CHAPTER – V

INTERROGATING THE CULTURE – NATURE DICHOTOMY

“Here is the vast, savage, howling mother of ours, lying all around with such a beauty, and such affection for her children, as the leopard; and yet we are so early weaned from her breast to society, to that culture which is exclusively an interaction of man to man – a sort of breeding in which produces . . . a civilization destined to have a speedy limit.”¹

Henry David Thoreau

Culture is the aesthetic and intellectual expression of a society or time. The values, beliefs and thoughts prevalent in the society represent its culture, giving it a unique identity. Though a living culture is never static, it retains a set of values and attitudes at its core. Culture is “a buffer zone of the man-made and man-construed.”² Hence, it is to a significant extent artificial. Yet in the pre-modern societies a place was afforded to the non-human aspect of nature too as their culture honoured the non-human either as a friend or a foe. The natural environment or nature, though not created and controlled by man, was never far removed from human culture. Man could accept himself as an inseparable part of the universe. Leading a life close to nature provided man a chance to measure himself against all
living and non-living beings which enabled him to recognize his true place within the universe.

The interesting life-story of the twentieth century British-born Indian anthropologist and ethnologist, Verrier Elwin, furnishes a remarkable instance of a life in which culture and nature are synthesized. When the ‘civilized’ Oxford scholar and evangelist decided to dedicate his life to the poorest of the poor, the tribals of India, his only aim was to provide “pure and unadulterated service from a humanitarian view.” But staying in various tribal villages in the forests of Central Province of India enabled him to observe and participate in the culture of those ‘savage’ tribals. He observed that contrary to the situation in the ‘civilized societies, the tribal culture offered a great sense of freedom to its members. He was surprised to see their freedom to express their views and creativity and to take decisions and the amount of freedom that the women enjoyed in the society. He could sense the pure enjoyment of the tribals in all their activities, whether it is in drinking, dancing or singing. Many years of study of the tribal culture enabled Verrier Elwin to realize that the factor that helped the tribals maintain this “primal matrix” condition of their culture was a total ignorance of the boundaries of culture and nature. The earth, with all its living and non-living beings, was a part of their culture.

Culture–nature dichotomy is a major concern of ecopsychology as well as ecocriticism. Theodore Roszak in his book, Where the Wasteland Ends: Politics and Transcendence in Post-Industrial Society, defines culture as “. . . the embodiment of a people’s shared reality as expressed in word, image, myth, philosophy, science and moral style.” If modern man leads a life devoid of
happiness and peace even after his victory over nature and after amassing wealth and power, it proves that “... urban industrialism is proving to be such a failed experiment, bringing in its wake every evil that progress was meant to vanquish.”

Roszak doesn’t want to project himself as anti-industrial, but he finds that the urban man is leading a “hermetically sealed and sanitized pattern of living in which very little of their experiences ever impinges on non-human phenomena.”

This creates a false sense of superiority and security in him, making him feel that humanity can adjust, improve and dominate in all situations:

“Like Narcissus, modern men and women take pride in seeing themselves – their products, their planning – reflected in all they behold. The more artifice, the more progress; the more progress, the more security. We press our technological imperialism forward against the natural environment until we reach the point at which it starts as a startling and not entirely credible news to our urban masses to be told by anxious ecologists that their survival has anything whatever to do with air, water, soil, plant or animal.”

Roszak is not blind to the capacity of human culture and its wonderful achievements, but he finds it alienated from its prime source, the natural surroundings. The pre-industrial people had been leading a harmonious life with the flora and fauna of their surroundings as they found their fate inextricably woven with the rest of the creation. Ecopsychologists in general believe that the “systemic and systematic removal of our lives from the natural world” is an “untenable violation” that has caused “a collective trauma” endured by the people of the
technological age.⁸ According to Roszak, nature has become a “devitalized” entity in modern culture as it is not considered a universal continuum and he warns modern man about the consequences of alienating human culture from nature:

“Nevertheless, to admit that urban–industrialism is erected upon a culture of alienation is like admitting that an edifice tall as the clouds and centuries in the building has been raised on a rotten foundation. Sooner or later that foundation must be dug up and rebuilt – though the edifice should be toppled and the dragons below aroused.”

Most of the ecopsychologists, like Roszak, views industrialization as the starting point of this cultural transformation because in pre-industrial society, wilderness, with its natural beauty and crudity and unpleasantness, was ever present even at the town limits, serving as a constant reminder of the limitations and transience of human potential.

Some other ecopsychologists trace the history of the culture-nature dichotomy to a period prior to industrialization. Paul Shepard who conducts a radical re-reading of human history in his essay, ‘Nature and Madness’ included in the book, Ecopsychology, does not consider the ecocidal habits of modern man a contemporary “aberration” of the industrial society, but as something that has deep roots in “an ontogenetic crippling” that can be traced to the invention of agriculture - an event that alienated man from nature and created a false sense of separation of man from his habitat.¹⁰ According to Chellis Glendinning, a “dysfunctional relationship with the Earth was set in motion” by agriculture, which was later
aggravated by unlimited population growth that necessitated increased
domesticated production and technological innovation.\textsuperscript{11} Another ecopsychologist, Ralph Metzner opines that this “ecologically disastrous split” between culture and nature has been a gradual process, a distortion of human culture that happened through historical stages – through agriculture, the system of domestication, Industrial Revolution and the mechanistic worldview propagated by science.\textsuperscript{12}

Chellis Glendinning analyses the impact of human culture severing ties with the natural world:

“As our livelihood in the western world slowly and imperceptibly became domesticated, our psyches slowly and imperceptibly retooled the functions that had previously served connectedness to natural world to suit the changing circumstances. Slowly and imperceptibly our psychic capabilities stopped reflecting the ways of earth and began to perpetuate the ways of traumatic experience. Formerly life-affirming functions that had linked inner constructs with outer reality to foster a way of being that “doesn’t break down into anything”, they became mechanisms fomenting all kinds of untenable and tragic situations.”\textsuperscript{13}

She contends that if modern man has a desire to escape the traumatic experiences arising out of this alienation he should recapture the “cultural avenues” for developing into a whole human being:

“To return ourselves to the whole of creation, we must break down our participation in the pathological ellipsis of techno-addiction. We
must disentangle our psyches from the myriad dysfunctions that reside within and without us.”

Theodore Roszak refers to modern man’s life in the post-industrial, technological culture, “encapsulated in a wholly man-made environment, sealed up and surviving securely in a plastic womb that leaves nothing to chance or natural processes” as “a cataclysm of urbanization.” In order to show how humanity has humiliated nature and reduced her to pitiable servitude, he describes his experience during a visit to the Old Faithful – the geyser in Yellowstone National Park that erupts promptly once in each hour. He noticed that a clock was indicating the next eruption while the monologue of a guide described the entire process to the crowd seated on bleacher-seats, engaged in eating and drinking. The entire place resembled a carnival ground. The family seated next to Roszak was trying to take photographs of the fountain when it reached the maximum height during the next eruption. But the geyser never reached the height that they had expected it to reach and within minutes they left the place in disbelief and disappointment, uttering a comment, “Disneyland is better”. The incident shocked Roszak to the realization that human culture’s assumed mastery over nature has caused a psychic transformation. This realization makes him strongly advocate an awakening of the ecological consciousness of human beings in order perceive the cultural inflections that separate us from nature as illusions.

