual depressing state of affairs in life. Snyder has greater skill in contrasting the modern gloomy life with the joyous mode of ancient life. Before the advent of machine age, life, according to him, was real and interesting. This is beautifully shown in the lines that follow:

Each dawn is clear  
Cold air bites the throat  
Thick frost on the pine bough  
Leaps from the tree  
Snapped by the diesel” (Poem-8 in MT, 10)

In the past, man communed with nature and nature communed with man in return. Life was expressed in a very exalted Spirit. The poet is pained to note that the spirit of life is gripped by the D8 Caterpillars. The gloom in modern life is portrayed clearly in these lines:

ground by steel tracks  
In the frozen grass  
wild horses stand  
beyond a row of pines  
The D8 tears through piss-fir  
Scrapes the seed-pine  
Chipmunks flee (MT 10)

In the opinion of Snyder, a deep co-operation between man and nature makes man’s life sublime and happy. But the D8 caterpillars strike at the very basis of this co-operation and separates man from nature and the animal world. This is the modern “text” – man’s separation from nature namely man’s spiritual disorientation which needs to be healed by a meaningful exposure to the study of myths”.

### **The Poem 8**

The poem-8 of “Hunting” section in *Myths & Texts* brings out Snyder’s attitude to life much more comprehensively. Usually myths & symbols express a rich mode of imagination and thereby portray the sub-conscious level of man. For example, poem-8 expresses the poet’s relation to creatures. Man becomes one with birds and animals more at a sub-conscious level. A casual description of a deer dancing on the mountain in poem-8 of “Hunting” section puts the poet in a state of ecstasy. This picture essentially describes the deeper level of man which longs for some kind of fulfilling experience. It is clear from a study of anthropology and deep psychology that the sub-conscious life of man may be invoked and revitalised only with the

renewal and revival of myths & symbols. This spirit gets vividly reflected in the following lines:

Deer on the autumn mountain  
Howling like a wise man – (MT 27)

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Deer don't want to die for me  
I'll drink sea-water  
Sleep on beach pebbles in the rain  
Until the deer come down to die  
In pity for my pain (Myths & Texts 28)

### **Deep Interaction Between Man and Deer**

The theme of this passage shows the deep interaction between man and deer. The poet is capable of establishing a sub-conscious level of communion with the deer. This section is connected with hunting. Snyder does not mean hunting as an aggressive activity. He makes an appeal to the deer that he is going to kill it. The deer responds to the poet's pathetic state of remorse in such a manner that it wishes to die as a mark of pity for the poet's sensibility. All these things clearly express the language of myths and symbols. The deer wishing to die for the poet indicated the depth of response that an animal is capable of making towards man. The point here is that man was more at home with the animal world. This harmony between man and beasts is based upon an imaginative level of consciousness. Any imaginative mode of thinking or living is indirectly known as a kind of mythic consciousness or symbolic recognition of things.

### **Academic Training and Poetic Sensibility**

Usually academic training follows a rational line and therefore hampers the development of sensibility. In Snyder's case, it proved to be a blessing in disguise. Bob Steuding rightly stated in his book entitled *Gary Snyder* as:

“At Reed, Snyder took the opportunity to use his imagination as well as the academic analytical abilities which he was taught to develop. Clearly, formal education had an important effect on the mind of Gary Snyder and is evident in *Myths & Texts*. Although



the poems are grounded in actual experience, *Myths & Texts* is a scholarly and in a certain case, academic work. The idea for these poems was probably conceived before his lookout and trail crew experiences (1952-54) and *Myths & Texts* bears the clear impression of Snyder's studies at Reed College, as well as the imprint of his extracurricular interests" (P27)

### **Historical Wisdom and Scholarship**

Perhaps Snyder's case illustrates the thesis that a mature understanding of the modern crisis requires a profound historical wisdom and scholarship.

Gary Snyder owes a deep debt to Pound, Jung and Eliot in his understanding of myths. It was Pound who broke the cobwebs of cultural narrowness and exclusiveness and introduced Snyder to cross-cultural experiments. The western psyche contains certain defects. This psychic neurosis springs from lack of depth in human consciousness. It is reason which predominantly orders the inner landscape of man and so human personality is improperly integrated. The due balance and moderation which the human mind can receive from imagination is entirely absent. Snyder, therefore, believed that the western scheme carried certain defects in their vision. The only way to remedy the defects lies in the revival of myths which indirectly involves interest in cross-cultural consciousness. It was Pound who showed the way for Snyder. Though evidences many influences, a consideration of three important influences seems imperative. First and most obvious, as critics have pointed out, is the influence of Ezra Pound. Pound's use of the ellipse, his juxta positioning of quotations, his loose thematic linking of sections and his use of exoteric, non-western materials is evident. Secondly, in the conception of the work, Snyder seems to have been significantly influenced by the theories or more specifically, by the admonitions of psychologist Carl Gustav Jung, as interpreted by Joseph Campbell. And third is the example offered by the work of T.S. Eliot. In many respects, *Myths & Texts* is strikingly similar to Eliot's "The Waste Land", one of the basic models for contemporary mythic Literature" (Steuding 67)

