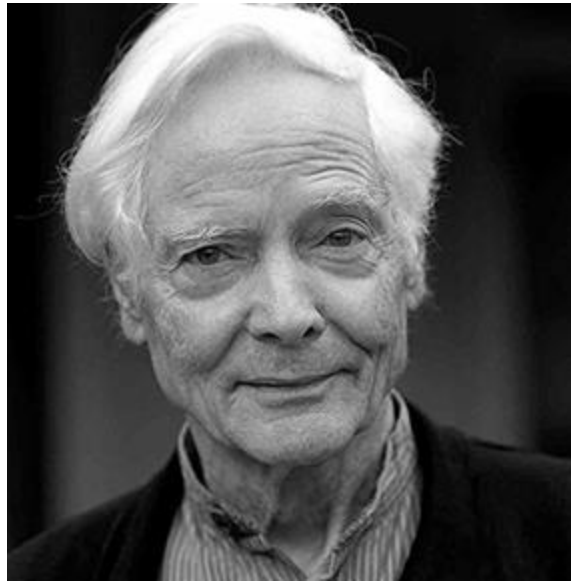


## **Egalitarian Worldview: The Fundamental Deliberation of Nature in the Poems of W. S. Merwin**

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**W. S. Merwin**

**Courtesy:**

[https://www.google.co.in/search?q=W.+S.+Merwin+images&rlz=1C1CHZL\\_enUS724US724&tbm=isch&source=iu&ictx=1&fir=puo8mLduKEUEWM%253A%252CI9UxyFj4x9qMPM%252C\\_&usg=\\_\\_ITVtUCj3dRflayZ906NpUjzXF0%3D&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj5tp7XxezYAhWKpJQKHTGC9UO9QEIKDAA#imgsrc=puo8mLduKEUEWM:](https://www.google.co.in/search?q=W.+S.+Merwin+images&rlz=1C1CHZL_enUS724US724&tbm=isch&source=iu&ictx=1&fir=puo8mLduKEUEWM%253A%252CI9UxyFj4x9qMPM%252C_&usg=__ITVtUCj3dRflayZ906NpUjzXF0%3D&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj5tp7XxezYAhWKpJQKHTGC9UO9QEIKDAA#imgsrc=puo8mLduKEUEWM:)

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### **Abstract**

Emergence of ecocriticism in English Literature in the recent decades has opened new avenues to analyze literary texts from an ecological perspective. William Stanley Merwin, a contemporary American Poet Laureate and a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner, has written numerous poems insisting the importance of ecological balance and the need to stop the

destruction of nature. Every element in this universe has its own value in terms of its uniqueness, individuality and usefulness and hence it is merely unfair to compare one element with another with regard to its size, shape or use. Right to existence should be independent of the economic value of the element, but the saddest part is that most of the times economic value of things add significance to its existence. By recognizing the intrinsic worth of other living beings, one recognizes the solidarity of all life forms. This thought has been clearly demonstrated by Merwin in his poems. This research study will analyze the poems of W. S. Merwin from an ecocritical standpoint and it will highlight the importance of mutual existence of every life form to have a sustainable development and to prevent the collapse of naturally existing ecosystems.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, Environmental Literature, Ecopoetry, Merwin, Egalitarianism, W. S. Merwin

### **Egalitarian Worldview: The Fundamental Deliberation of Nature**

Social relevance of literary texts has become a matter of prime significance in the current state of affairs. Most of the developed nations and a few developing countries have slowly started to ignore the pressing environmental concerns despite obvious climatic changes and recording of high pollution rate in major metropolitan cities. This ideology of nations may be the resultant of the anthropocentric mindset without considering the importance of other life forms. Even the non-living constituents of this universe play their part in preserving the prevailing natural ecosystems. Emergence of ecocriticism in English Literature in the recent decades has opened new avenues to analyze literary texts from an ecological perspective. Its impact is well evident with a few texts like *Silent Spring* written by Rachel Carson resulting in banning of DDT in the United States. This research study will analyze the poems of W. S. Merwin from an ecocritical standpoint and it will highlight the importance of mutual existence of every life form to have a sustainable development and to prevent the collapse of naturally existing ecosystems.

“The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth have value in themselves. These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes” states Drengson in one of the most significant principles of deep ecology. This thought

has been clearly insisted in a number of poems by William Stanley Merwin, a contemporary American Poet Laureate and a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner, who has written numerous poems insisting the importance of ecological balance and the need to stop the destruction of nature. This basic concept has its own significance for the welfare of nature as well as humans, who are supposed to be the integrated part of the natural world. Every element in this universe has its own value in terms of its uniqueness, individuality and usefulness and hence it is merely unfair to compare one element with another with regard to its size, shape or use. A number of examples may be derived from Indian mythology to prove that the intrinsic value of things does not depend on its size or shape. “Vamana Avatar” of Lord Krishna stands testimony to this fact where the value of an individual is being insisted in spite of the small size. With this perspective in mind, one cannot say that the life of a tiny organism is inferior to that of an ordinary man or a great saint.