Ecocritics often encounter the complex culture-nature relationship and its implications during their analysis of modern environmental texts. Ecocritic Eric Todd Smith in his essay, ‘Dropping the Subject: Reflections on the Motives of an
Ecological criticism’ included in the book *Reading the Earth*, points out how Cheryll Burgess Glotfelty’s definition of ecocriticism itself affirms the existence of culture-nature dichotomy:

“... by identifying ecocriticism as the study of “the relationship between human culture and the environment”, Glotfelty’s definition makes real distinction between “culture” and “nature”, granting each term status as a coherent noun. The idea of a primary separation between culture and nature has analogues in Western history and epistemology: self/other, subject/object, mind/body.”17

Eric Todd smith criticizes such dualisms as he thinks that there is always a chance of the subject disdaining mere object and culture objectifying nature. Hence ecocritics generally oppose the dualistic and anthropocentric thinking. Another ecocritic William Howarth thinks that ecocritics must try to find a common ground when they deal with the portrayals of culture-nature dichotomy in modern literary texts. According to him, nature is used in conflicting ways the Western culture:

“Nature, on the one hand, is seen as something complete and great, vaster than our powers to know, but it is also a ground that we shrewdly exploit, often to its detriment. That garden down in the draw is an ironic sign of the prairie’s future, for one day this empty, boundless region will bear houses, fences and roads, the “improvements” that measure the progress of a westering nation.”18

Eric Todd Smith views the unjust domination of nature as a “malaise of human society” which is the product of “an alienated, pathological,
“anthropocentric” ideology that must be cured by reconnecting human culture with nature.”19 Otherwise ‘culture’ will remain as a subject for the human sphere and ‘nature’ will be treated as an ‘object’. Smith quotes Glen Love who considered ‘nature-oriented literature’ as a corrective force to solve the dissociation as it can dissolve the boundaries between the subject and object “by acknowledging the embeddedness of any subject in a context of lived experience . . .”20 Reflecting the views of many ecocritics, Smith argues that both ecocriticism as well as the literary texts dealing with environmental crisis must focus on the various kinds of mediations that are going on between culture and nature. According to him, instead of merely giving voice to the silenced and exploited earth, literary texts must express and enact “our relationships with land, pollution, animals, anger, and desire, among other things . . . these relationships are the basis of value, and . . . political action.”21

Edward Abbey’s novels and non-fiction writings show the author’s acute awareness of the culture-nature dichotomy. He portrays the city and wilderness as two severed entities that are difficult to be bridged. Yet his views about this dichotomy are highly ironic. He declares that he would not reject the fruits of industrialism and technology as evils, but at the same time he is unwilling to accept the views of technophiles that these gifts come as an entire package, which includes both good and bad. He argues that

“Man, who is gifted with the power of discernment . . . can pick and choose, we can learn to select this and reject that. Discrimination is a
basic function of human intelligence. Are we to be masters or slaves of the techno-industrial machine?”  

Abbey reminds his compatriots what price humanity has to pay for its unbridled greed:

“And what terrible price most of us have to pay for our tract homes, our fancy plumbing, our automobiles, our labor-saving appliances, the luxuriously packaged ersatz food in supermarkets, all that mountain of metal junk and plastic garbage under which our lives are smothered.”

He feels that the plight of modern man is lamentable despite all his achievements. Like T. S. Eliot he too portrays the modern world as a veritable wasteland:

“Men and women trapped in the drudgery and tedium of meaningless jobs . . . and the despoliation of a continent, the grey skies, the ruined rivers, the ravaged hills, the clearcut forests, the industrialized farms, all to keep that Gross National Product growing ever grosser. Madness and folly. Untouched by human hands. Unguided by human minds.”

This view of Abbey is similar to the perception of ecopsychologist Chellis Glendenning when she points out how the ever-expanding technological thrust which “rather than providing new horizons of hope, is blindly leading us towards more possibilities for dissociation and, rather than offering reconciliation is bringing us more possibilities for alienation.” According to her,
“. . . wings of the deconstructive post-modern ideology . . . prepare people to accept an ever more technologized world – one in which life forms may be manipulated to reject a corporate vision of “perfection”, in which organic or inorganic, may be instantaneously disintegrated by invisible machines, in which people will be able to mentally remove themselves from the trauma of everyday life with predetermined techno-visions in which earth will be entirely tamed and human created.”\(^{26}\)

In *The Journey Home* Abbey suggests that what the modern world needs is a culture in which technology is brought under human control and which does not allow technology to become a “self-perpetuating, ever-expanding monster.” He feels that

“What we need is an optimum industrialism, neither too much nor too little, a truly sophisticated, unobtrusive, below ground technology.”\(^{27}\)

In a world where nature is outside human culture, health, both physical as well as psychological, becomes an elusive state. Abbey depicts the slow death of New York City though it appears to be “golden city of electric glory”, powerful enough to provide everything that man seeks, whether it is love, adventure, revelation or triumph:

“When I was there I thought New York is dying. Maybe it really is. I know I was dying to get out. But if it’s dying then it is going to be a
prolonged, strange, infinitely complex process, a death of terror and grandeur.”

The virtual reality of the urban landscape is far from true:

“Close to, the scene comes into a different focus: we found ourselves back in the profane world of people with problems, embittered cab drivers... the quiet tragedy of human relationships. No amount of weed or booze or sex or heavy art could permanently alter any of that.”

Abbey believes that it is not only the physical factors such as pollution that is causing the environmental degradation, but the psycho-social factors also negatively affect human culture. He attributes this to the over-crowded cities which arouse a kind of ‘hatred’ in human minds:

“I believe the city is doomed. The air is poisonous, not so much with filth and disease as with something deadlier – human hatred. Yes, there’s hatred in Arizona, too, but here it is easily dissipated into nothingness of space. Walk one-half mile, away from the town, away from the road and you find yourself absolutely alone, under the sun, under the moon, under the stars, within the sweet aching loneliness of the desert.”

Abbey expresses a desire to change the plight of cities by purging the human culture because cities are the essence of a nation; losing them would mean losing the essence of the nation. To save those cities which are the centres of liberty, beauty and joy, he advocates a ‘middle way’.
Abbey thinks that for achieving this ideal state of living in cities the human population should be reduced to half of the present. For this he suggests more humane social policies like incentives for prompt payment of taxes, for adopting birth control or for opting for one child or unmarried state or the community family. Though this appears to be a rational stand, it is ironical and problematic. Abbey’s pride in American cities as centers of individual freedom and comforts does not hide his conviction that the life there is tolerable only if pure wilderness exists parallel to it as a refuge. Hence his suggestion to adopt a ‘middle way’ is not without a touch of paradox:

“The citizens of our American cities enjoy a high relative degree of political, intellectual and economic liberty, but if the entire nation is urbanized, industrialized, mechanized and administered, then our liberties continue at the sufferance of the technological megamachine that functions both as servant and master, and our freedom depends on the pleasure of the power of the privileged few who sit at the control consoles of that machine. What make life in our cities at once tolerable, excitable and stimulating is the existence of an alternate option, whether exercised or not, of a radically different mode of being out there, in the forests, on the lakes and rivers, in the desert, up in the mountains.”

