

Posthumanism and the Decentring of the Human in the Poetry of Mary Oliver and Gary Snyder

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Abstract: This article examines how the poetry of Mary Oliver and Gary Snyder unsettles human exceptionalism and imagines ethical relations across species, bodies, and environments. Drawing on posthumanist thought, ecocriticism, and deep ecology, it argues that both poets relocate human beings within wider ecological networks rather than treating nature as a passive backdrop to human experience. Oliver's attentive encounters with birds, insects, flowers, and other animals cultivate humility through observation, wonder, and the recognition of nonhuman lives as meaningful in themselves. Snyder's poetry, shaped by Buddhist thought, bioregionalism, and ecological activism, more explicitly challenges anthropocentric culture by presenting humans as participants in a community of beings. The article compares their different poetic strategies: Oliver often begins with intimate acts of attention and contemplative transformation, while Snyder connects ecological awareness to place, community, and critiques of industrial civilization. The discussion also notes that neither poet simply erases human experience; rather, both revise the human subject as embodied, dependent, and ethically answerable to more-than-human worlds. Through close readings of selected poems, the article demonstrates how their poetry contributes to posthumanist debates about agency, relationality, and ecological belonging.

Keywords: *Posthumanism; Mary Oliver; Gary Snyder; anthropocentrism; more-than-human world; ecocriticism; deep ecology.*

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Introduction

Posthumanism challenges the assumption that the human being is the measure, centre, and privileged interpreter of all existence. It questions the humanist image of an autonomous subject who stands apart from animals, plants, landscapes, and material processes, and instead understands life as relational, embodied, and entangled. In literary studies, this shift invites readers to attend to the agency and significance of nonhuman beings, to the limits of human knowledge, and to the ethical consequences of imagining the world as a resource arranged for human use. Poetry is particularly suited to this inquiry because its forms of attention, rhythm, image, and voice can unsettle familiar boundaries between self and world.

The poetry of Mary Oliver and Gary Snyder offers two distinctive routes into this posthumanist reorientation. Oliver's poems often begin in close observation of a particular creature or scene: a grasshopper, a swan, a black bear, a wildflower, or the movement of water. Such encounters interrupt self-absorption and teach the speaker to perceive lives that exceed human purposes. Snyder, by contrast, frequently places ecological awareness within a larger cultural and political frame. His poetry draws on Zen Buddhism, Native and place-based knowledge, bioregionalism, and environmental activism to question industrial modernity and the fantasy of human separation from the natural world. Although their styles and emphases differ, both poets make the nonhuman world more than scenery or symbol.

This article argues that Oliver and Snyder decentre the human by representing human consciousness as one participant in a dynamic community of life. Their poems challenge anthropocentrism not by denying human feeling or responsibility, but by transforming the basis of both: attention becomes a practice of humility, and ethical responsibility emerges from interdependence. Reading selected poems through posthumanist and ecocritical frameworks, the article examines nonhuman agency, the instability of human exceptionalism, embodiment, place, and the ethical implications of ecological belonging.

Theoretical Framework: Posthumanism and Ecocriticism

Posthumanism is not a single doctrine, but a cluster of approaches that question the hierarchy separating "the human" from other forms of life and matter. Cary Wolfe argues that posthumanism challenges the inherited humanist subject and asks how human identity is produced through relations with animals, technologies, institutions, and systems that exceed individual control (Wolfe). Rosi Braidotti similarly describes the posthuman subject as embodied and relational rather than self-contained, emphasising interdependence and the need to rethink human exceptionalism (Braidotti). These approaches do not simply replace humans with animals or declare all beings identical. They instead ask how ethical thought might begin from relations, vulnerabilities, and shared material conditions.