### **Complex Web**

Every ecosystem is a complex web of interconnected elements which cannot exist without the other and man is also a part of it. The complexity of each system is beyond human comprehension and it is better not to disturb them to have a safer universe. This may be achieved only with the understanding that universe is not a resource that is to be exploited by the human community. One must have “a long-range vision of what is necessary to protect the integrity of the Earth’s ecological communities and values” (Drengson). This may be possible only by celebrating the virtues of smallness and slowness rather than the development of science and technology. Right to existence should be independent of the economic value of the element, but the saddest part is that most of the times economic value of things add significance to its existence. In the poem “Place,” Merwin states that

On the last day of the world  
I would want to plant a tree  
  
what for  
not for the fruit  
  
the tree that bears the fruit

is not the one that was planted (1-6) throwing light on the fact that usefulness of elements to human community does not add value to them, but surprisingly in the current scenario, even the decisions made by governments are revenue based and short-term benefit oriented. This will not help for a sustainable development and may result in the collapse of the entire system. If similar situation prevails “the worst consequences of global change will be experienced in the future. If all people intently pursued their individual economic self-interest, based on their own past experience, nothing would be done to improve the situation (qtd. in Satterfield 1).

### **Deciphering Language of Insects**

In his poem “After the Alphabets,” W.S. Merwin says “I am trying to decipher the language of insects / they are the tongues of the future” (1-2) depicting the importance of insects. He ends this poem in a more persuading manner, saying “they are never important they are everything” (13) hitting the nail on the head. This stands testimony to the fact that every tiny element in an ecosystem plays its part in the sustenance of ecology.

### **Need to Abolish the Concept of Hierarchy among Life Forms**

Without considering such an observable fact, human beings are destroying the natural constituents unabated. It is noteworthy here to understand that no one, including man, has right to destroy an element of Nature unless there is a vital need for it. This phenomenon may be achieved only by abolishing the concept of hierarchy among life forms. The hierarchical order of life forms given by some theories is objectionable as every organism has its own intrinsic value and one can come to a conclusion that this hierarchy of life forms is a result of the anthropocentric mindset of human beings. This stance of man would rather lead only to deterioration of nature and extinction of animals ultimately paving the way to an apocalypse. The real picture of the anthropocentric arrogance is depicted by Merwin in the poem “Green Fields,” through the lines, “there is still game for the pleasure of killing” (5).

It is a proven fact of science that the existence of human beings is a result of various stages of development of unicellular organisms. If one considers man to be of higher

hierarchical order, then the obvious fact that man came into existence only because of the chemical reactions of algae and bacteria should not be forgotten. Not only from a scientific point of view, but also from a religious standpoint, one can cite the notions that man cannot destroy nature except to satisfy his vital needs and it is his responsibility to safeguard the gift of nature to ensure his existence as an integral part of the natural world.

### **Egalitarian View of All Living and Non-Living Forms**

This idea is well supported by W. S. Merwin with his egalitarian view of all living and non-living forms in his poem “Coming to the Morning.” In this poem, he states that he can feel “a blood kinship with rain” (6). He further insists the equality of elements by saying “the world is made / from a single star” (9-10).

“Things” is another poem by Merwin which serves as a strong reminder coming from the non-human world, on the whole, to man about its indispensable nature. The poem starts with a single-word line “Possessor” (1) indicating the oneness of the whole world and its primordial quality: “At the approach of winter we are there” (2). The poet does not fail to register its nobility and magnanimity: “Better than friends, in your sorrows we take no pleasure, / We have none of our own and no memory but yours” (3-4). Merwin further adds that it is human beings who depend upon nature for their existence, but they think that it is the other way round. The realm of nature with its all-inclusiveness sends out a call to man to be a part of it:

We are the anchor of your future.

Patient as a border of beggars, each hand holding out its whole treasure,

We will be all the points on your compass.

We will give you interest on yourself as you deposit yourself with us.

(5-8)

Ignoring these words of promise, if man continues his self-centered behaviour, then he has to suffer the consequences. Hence, the poem ends with a word of caution to man to understand his precarious position: “Be a gentleman: you acquired us when you needed us, / We do what we can to please, we have some beauty, we are helpless, / Depend on us” (9-11).

“By recognizing the intrinsic worth of other living beings, one recognizes the solidarity of all life forms” (Nelson 207). This thought has been clearly demonstrated by Merwin in all the poems analyzed above. In an interview, Merwin once said: “We are neither superior nor inferior, we are a part of it. It is not different from us. So when we treat it with contempt and we exploit it, we are despising ourselves” (qtd. in Bryson, “Earth” 102) insisting on the equality of species and the necessity for mutual co-existence.

### **Think Beyond the Conventional Anthropocentric Point of View**

It is high time for man to “know what is valuable and what is worthless” (Sumathy 16) and “creatures with less economic value also are a part of biotic community” (Sumathy 18). One must think beyond the conventional anthropocentric point of view and respect the intrinsic value of beings and help to maintain the richness of elements within an ecosystem. “One can’t serve God by misusing or destroying His work” (Satterfield 182) and only the equality of all elements would ensure a safer world than the present one.

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**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 **18:1 January 2018**

Dr. S.G. Mohanraj, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. and Dr. S. Sreejana, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. 389  
Egalitarian Worldview: The Fundamental Deliberation of Nature in the Poems of W. S. Merwin