It cannot be denied that Abbey’s suggestion to adopt a middle way appears irrational and pretentious as his works clearly express his disgust for a life confined in the industrial-urban landscape:
“The global village and the technological territory. More nightmares! I don’t believe that human beings would or could long tolerate such a world. The human animal is almost infinitely adaptable- but there must be limits to our capability, limits beyond which if we can survive them at all, we would survive only by sacrificing those qualities that distinguish the human from that possible cousin of the future: the two-legged, flesh-skinned robot, his head, her head, its head wired by telepathic radio to a universal central control system.” 32

Abbey’s nostalgic memories about a boyhood spent in the Pennsylvanian farm or about the life a fire lookout prompt him to idealize a life of “simplicity” and “positive poverty”. In *The Journey Home* he recalls his rural life:

“Hauling water, cutting firewood, using a pit toilet seem like only normal to me, raised as I was on a backwoods Pennsylvanian farm . . . Most of what we call modern conveniences are no more than that at best. They are far from being necessities.” 33

*Desert Solitaire* is a stringent criticism of the industrial economy and its profit-oriented culture that destroys man’s freedom to live in and observe nature and to develop his creativity in leisure. Watching the pictographs and petroglyphs made by Native Americans in the ancient Pre-Columbian era on the cave walls in the desert, he observes:

“This speaks well of the food gathering economy and also its culture, which encouraged the Indians to employ their freedom in
the creation and sharing of a durable art. Unburdened by the necessity of devoting most of their lives to the production, distribution, sale and servicing of labor-saving machinery, lacking proper recreational facilities, these primitive savages were free to . . . make graven images.”

Abbey argues that an experience in the pristine wilderness is certain to create a revulsion for cities and its industrial, technological culture and knowing this fact the authorities try to “smother wilderness under asphalt and reservoirs.” This intolerance of urban life created by experiences in wilderness is expressed in all works of Abbey. For instance, in Desert Solitaire, while paddling down the Colorado River before it was dammed, the author experiences a mixture of delight and revulsion:

“I am thinking, what incredible shit we put up with most of our lives- the domestic routine . . . the stupid and useless and degrading jobs, insufferable arrogance of elected officials, the crafty cheating and the slimy advertising of the business men, the tedious wars in which we kill our buddies instead of our real enemies back home in the capital, the foul diseased and hideous cities and towns we live in, the constant petty tyranny of automatic washers and automobiles and TV machines and telephones - ! ah Christ! . . . What intolerable garbage and what utterly useless crap we bury ourselves in day by day, while patiently enduring at the same time the creeping
strangulation of clean white *collar* and the rich but *modest* four-in-hand garrote!”

One can easily discern how urban life, apart from representing over-population and pollution, becomes a symbol of work and responsibility for Abbey and he has an urge to escape from this world of duties. The image of wilderness offers him a possible refuge and perceives the wild as his Eden. In *Desert Solitaire* he describes such an experience:

“Why, we ask ourselves, floating onwards in effortless pace deeper into Eden, why not go on like this forever? True, there are no women here (a blessing in disguise?), no concert halls, no books, bars, galleries, theatres or playing fields, no cathedrals of learning or high towers of finance, no wars, elections, traffic jams or other amusements, none of the multinefarious delights of what Ralph calls Syphilization. But on the other hand most anything else a man could desire is here in abundance: catfish in the mainstream and venison in the side canyons, cottonwoods for shade and shelter, juniper fuel, mossy springs . . . for thirst and the ever changing splendor of sky, cliffs and mesas and river for the needs of the spirit.”

The fact to be noted here is Abbey’s complete rejection of everything that is a part of human culture. Such an intolerance seems to be highly ironic when he has not completely severed his connection with the society and has been using many useful inventions of modern techno-industrial society. Ecocritic Joni Adamson in her book, *American Indian Literature: Environmental Justice and Ecocriticism, the*
Middle Place, compares Abbey’s depiction of Edenic wilderness in his writings to the portrayal of nature in the writings of some of her Diné (the Native American tribe of North America) students who belong to a culture that has included nature as its integral part. The Diné people are forced to live in a land highly abused and exploited by white men and hence their response to the ecocrisis appears to be more real:

“In Desert Solitaire, Abbey laments the mineral speculation and mining that has pocked the Four Corner’s area generally and discusses Black Mesa specifically, but the focus of his book is still ‘Abbey’s Country’, a place located somewhere out of the contaminating reach of human culture. The Diné, on the other hand, have responded in more concrete ways to the social and ecological threat posed by the world’s largest open-pit coal mine.”

The major argument against Abbey’s convention of ‘pristine wilderness’ is that it automatically portrays every aspect of human culture as exploitative, ignoring the history of primitive cultures which have successfully integrated nature into culture. Joni Adamson feels that such a negative perception of culture can “create blind spots in the main stream environmental movement that excuses us from thinking seriously about our everyday activities in culture have consequences that flow out into nature.”

Abbey’s autobiographic novel, The Fool’s Progress: an honest novel begins in a setting where the demarcation between culture and nature is too well-pronounced. A school, with its anxious and exasperated teachers and noisy
children, is set opposite to “the green vernal, the deep and haunted, the dark, transpiring forests of the Appalachian hills.” The young protagonist, Henry, who is often considered as a prototype of Abbey, runs away from the school to hide in the woods and watches the school from his refuge. As the novelist moves on to Arizona to focus on the man Henry has become, we find Henry groping in the ruins of his life- a depressed, lonely man after his third wife, Elaine, has walked out of his life. Henry heaves a sigh of relief at the newly found freedom in the absence of his wife and looks forward to a life in a cheap houseboat which he plans to buy after selling all his property. Abbey’s disgust with the centers of human culture finds expression when Henry describes Arizona as “the doomed, damned beleaguered red city” with “police helicopters circling- blinking red like diabolical fireflies.”

When he fails to overcome his depression and loneliness Henry feels that the only way out would be a journey homewards:

“. . . eastwards, towards the world of rising sun and Stump Creek, West Virginia.”

The military helicopters thundering over the roof, not more than a hundred feet above – a powerful symbol of man’s estrangement with the nature – turns him aggressive. He tries to complain against this tyrannical sound, but Major Flemingo of Corporal Drew Information office tells him that it is the sound of freedom.

With Henry’s decision to undertake a pilgrimage, a journey back to the family farm and the wooded hills of Virginia, the suppressed images of nature from his subconscious surges up into his mindscape. During his journey through the
desert and the wooded canyon countries, the sweet freshness of nature and its
mystery inspires Henry to take a life-transforming decision – whether to stay on in
the cultural landscape or to escape into the mysterious depths of wilderness. Abbey
successfully maintains the striking demarcation between the two worlds when
Henry struggles to choose between the worlds of culture and nature. In a state of
confusion Henry questions himself,

“Once again I ask myself the simple obvious question. Why not?
Why suffer any more? You have lived over half a century now,
you’ve had your share – the love of a number of beautiful women,
the friendship of enough good men, the test of blood, muscle, nerve
and skill in some lovely, dangerous and very strange places. What
do you want? Why not go for one last walk in the woods, in the
spirit of undying adventure, never to return.”42

Another aspect of modern culture against which Abbey unleashes his
criticism is industrial tourism and Desert Solitaire is the most powerful expression
of his exasperation with machines that enslave man. The sight of the industrial
tourists “[s]eated in their metallic shells like molluscs on wheel” fills him with rage
and tempts him to shout at them, asking them to “get out of those motorized
wheelchairs . . . stand up straight like men! Like women! Like human beings! And
walk – walk – WALK upon our sweet and blessed land!”43 At the end of the tourist
season in Arches, Abbey visualizes the majority of tourists getting back to the
clutches of a monotonous and mechanic urban life style:
“... the great majority, answering a mystical summons, have returned to the smoky jungles and swamps of what we call, in wistful hope, American civilization. I can see them now in all their millions jamming the freeways, glutting the streets, horns bellowing like wounded steers, hunting for a place to park.”