Ecocriticism complements this framework by examining how literary texts represent environments and shape cultural ideas about nature. Lawrence Buell's account of environmental writing emphasises that the nonhuman environment should not be reduced to a device for human concerns; it must be recognised as a presence in its own right (Buell). Deep ecology, associated with Arne Næss, questions the assumption that nonhuman beings possess value only through their usefulness to people. It calls for a broader ecological self in which individual flourishing is understood through the flourishing of the wider community of life (Næss). Snyder's work is directly connected to deep ecology, while Oliver's poetry frequently enacts a comparable decentring through sustained attention to nonhuman lives.

The term "more-than-human world," used in environmental humanities and place-based writing, is useful here because it avoids treating nature as a separate realm outside human society. Humans are themselves animals, bodies, and ecological participants; yet cultural systems often obscure this fact by privileging human goals. A posthumanist reading therefore asks three related questions: how do poems grant significance or agency to nonhuman beings; how do they revise the boundaries of the human subject; and what forms of ethical responsibility follow from such revisions? These questions guide the comparative analysis of Oliver and Snyder.

Mary Oliver: Attention, Humility, and Nonhuman Agency

Mary Oliver's poetry repeatedly transforms looking into an ethical and philosophical practice. The speaker does not approach the natural world merely to collect images for personal reflection; rather, the encounter with another living being can interrupt the self and redirect attention outward. In "The Summer Day," the famous question "Tell me, what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?" follows a detailed account of a grasshopper's embodied activity (Oliver, "The Summer Day"). The poem's philosophical question emerges only after the speaker has watched a small creature eat, move, and exist. The grasshopper is not simply a metaphor for human freedom. Its own physical life commands attention before the poem turns to the human reader's choices.

The poem's structure is important. Its opening question—"Who made the world?"—might appear to place the human speaker in a position of theological authority, but the poem quickly shifts from abstract speculation to sensory observation. The grasshopper's legs, jaws, and movements make knowledge bodily and situated. The speaker's attention becomes a way of recognising that life is already active and meaningful beyond human consciousness. The human is not removed from the poem, but decentered: human reflection is prompted by a creature whose existence does not depend on being observed.

A similar pattern appears in "Wild Geese," where Oliver rejects the demand that moral worth must be earned through self-punishment. The poem turns toward the world's "family of things," in which the reader belongs alongside "the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain" and the migrating geese (Oliver, "Wild Geese"). The phrase "family of things" can be read as an alternative to a human-centred moral universe. Belonging is not granted solely by social status, achievement, or purity; it is grounded in shared existence within a living world. The geese do not serve merely as an uplifting image. Their movement across the

sky offers a model of life that follows rhythms larger than the individual human self.

Oliver's attention to animals also complicates the tendency to turn them into symbols. In "The Fish," the observed creature's material presence and movement resist easy abstraction, while in "The Black Snake" the sudden death of an animal provokes a recognition of vulnerability and the limits of human control (Oliver, "The Black Snake"). Oliver's poetic voice often begins in a human perspective, but it asks that perspective to remain open to what cannot be fully translated into human language. The nonhuman is encountered as a life, not simply as a lesson. This does not mean that the poems provide direct access to an animal's consciousness; rather, they acknowledge the ethical importance of paying attention without claiming complete knowledge.

Such attention has posthumanist significance because it weakens the division between a knowing human subject and a passive natural object. The creature is not inert matter awaiting interpretation. It moves, feeds, migrates, struggles, and dies. These actions shape the poem's thought. The speaker's knowledge is therefore relational: it arises in an encounter and remains limited by the other being's difference. Oliver's poetry repeatedly suggests that humility is not a loss of human value but a more responsible way of inhabiting the world.

Gary Snyder: Deep Ecology, Place, and the Ecological Community

Gary Snyder's poetry also challenges human exceptionalism, but it often places this challenge within an explicit critique of modern industrial culture. His work links ecological perception to Zen practice, wilderness experience, Indigenous and local knowledge, and the politics of land use. Snyder's collection *Turtle Island* takes its title from an Indigenous name used for North America in several traditions; the title itself contests the idea that land is merely a possession named and organised by colonial power. The poems encourage readers to imagine a continent as a living community rather than a territory whose value is measured by extraction and development.