### **Eliot's *The Waste Land***

Snyder's deep concern with myths and symbols begins with his profound interest in Eliot's *The Waste Land* which explores the tragic conditions of the modern world and lays emphasis upon the renewal of mythical mind. Eliot saw that the ancients had developed a mode

of knowledge far healthier than the moderns for their life was rooted in mythical sensibility. Snyder took the clue from Eliot and developed his interest in myths and symbols on a much larger scale with obvious modesty, Snyder acknowledges his debt to Eliot by writing thus: “of course studied Eliot, much too-very carefully” (P70). There is a close resemblance between Eliot and Snyder in the use of the mythical method. Eliot looked at primitive cave painting and wrote “Tradition and the Individual Talent”. Possibly, “Eliot’s response his feelings of awe, reverence and admiration for the art treasures of the paleolithic past indicate the point at which these seemingly disparate poets touch” (Steuding 70).

### **Past, Present and the Future**

There is a need to know the past as the present is nothing but an extension of the past. Eliot holds the view that the past contains many health-giving forces for the rejuvenation of the present. Eliot’s mythical method is based on a realization of the shallow and tragic conditions of modern life and Snyder is at home with it. Imaginative modes of consciousness, happy kinship with nature, freedom of giving value to the past are to be recovered Eliot and Snyder have the genius to hit upon the right cure of things. To live inward with the past, according to both Eliot and Snyder, needs historical consciousness. A man imbued with historical sensibility sees the past and present integrating at one place. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, Eliot writes;

“Tradition is a matter of much wider significances. It invokes, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past but of its presence.... this historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as the temporal, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of this place in time, of his own contemporaneity” (P4)

In the terms outlined by Eliot, Snyder’s perception is nothing but “historical”. In *Myths & Texts* and in *Mountains and Rivers without End*, the richness of archaic culture underlies the images of the destruction and decadence of the present era. Quite ‘traditional’ in this respect, Snyder’s work manifests his awareness of his place in the stream of events called “time” (Bob 71)

No doubt, Snyder wholeheartedly owes his literary alliance to Eliot in the matter of treating myth as a transforming force on the modern mind. Both poets delight in the use of classical allusions. Eliot's reference in lines 196-98 of "The Waste Land" to Greek mythology – to Diana caught naked by Actaeon – deserves special mention here. Actaeon saw Diana nakedly in bath. Actaeon in turn became a deer pursued by Diana in the form of a Round. Eliot believes that his ancient incident carries classical grace and dignity. Snyder makes use of the same classical myth with a slight change in his purpose:

“Actaeon saw Dhyana in the Spring  
it was nothing special  
misty rain on Mt. Baker  
Neah Bay at low tide” (Poem – 13 in MT)

Snyder exploits Eliot's uses of myths in a very unconventional way. Eliot uses myths in order to revive certain awareness of the past. Snyder does the same thing with a different motive. In Eliot, there is a specific Christian commitment whereas in Snyder, there is a universal response to things. Eliot wants to juxtapose a past classical event with the present state of degeneration and it is in this way that a new knowledge of life can be as stated by him in **The Waste Land**. Snyder has worked on the mythical method of Eliot with a different overtone, though their purpose may be somewhat similar. For by making a reference to a classical myth in the manner of Eliot, Snyder writes that there is nothing special about the classical event. The memory of a rich way of life lived in the past is what appears to be import. In this respect, myths are a rich deposit of the past way of life.

### **To Conclude**

To conclude, all situations which prevail in the present world can be roughly described as reality or physical surrounding or in other words “texts”. The implication is that Snyder's *Myths & Texts* make a simultaneous comparison of the past with the present, the personal with the universal and the mythical with the textual. Lisel Mueller's words bear evidence and make this point very clear:

“In *Myths & Texts*, Snyder moves from past to present, from nature experienced to history imagined, from the personal to the universal, and from the textual to the mythic”  
(P255)

Snyder’s *Myths & Texts* thus describes an eternally ongoing process conceiving life as an evolution containing diverse, vast and infinite potentialities taking its roots from ancient myths to move forward for a multi-faceted process of hope and renewal in all current human life situations. In a word, it may be stated that ‘myths’ are nothing but generalized conceptions of human knowledge and behaviour and ‘texts’ are the modern situations carefully scrutinised through ancient myths.

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