And he is left alone in the desert wilderness, Abbey is relieved and happy:

“They have left me alone here in the wilderness, at the center of things, where all that is most significant takes place (sunset and moonrise, moaning winds and stillness, cloud transformations, the metamorphosis of sunlight, yellowing of leaf and the indolent, soaring vulture...”

Like the tourists who leave Arches at the end of the season, he too must leave the desert, to set the desert wilderness free from human gaze. He asks himself in an aside:

“Who am I to pity the degradation and misery of my fellow citizens? I, too, must leave the canyon country, if only for a season, and rejoin for the winter that miscegenated mesalliance of human and rodent called the rat race...”

Abbey seems to maintain a balance between the worlds of culture and nature by choosing to stay in the desert during summer and spending the winter in the city. According to him this way is the ideal way of life:

“Balance, that’s the secret. Moderate extremism. The best of both worlds. Unlike Thoreau who insisted on one world at a time I am
attempting to make the best of two. After six months in the desert I am volunteering for a winter of front-line combat duty – caseworker, public welfare department – in the howling streets of Megalomania, U.S.A."

Commenting on Abbey’s stand on the culture-nature dichotomy, Joni Adamson points out how in his works he tries to create a ‘middle way’ where he can have a pure, pristine wilderness as well as the comforts of civilization while escaping from its corruptions:

“Abbey’s wilderness experience is predicated not solely on his educational and professional resources, but on his choice to participate in and to perpetuate – through his writing – what has become, since the end of the nineteenth century, a uniquely white, middle-class fantasy that sidesteps race and class relations.”

Joni Adamson criticizes Abbey’s “selective blindness” in forgetting his own connection to urban-industrial civilization. She points out how Abbey’s apprehension about his writings attracting more people to wilderness shows that he was aware of his urge to keep human beings away from wilderness:

“At the same time that he criticizes the industrial tourist and clearly sees his own complicity in the disappearance of “true wilderness” he also propagates the illusion that by getting out of your motor home, your car, or your speed boat you can somehow slip your own entanglement in civilization and escape into prehistory, a place that existed before humans began to leave their imprints on the world.”
Abbey’s tendency to flee those parts of wilderness where human culture has already made its imprints and to retreat farther into the depths of wilderness is clearly evident when he shares his feelings while he floats down the Colorado River:

“... when a man must be afraid to drink freely from his country’s rivers and streams that country is no longer fit to live in. Time then to move on to, to find another country.”

Pointing out the dangers of alienating culture from nature, Joni Adamson says that this kind of an attitude can be the root cause of the present ecocatastrophe. Abbey seems to have forgotten the fact that human beings cannot extricate themselves completely from human culture and its history and hence man must develop a sense of responsibility towards the environment even when he is an active participant in the world of culture:

“By separating the “real”, “original” wilderness from “false” civilization’, Abbey creates a blind spot, releasing himself – and all of us – from the responsibility for those institutions and those industrial and agricultural landscapes that shelter and benefit us. He holds himself aloof from these benefits, as if he could essentially separate himself from urban-industrial civilizations simply because he rejects its value. But the U.S Government- the builder of dams – was footing the bill for his education and providing him with a summer job, both of which gave him the opportunity and resource to spend time in the wilderness. Also like most wilderness adventurers who do not make their outdoor gear or forage for their food, Abbey
packed a rubber boat, hiking boots, beans and bacon, and canned fruit for his trip through Glen Canyon, none of which he produced himself.”51

What differentiates Abbey from Gary Snyder or Wendell Berry is the difference in his perception of culture-nature dichotomy and his unwillingness to conform to ‘the middle way’ he himself suggests in Desert Solitaire, in order to maintain a balance between the two worlds. In addition to this, the Edenic wilderness in which he wishes to take refuge is apparently implausible. As William Cronon contends, the natural and human history provides ample proof that natural world is far more ‘dynamic’ and changeable than we presume and “. . . human beings have been manipulating ecosystems for as long as we have records.”52 Though this fact does not support the widespread destruction of nature by urban-industrial society, Abbey’s concept of having a virgin wilderness, quite devoid of human presence seems to be far from reality. Referring to the failure of such a concept, Joni Adamson points out:

“If the only original and real wilderness must be completely untouched by human culture, and if wilderness adventurers must retreat farther from civilization to find it, then humanity and nature are at widely opposite poles; humans, then, are excused from thinking seriously about how their everyday activities in culture have consequences that flow out through the river channels or float through the air into nature. This conceptual split relieves them of the responsibility of learning what an ethical, sustainable relation to
nature might look like because they are endlessly searching for a last, best, untouched, uninhabited paradise.”

Abbey’s conception of the wild as a pure, unfallen ‘home’ and the destruction of it as ‘original sin’ seems fallacious as such a view leads to the conjecture that civilization is unnatural and fallen. Pristine wilderness becomes a dream that human beings are unworthy to experience in reality. The problem with this attitude is that it does not propagate a sustainable way of life. This message is clearly reflected in the actions of the characters of Abbey’s novels.

Henry Holyoak Lightcap, the protagonist of Abbey’s novel A Fool’s Progress: an honest novel during his 3500 miles journey from Tucson, Arizona, to the green, misty hills of Stump Creek tosses empty beer bottles on to the National Highway, to express his revulsion for development. In Monkey Wrench Gang George Washington Hayduke, an anarchist, in order to avenge his unjust arrest by a Flagstaff cop, Hall, absconds with his police car and leaves it on the railway track to be crushed by a freight car. Like Henry Holyoak, he too races through the highway, drinking and throwing empty cans out of the window:

“Hayduke, rejoicing, scarfing up more beer, concluding his Flagstaff six-pack, wheels down to the river on the narrow road at a safe and sane 70 per. . . He was indeed a menace to other drivers but justified himself in this way: if you don’t drink, don’t drive. If you drink, drive like hell. Why? Because freedom, not safety is the highest good. Because public roads should be wide open for all . . . Let us have no favorites, no licenses, no god-dammed rules for the road.”
Though Abbey’s characters harbor a deep concern for the protection of the natural they do not reflect any sense of social, political and moral responsibility. As Joni Adamson points out:

“Problems (whose victims are many people) occurring in places no longer considered “wild” seem less important. Backpackers, rock climbers and river runners- who carefully follow the “leave no trace” back country ethic, packing out every zip-lock bag and Ramen Noodles package- often live less carefully when they return to city, forgetting that their houses were built from wood from the forest and that their electricity is produced by dams or coal-burning generating stations. They feel somehow less responsible for the forest that has already been clear-cut, for the land at the edge of an urban minority neighborhood that is being used to dispose the toxic industrial waste . . .”