In "For the Children," Snyder describes the need to "stay together / learn the flowers / go light" while preparing for an uncertain future (Snyder, "For the Children"). The poem's brief imperatives connect survival to attention, restraint, and collective learning. "Learn the flowers" is not an ornamental instruction. It proposes knowledge grounded in specific living forms and local relationships. "Go light" can be read as an ecological ethic: to move through the world without imposing excessive burdens on it. The poem's concern for future generations is inseparable from nonhuman life, because human futures depend on ecological systems that cannot be reduced to human intention.

Snyder's "Axe Handles" develops a related account of learning and continuity. The poem begins with a practical object and a father-son interaction, then opens into a reflection on the transmission of knowledge across generations and cultures (Snyder, "Axe Handles"). The axe handle links human work to wood, tools, skill, and the histories of making. From a posthumanist perspective, the object is not a neutral extension of human will. It embodies material relationships and inherited practices. The poem's attention to the handle suggests that culture itself is materially entangled with trees, tools, bodies, and landscapes.

Snyder's environmental thought is also visible in his emphasis on bioregion: the ecological and cultural patterns of a particular place. Bioregional thinking resists the abstract view from nowhere that allows land to be treated as interchangeable property. A place has watersheds, soils, plants, animals, weather systems, and human communities with histories of use and care. To belong to a place is to learn its particularities and recognise the limits it imposes. This orientation decentres the human because people are not imagined as sovereign managers standing outside ecology; they are inhabitants whose lives depend on a network of relations.

Snyder's work can therefore be read as an ethical and political extension of deep ecology. His poetry asks readers to reconsider consumption, settlement, work, and community in light of the wider living world. It does not idealise all nonhuman nature as peaceful or harmless, nor does it suggest that human needs disappear. Instead, it contests the cultural assumption that economic growth and technological power should automatically take precedence over ecological continuity. The human subject becomes accountable to place and to other forms of life.

Comparative Analysis: Two Poetic Routes to Decentring the Human

Oliver and Snyder share a commitment to ecological attention, but their poetic methods differ. Oliver often begins with a single encounter and allows it to alter the speaker's sense of self. Snyder more frequently moves from observation toward a communal, historical, or political critique. Oliver's poems tend to dramatise the inward transformation that follows from attending to a nonhuman being; Snyder's poems often ask how that transformation might reshape ways of living, working, and inhabiting land. These are not absolute distinctions: Oliver's attention has ethical consequences, and Snyder's politics depends on close observation. Nevertheless, the contrast clarifies the range of posthumanist possibilities in their work.

In Oliver, decentring commonly takes the form of wonder. The speaker pauses before a creature whose ordinary life becomes astonishing when observed without haste. This pause challenges the assumption that human concerns are naturally the most important concerns in the world. The grasshopper in "The Summer Day" does not need to perform a human function to deserve attention; its life is sufficient to disrupt the speaker's abstract thinking. In Snyder, decentring more often takes the form of ecological literacy and restraint. To learn flowers, understand a watershed, or "go light" is to recognise that ethical life requires knowledge of systems that precede and exceed individual desire.

Both poets also resist the notion that the human self is isolated. Oliver's "family of things" places human life within a larger field of belonging, while Snyder's bioregional imagination locates human communities within particular ecological relationships. In each case, identity is not merely inward or psychological. It is produced through participation in a world of other beings and material processes. This relational view resonates with Braidotti's account of the posthuman subject as embodied and interconnected (Braidotti). It also echoes Wolfe's argument that humanism's privileged subject must be reconsidered in light of its dependence on forms of life it has historically subordinated (Wolfe).