This partial perception of the situation makes the environmental problems of the thickly populated areas appear really insignificant. Even the mainstream environmentalists fail to recognize this problem and hence neither the writers nor the environmentalists are able to give the necessary guidelines for maintaining a balance between nature and culture.

Despite maintaining the worlds of culture and nature as two entirely different worlds, Abbey’s writings have successfully voiced his concern for the preservation of pristine wilderness. Along with this, he has taught a generation of Americans a new way of experiencing the wild, with fewer disturbances to the
natural setting, even when they depend upon certain products of human culture
during their journeys into the wilderness.

While assessing the reasons for Abbey’s popularity, Joni Adamson
mentions the views of another ecocritic Peter Wild who aptly points out how Abbey
can be considered a “middle class maverick” who often maintains the culture-
nature dualism in his writings in order to offer the middle class an Edenic paradise
that it never possessed but thinks it has lost. Wild does not refer to the middle class
in an economical or political or educational sense, but to a varied group of doctors,
professors, businessmen, lawyers, nurses etc. According to Wild,

“Abbey taps into the romanticism that has lain at the center of the
middle class since the birth of the republic: the notion that it is
possible to “have it all” in a comfortable wood-framed house in the
suburbs and a beautiful, old-growth forest.”

Abbey juxtaposes the worlds of culture and nature and chooses a life that
moves from one to another, crossing the borders smoothly; yet he celebrates only
the world of nature.

As Joni Adamson contends the literary writers dealing with the theme of
nature have the freedom “to address or not address certain genres of writing or
political issues on the basis of their individual talents and preferences . . .”; but “. . .
writing that separates nature from culture holds little promise of activating concrete
change because it fails to reveal the social, political, and environmental forces that
lead to and justify the exploitative, unsustainable uses of natural world.”
While dealing with the theme of culture- nature dichotomy, Gary Snyder and Wendell Berry tread a more conventional and practical path. Snyder defines ‘culture’ as a “deliberately maintained aesthetic and intellectual life which contributes to the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns” that acts like a “yogurt culture” – a nourishing habitat. He admits that “civilizations east and west have long been on a collision course with wild nature, and now the developed nations in particular have the witless power to destroy not only individual creatures but whole species, whole processes of the earth.” He thinks that the uncontrollable “Growth Monster” is behind the culture-nature dichotomy and man can resolve this divide only if he develops a desire to be whole. As one who has realized the danger of maintaining this dichotomy, Snyder wishes to slow down this growth monster:

“If the lad or lass is among us who knows where the secret heart of this Growth Monster is hidden, let them please tell us where to shoot the arrow that will slow it down.”

A comparative study of the modern and ancient human cultures enables Snyder to prove that modern man’s pride in unbounded ‘progress’ is just an illusion, a backward journey. In the olden days man could understand and accept his real place in the universe:

“In the olden ways, the flora and fauna and land forms are part of the culture. The world of culture and nature, which is actual, is almost a shadow world now, and the unsubstantial world of political jurisdictions and rarefied economics is what passes for reality. We live in backward time. We can regain some sense of that old
membership by discovering the original lineaments of our land and
steering – at least in the home territory and in the mind – by those
rather than the borders of arbitrary nations, states, and countries.”

Snyder opposes the binary opposition of wilderness and civilization and in
all his works emphasizes man’s oneness with the elements of nature and hence the
need for gratitude on the part of human beings. For instance, in Turtle Island the
poem, ‘Mother Earth: Her Whales’, is an expression of his perception of this unity
as exemplified in the ancient cultures:

“Solidarity. The People
Standing tree people!
Flying bird people!
Swimming sea people!
Four-legged, two-legged people” (P48)

The Sioux Indians used to include “the creeping people, and the standing
people and, the flying people and, the swimming people- into the councils of
government.” Referring to this Snyder argues that modern culture too should
include the flora and fauna in the democracy; otherwise they “will submit non-
negotiable demands about our stay on earth.”

The nature that appears chaotic to modern man who inhabits the so-called
civilized society is not chaotic at all; it has its own rules. It is man’s ignorance of
this fact that engenders in him a false sense of superiority about his culture which
he perceives as different from ‘wild’ nature. In another poem in Turtle Island,
‘Straight Creek – Great Burn’, Snyder appreciates the sense of unity among birds:
“never a leader

All of one swift

Empty

Dancing mind.” (p53)

Snyder accepts the fact that modern man is alienated from nature and analyses the various causes that has lead to this plight:

“For several centuries western civilization has had a priapic drive for materialistic accumulation, continual extensions of political and economic power, termed “progress”. In the Judaeo-Christian worldview men are seen working out their ultimate destinies . . . with planet earth as the stage for the drama – trees and animals as mere props, nature a vast supply depot. Fed by fossil fuel, this religio-economic view has become a cancer: uncontrollable growth. It may finally choke itself, and drag much else down with it.”

In the poem, ‘Tomorrow’s Song’ in Turtle island Snyder portrays the present-day America:

“The USA slowly lost its mandate
it never gave the mountains and rivers,
trees and animals
a vote.
all the people turned away from it
myths die; even continents are impermanent.” (p77)
In the poem ‘For the West’ in Snyder’s anthology, *Back Country*, the poet beautifully portrays the rift between culture and nature as exemplified in American society. He describes Western civilization as,

“the flowery glistening oil blossom

Spreading on water – blossom and the dangerous properties of it.

It was so tiny, nothing, now it keeps expanding” (p117)

Snyder admits that western culture has always been appreciative of wilderness, but there is something inherently wrong in its treatment of wilderness which can be presumed as the root cause of present environmental crisis:

“. . . a culture that alienates itself from the very ground of its own being – the wilderness outside (that is to say, wild nature, the wild, self-contained, self - informing ecosystems) and from that other wilderness, the wilderness within - is doomed to a very destructive behavior, ultimately perhaps self-destructive behavior.”

In *Earth House Hold* Snyder shows how modern man’s destructive nature can be traced back to history:

“Rape of the world: destructiveness of Western Civilization. Those insane Spaniards in Central America answering to abstractions of gold and religion. The nature, wild life, Indian life, Mississippi, Grand Canyon, didn’t move them.”

He does not accept the view that the alienation from nature and the consequent self-destructive nature of the present day man as an exclusive American
characteristic but a ubiquitous feature of the Eastern and Western civilizations. Snyder points a changed perception and attitude as the cause for this transformation:

“At the root of the problem, where our civilization goes wrong is the mistaken belief that nature is something less than authentic; that nature is not as alive as man is, or intelligent, that in a sense it is dead and that animals are of so low an order of intelligence and feeling, we need not take their feelings in to account.”

Recovering the primitive worldview alone can attribute more authenticity and intelligence to natural systems, which in turn will allow the modern man living in the verge of post-civilization to regain his relationship with nature. In order to describe this inherent intelligence in nature which is a repository of universal wisdom stored in genes, Snyder borrows the expression ‘biomass’ from ecologist Eugene Odum. Snyder’s awareness that the various Indian tribes were staunch believers of this universal wisdom in nature even before the West became aware of ‘ecology’ makes him propose the establishment of “a council of elders” to “maintain and transmit the lore of tribe on the highest level – would arrange a cycle of ceremonies geared to the seasons, to the migrations of the fish and to the phases of the moon.”

In ‘Four Changes’, an essay included in Turtle Island, Snyder describes man as an integral part of nature, and this awareness of Snyder makes the binary vision of culture and nature irrelevant:
“Man is but a part of the fabric of life – dependent on the whole fabric for his very existence. As the most highly developed tool-using animal, he must recognize that unknown evolutionary destinies of other life forms are to be respected, and act as gentle steward of the earth’s community of beings.”

According to Snyder, though our five-millennia-long civilization was successful in urbanizing most parts of the world within a few centuries, it is characterized by a kind of inertia which is dangerous to humanity. Hence it needs to be transformed into a new culture that is ecologically-sensitive and wild-minded. Only such a culture which is both spiritual and scientific in nature can help man live in harmony with nature. By integrating wilderness into culture man can achieve an acute sense of awareness. Snyder envisions a planet on which humanity can live in harmony with a natural environment and still lead a dynamic life by employing various sophisticated and unobtrusive technologies. This vision has certain salient features:

(i) A healthy and spare population of all races.

(ii) Cultural and individual pluralism, unified by a type of world tribal council division by natural and cultural boundaries rather than arbitrary and political boundaries.

(iii) A technology of communication, education and quiet transportation, land use sensitive to the properties of each region. Careful but intensive agriculture in the alluvial valleys; deserts left wild for those who live there by skill.
(iv) A basic cultural outlook and social organization that inhibits power and property-seeking while encouraging exploration and challenge in things like music, meditation, mathematics, mountaineering, magic and other things of authentic being-in-the world.69

This vision of Snyder is based on his perception of human culture, which is never static. In Turtle Island he describes the position of culture in the evolution of humanity:

“Everyone is the result of four forces: the conditions of the known universe (matter/ energy forms and ceaseless change); the biology of his species; his individual genetic heritage and the culture he’s born into. Within the web of forces there are certain spaces and loops which allow to some persons the experience of inner freedom and illumination. The gradual exploration of some of these places is “evolution” and, for human cultures, what “history” could increasingly be. We have it in our deepest powers not only to change our “selves” but to change our culture.”70

Snyder believes that if humanity wants to integrate nature and culture, children should be brought up as a part of the wild and we should use the real potential of science and technology for the service of the planet. What he criticizes in the industrial culture is its tendency to exploit earth in the name of perpetual growth. Referring to the efforts of young Native American militants and longhairs to protect the sacred land of Black Mesa from strip miners, Snyder attributes a mythical meaning to such acts which enable man to listen to the voices of the land.
He warns the modern Americans that if they don’t want their future generation to live on the moon but on the continent, they must “return to marginal farm land on the part of longhairs” and learn from the elders how to live, ‘loving and protecting this soil, these trees, these wolves – Natives of the Turtle Island.” He prefers this old name of the continent, ‘Turtle Island’, to the European word, America. Snyder thus advocates a counter-culture that uses a ‘scaled-down’ and balanced technology which will aim at less growth.

In the three sections of *Myths & Texts* Snyder expresses his anxiety about American culture through the poetic images. In the first section, ‘Logging’, the act of logging becomes an image of the precariousness of American culture:

“San Francisco 2x4s
were the woods around Seattle;
Someone killed, and someone built, a house,
a forest, wrecked or raised
All America hung on hook
& burned by men, in their own praise.”  (p.4)

Logging becomes a symbol of stealing, demoralizing humanity; men are portrayed as “soldiers of discontent.”

“Man is the heart of the universe
the upshot of the five elements,
born to enjoy food and color and noise . . .”
Get off my back Confucius
There’s enough noise now.
What bothers me is all those stumps.” (p.12)

The poems in the second section, ‘Hunting’, are expressions of the poet’s ecological consciousness. In the poem, ‘this poem is for deer’, hunting is portrayed as an act of connecting with nature; the deer has to feel pity for man and has to come to him, ready to be shot:

“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.” (p.28)

By partaking the life of the deer, man is living in participation with nature. The ceremonial act of hunting is not viewed as killing. By its death, the deer becomes one with the man who intends to make it his food.

Snyder perceives the land as the source of man’s energy. Man, the land and all the living and non-living beings on it form a network which is the gift of Gaia (the proper name of the earth). This concept of human life on the planet is similar to what Chellis Glendinning describes as primal matrix. Another perception that Snyder shares with the ecopsychologists is that agriculture is an act of the civilized society that has severed human society’s relationship with the natural world. Agriculture is viewed as a symbol of the selfish ego of the civilization as it has enabled humanity to transform the human society into an artificial system that is completely regulated according to the plans of man. As a consequence nature and the natural processes are projected as chaotic:
“...there is almost an almost self-congratulatory ignorance of the natural world that is pervasive in Euro-American business, political and religious circles.”72

Snyder criticizes this view as he has a strong conviction that nature is orderly and if it appears chaotic it is merely because of the complexity of the natural processes. He sees the culture-nature dichotomy and various other dichotomies which are characteristic of human civilization as arising from an anthropocentric attitude. According to him, a hierarchical spirituality with its austerities, obedience to religious authority, long bookish scholarship and an overriding image of divinity being “centralized” and sometimes “a dualistic devotionalism” which distinguishes the creator and the creature is a war against nature because it tries to place the humans over animals and the spiritual over the human.73

Snyder calls those who try to place human beings above the animal and plant life on earth as “Spiritual Darwinists” who try to “enter an off-the-planet realm transcending biology.”74 Civilizations which are considered highly evolved always have a tendency to maintain a separate identity as they would prefer “to declare themselves “out of nature.” Snyder points out the implications of this tendency:

“As a kind of game this might be harmless. (One could imagine phylum Chordata declaring, “We are a qualitative leap in evolution representing something entirely transcendent entering what has hitherto been merely biology). But at the very minimum this call to a
special destiny on the part of human beings can be seen as a case of needlessly multiplying theories . . . And the results – in the human treatment of the rest of the nature – have been pernicious.”75

His immersion in the teachings of Buddhism has enabled Snyder to realize the meaninglessness of man’s false pride in the superiority of human culture. According to him, if human beings feel that they are different and superior to non-human beings it is only from their point of view. Each being is “totally uniquely at home” when they are in their “own unique Buddha field.”76

The ecopsychologists’ belief that a healthy humanity can exist only on a healthy planet seems to be the argument of Snyder too. He draws the readers’ attention to the conservation biologists’ concept of “indicator species” – animals and birds that are too typical of a natural area – the condition of which indicates the condition of that geographical area. For instance, the presence of the “Spotted Owl” can indicate a healthy conifer forest; bison can indicate the “Great Plains”. Similarly, the whole of this earth on which we find our lives completely at home can indicate the condition of human beings.77

This indicates Snyder’s belief that the deteriorating condition of the planet is directly related to man’s actions and hence he cannot escape his responsibility to maintain ecological balance. An intimate knowledge of one’s own territory is a basic necessity. Primitive cultures, which lived a life in close relation to nature, according to Snyder, are like an ancient forest, a repertoire of ancient wisdom and rich diversity:
“For those who live by foraging . . . the jungle is a rich supply of fibers, poisons, medicines, intoxicants, detoxicants, containers, water proofing, food, dyes . . . These primary societies are like ancient forests of our human history, with similar depths and diversities . . . The lore of wild nature is being lost along with the inhibitory human cultures. Each has its own human custom, myth, and lore that is now being swiftly lost – a tragedy for us all.”78