The poets' approaches to language reveal both the power and the limits of poetic representation. Oliver's lyrical intimacy

can invite readers to feel close to nonhuman beings, yet the animal remains other than the human speaker. Snyder's compressed, sometimes instructional style emphasises practice and shared responsibility, but it too must use human language to represent ecological relations. Neither poet can simply speak for every nonhuman being. Their achievement is more modest and more productive: they expose the limits of human-centred perception and encourage modes of attention that respect difference.

Their poetry also complicates a simple opposition between humanity and nature. Humans are not external observers who can choose whether to participate in ecology. Human bodies breathe, eat, age, and depend on other organisms; communities rely on water, soil, and climate. The question is not whether humans belong to nature, but whether cultural habits acknowledge that belonging and act responsibly within it. Oliver's contemplative encounters and Snyder's place-based ethics both make this dependence perceptible. Their posthumanism is thus less a rejection of the human than a redefinition of human responsibility.

Ethics, Vulnerability, and the Limits of Anthropocentrism

Decentring the human has ethical consequences because it challenges the assumption that value follows from human usefulness. If animals and plants matter only as resources, their destruction can be justified whenever it benefits human institutions. Oliver's poems resist this logic by giving nonhuman lives sustained poetic attention. Snyder resists it by connecting ecological damage to economic and cultural systems that separate people from the consequences of their actions. Both approaches encourage readers to consider nonhuman life as part of the ethical community.

Yet posthumanist reading should avoid romanticising nature or treating all beings as interchangeable. Predation, disease, death, and ecological competition are part of living systems. The point is not that the natural world is morally pure, but that human beings do not possess an exclusive claim to significance. Oliver's encounters with death and vulnerability can make mortality visible across species, while Snyder's ecological thought situates human survival within the conditions of the wider biosphere. Shared vulnerability does not erase difference; it creates grounds for humility and care.

A further limitation concerns the human voice itself. Poems are shaped by human language, memory, and cultural assumptions. A bird or insect represented in a poem inevitably appears through a human perspective. The risk is that the nonhuman becomes a mirror for human feelings rather than a being with its own forms of life. Oliver's emphasis on observation and Snyder's attention to ecological knowledge partly counter this risk by keeping the material particularity of the world in view. Their poems do not abolish mediation, but they encourage awareness of it.

The ethical force of these poems lies in their capacity to alter perception. Attention can interrupt habitual extraction; knowledge of place can challenge abstract ownership; recognition of interdependence can unsettle the fantasy of self-sufficiency. These are not complete political programmes, and poetry alone cannot resolve environmental crises. However, literature can reshape the imaginative habits through which societies value some lives and disregard others. In this respect, Oliver and Snyder contribute to an environmental ethics that begins with seeing the world differently.

Conclusion

Mary Oliver and Gary Snyder offer significant poetic resources for thinking beyond anthropocentrism. Their work questions the humanist assumption that people stand at the centre of existence and that other beings matter chiefly as symbols, resources, or instruments of human development. Oliver's close attention to animals and ordinary natural processes invites humility and a renewed sense of belonging. Snyder's deep-ecological and bioregional vision connects such awareness to cultural practices, collective responsibility, and the critique of extractive modernity.

Their differences are productive. Oliver's poetry often makes decentring felt through wonder, intimacy, and a transformation of the observing self; Snyder's poetry often turns ecological awareness toward place-based knowledge, restraint, and communal action. Both, however, portray human life as embedded in a more-than-human world. Their poems do not ask readers to abandon humanity, but to relinquish the fantasy of human sovereignty. The human becomes one participant among many, dependent on the living systems that sustain it and responsible for the consequences of its actions.

Read through posthumanism and ecocriticism, Oliver and Snyder show that ecological consciousness involves more than celebrating natural beauty. It requires recognising nonhuman agency, accepting the limits of human knowledge, and developing ethical relationships grounded in interdependence. Their poetry

ultimately imagines a less hierarchical understanding of life—one in which the Earth is not a backdrop to human history but a living community within which human futures are formed.

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