Linking one’s life with the life of the land is the way to heal a wounded planet. Keen observation and a deep knowledge of one’s own locality enrich the culture. Snyder explains what he means by having a basic knowledge about a region and its life and how such a knowledge can empower a person:

“[knowing] north from south, pine from fir, in which direction the new moon might be found, where the water comes from, where the garbage goes, how to shake hands, how to sharpen a knife, how the interest rates work. This sort of knowledge itself can enhance public life and save endangered species. We learn it by revivifying culture, which is like a re-inhabitation: moving back in to a terrain that has been abused and half-forgotten – then replanting trees, dechannelizing streambeds, breaking up asphalt.”79

Snyder disagrees with the group of people who argue that there is ‘no culture’ left in the modern world and so even ‘nature’ is disintegrating. According to him,
“There always is – just as much as there’s always (no matter where) place and language. One’s culture is in the family and the community, and it lights up when you start to do some real work together, or play, tell stories, act up – or when someone gets sick, or dies, or is born – or at a gathering like Thanksgiving. A culture is a network of neighborhoods or communities that is rooted and tended.”

The man-made world of culture offers safety and comforts for humanity. Hence it is natural for human beings to try to improve and expand the world of human culture. But Snyder reminds his fellow human beings the necessity to come out of this self-centered world in order to seek the freedom of nature. Unlike Abbey he has the conviction that it is possible to integrate nature and culture. He describes how that kind of integration is possible when a ‘cultured’ person embarks on a trip to encounter nature:

“One departs the home to embark on a quest into an archetypal wilderness that is dangerous, threatening, and full of beasts and hostile alien. This sort of encounter with the other - both the inner and the outer – requires giving up comforts and safety, accepting cold and hunger, and being willing to eat anything. You may never see home again. Loneliness is your bread. Your bones may turn up someday in some riverbank mud. It grants freedom, expansion, and release. Untied. Unstuck.”
In The Practice of the Wild Snyder states his staunch belief that human civilization is a part of nature and that it is the human ego that alienates between human culture and nature. He beautifully portrays how the human body itself can be seen as a combination of the natural and the cultural:

“Civilization is part of nature – our egos play in the fields of the unconscious – history takes place in the Holocene – human culture is rooted in the primitive and paleolithic – our body is a vertebrate mammal being – and our souls are out in the wilderness.”

The poems in Mountains and Rivers Without End depict the human alienation from the physical. Todd Ensign in his essay, ‘Gary Snyder: A Post-modern Perspective’, points out how individual perceptions can establish a link between the disconnected experiences of the post-modern man leading an alienated life:

“In his poem ‘Night Highway 99’ Snyder reconnects the . . . descriptions of places and experiences while hitchhiking across the country to show how the individual perceives and organizes his world. The structure of this poem illustrates the effect of global capitalism: individual objects, people and places are described as alienated and disconnected . . . but the individual who creates a map reconnected these.”

Bob Steuding, in his work, Gary Snyder, analyzes the ways in which the concept of wilderness has been changing from the time of early settlers. For the early settlers wilderness was a dangerous place which was the abode of the devil.
This perception of wilderness projected it as a negative entity. Cutting down trees was an act aimed at letting in light. Snyder employs this image in the section ‘Logging’ of *Myths and Texts*, with a reference to ‘Exodus 34:13’

“But ye shall destroy the altars,
break their images, and cut down their groves.”  (p.3)

Wilderness acquired a sublimity and picturesque nature in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Early Deists and transcendentalists like Thoreau too appreciated the beauty of wilderness and considered its destruction as an act of sacrilege. The separation of nature and culture was seen as a natural occurrence. Thoreau believed in maintaining a balance between civilization and wilderness in order for human beings to lead a healthy life in a healthy society:

“Civilization was the source of culture and arts; the wilderness of strength, inspiration and vigor. Thoreau believed that without a connection with wilderness a people became weak and dull.”84

In an essay ‘Buddhism and the Coming Revolution’ in *Earth House Hold* Snyder prophesies a revolution in the near future:

“In fact, it is my own view that the coming revolution will close the circle and link us in many ways with the most creative aspects of our archaic past. If we are lucky we may eventually arrive at a totally integrated world culture with matrilineal descent, free-form marriage, natural-credit communist economy, less industry, far less population and lots more national parks.”85
This futuristic view is based on Snyder’s concept that we have already come to the end of industrial age and the new civilization that replaces it may be antithetical to the industrial culture and a return to the earlier stages of human history. In another short essay, ‘Why Tribe’, in Earth House Hold he outlines this new type of society that he envisions:

“This new subculture is in fact more similar to that ancient and successful tribe, the European Gypsies – a group without nation or territory which maintains it own values, its language and religion, no matter what country it may be in.”

This subculture, the ‘Tribe’, is visualized as a synthesis of Gandhian “village anarchism” and I.W.W syndicalism (Industrial Workers of the World, a revolutionary workers movement in the U.S to overthrow capitalism), proposing a totally different organization. It is

“. . . based on community houses, villages and ashrams; tribe-run farms or workshops or companies; large open families; pilgrimages and wanderings from center to center . . . The tribe proposes personal responsibilities rather than abstract centralized government, taxes, and advertising-agency-plus-Mafia type international brainwashing corporations.”

The basic principle of this subculture that Snyder proposes is “follow the grain” – trust man’s natural instincts. Claims of church and state are negated in it. Snyder considers ‘Tribe’ as subversive to civilization:
“All this is subversive to civilization: for civilization is built on hierarchy and specialization. A ruling class, to survive, must propose a Law, a law to work must have a hook into the social psyche – and the most effective way to achieve this is to make people doubt their natural worth and instincts, especially sexual. To make “human nature” suspect is also to make Nature – the wilderness – the adversary.”

He perceives this kind of development as a revolution and attributes the present day ecological crisis to this development. He mentions the features of the tribe that may help the members to recognize one another:

“The signal is a bright and tender look; calmness and gentleness, freshness and ease of manner. Men, women and children – all of whom together hope to follow the timeless path of love and wisdom, in affectionate company with the sky, winds, clouds, trees, waters, animals and grasses – this is the tribe.”

Snyder does not project this subculture as anti-scientific and anti-technological. This stand resembles the attitude of ecopsychologists who do not reject technological development per se. In Snyder’s perception, the most advanced developments in the field of technology support the concept of ‘tribe’:

“Consequently the modern tribesman, rather than being old-fashioned in his criticism of civilization, is the most relevant type in contemporary society. Nationalism, warfare, heavy industry and consumership, are already outdated and useless. The next great step
of mankind is to step into the nature of his own mind – the real question is “just what is consciousness?” - and we must make the most intelligent and creative use of science in exploring this question. The man of wide international experience, much learning and leisure – luxurious product of our long and sophisticated history – may with good reason wish to live simply, with few tools and minimal cloths, close to nature.”

Paul Shepard, one of the pioneers of ecopsychology, while attempting a profound rereading of the cultural history of humanity in his famous work, *Nature and Madness* expresses his belief that invention of agriculture, rather than “a contemporary aberration on the part of industrial society” has caused “a false sense of separation from natural habitat.” Once if human beings lived in harmony with their environment, it was not due to their inability to change it, rather, they were aware of their deep roots in it. According to Shepard, this ‘ancient machinery’ is distorted and destroyed by advancing technology and the ‘progress’ of civilization. Western civilized culture does not seek the aid of external models of order in nature, which in ancient cultures used to be internalized during the process of growth into adulthood. Cut off from these rich sources of a supporting mechanism, modern adults never become completely mature. As a result of this “ontogenetic crippling” human beings forget the existence of the real world, the natural world to which they really belong. Shepard regrets the absence of the benign guidance a cadre of elders in order to administer the transition to adulthood. Paul Shepard believes that though culture can distort human relationship with nature, “there is a
secret person undamaged in each of us, aware of the validity of man’s chance to relink with nature.”

Ecocritic Charles Molesworth supports Snyder’s view that modern civilization is destructive at heart due to its technological orientation that tempts man to reject his interrelatedness with nature and with the natural environment. Snyder’s solutions to the ills of the modern world seem to combine a negation of will suggested by Buddhism together with a consciousness of natural balances. Molesworth feels that this vision of Snyder resembles a kind of Shamanic experience with its roots in Paleolithic culture. It appears impractical because it is difficult to be integrated in to the life of common man of today:

“The difficulty with such experience and consciousness . . . is that they are not easily integrated back into the social order. This leads to . . . the quietistic side of Snyder’s programme, which leads him to the sort of isolated communal existence he has been involved in through the 1970s. His vision entails a tribal structure for its authoritative system of government.”

Wendell Berry’s concept of culture as an ‘ideal nurturing habitat’ strikes a parallel to Snyder’s definition of it as a “yogurt culture – a nourishing habitat”. In The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture, Berry defines culture:

“A culture is not a collection of relics or ornaments but a practical necessity, and its corruption invokes calamity. A healthy culture is a communal order of memory, insight, value, work, conviviality, reverence, aspiration. It reveals the human necessities and human
limits. It clarifies our inescapable bonds to earth and to each other. It assures that the necessary restraints are observed, that the necessary work is done and that it is done well.”

Like other writers Berry also acknowledges the fissure in the culture–nature relationship as a reality in the contemporary world and considers the narrow vision of modern man as a cause for this. Man can see only the nearest surrounding as his environment and hence he is unable to have a holistic view of humanity, its culture and nature, which includes both these:

“The concept of country, homeland, dwelling place becomes simplified as the environment, that is, what surrounds us. Once we see our place, our part of the world as surrounding us, we have already made a profound division between it and ourselves. We have given up the understanding –dropped it out of our language and so out of our thought – that we and our country create one another, depends on one another, are literally part of one another; that our land passes in and out of our bodies as our bodies pass in and out of our land; that as we and our land are part of one another, so all who are living as neighbors here, human, plant and animal, are part of one another and so cannot possibly flourish alone; that, therefore, our culture must be our response to our place, our culture and our place are images of each other and inseparable from each other, so neither can be better than the other.”
By defining culture as humanity’s response to the land, Berry bridges the culture-nature divide and emphasizes the meaninglessness of the assumed superiority of human culture and the modern man’s egoistic pride in his right to exploit and rule over nature. If roots of culture are in nature, then wilderness itself should be accepted as “a cultural model, a standard of civilization.” So Berry argues that there is a “. . . likelihood that our surroundings, from our clothes to our countryside, are the products of our inward life – our spirit, our vision, as much as they are products of nature and work.”\textsuperscript{97} If modern man is sensible enough to accept this ideal view of a holistic relation, concern for nature would have been at the apex of human culture. Berry finds modern man ignorant about the reality of his existence on this planet, which makes him unable to understand the essential connection between many things such as between men and women, body and spirit, city and country, civilization and wilderness, growth and decay, life and death.\textsuperscript{98}

Unable to understand these relations, modern man never learns to participate in these relationships responsibly. Tracing the consequences of this failure, Berry points out:

“No longer does human life rise from the earth like a pyramid, broadly and considerately founded upon its sources. Now it scatters itself out in a reckless horizontal sprawl, like a disorderly city whose suburbs and pavements destroy the fields.”\textsuperscript{99}

Here Berry is actually sounding a warning to humanity about a culture that has lost its foundation in nature. Analyzing the changes in man’s perception due to this kind of incomprehension of the essential relations, Berry feels that the
humanity's basic nature itself has changed. There is a deep-rooted tendency to exploit and debase work. Man’s excessive dependence on machines, in his search for extra leisure and comforts, has reduced him to a victim or captive in the hands of technology and specialization. Human society has become more organized and intricate, yet paradoxically lacking in structure.

Berry believes that a better understanding of nature and a more “kindly use” of it can enable man to “dissolve the boundaries that divide people from land and its care, which together are the sources of human life.”¹⁰⁰ But humanity's attitude to nature itself seems to be polarized in the contemporary world. Berry, in his essay, ‘Preserving Wilderness’, in The Landscape of Harmony depicts the two major approaches to nature prevalent in the contemporary world. On one side there are nature extremists who “are entirely in favor of nature; they assume that there is no necessary disjuncture or difference between the human estate and the estate of nature, that human good is in some simple way the same as natural good.”¹⁰¹ These nature extremists believe that all creatures in nature have equal value and equal rights to live in an egalitarian biosphere. According to Berry, the major problem with this group is that they are unwilling to approach the issues regarding the proper use of nature.

On the contrary, the ‘technology extremists’ or ‘technocrats’ aim at conquering nature and nurture an impatience for the “old-fashioned outdoor farm” and even for wilderness.

“These people divide reality into two parts: human good, which they define as profit, comfort, and security; and everything else, which
they understand as a stockpile of ‘natural resources’ or ‘raw materials’, which will sooner or later be transformed into human good.”\(^\text{102}\)

Berry’s major disagreement with the attitude of the technocrats is that they consider the ability to do something as the reason to do it. This wrong attitude is the reason for modern age’s craze for ‘development for development’s sake’, which according to ecopsychologists, destroys the health of the society as well as the health of the planet. To prove his point, Berry gives the instance of a press release from the University of Illinois College of Agriculture that states the aim of the researchers there as “food production without either farmers or farms.” He feels that such a program has been implicit in the work of the “land-grant universities for forty or fifty years”, though they have acknowledged it explicitly only recently.\(^\text{103}\)

Berry prefers not to join both the nature and technology extremists as he believes that only a middle path would enable man to live in harmony with wilderness. Human good need not be always good for nature; humanity or domesticity is “indivisible and yet different” from wilderness.”\(^\text{104}\) An inherent problem that Berry finds in dealing with the culture-nature dichotomy is that our body itself is half wild:

“The indivisibility of wildness and domesticity, even within the fabric of human life itself, is easy enough to demonstrate. Our bodily life, to begin at the nearest place, is half wild, for it is dependent upon reflexes, instincts and appetites that we do not cause or intend and that we cannot . . . stop. We live partly, because we are domestic
creatures – that is, we participate in our human economy to the extent that we ‘make a living’, we are able, with variable success to discipline our appetites and instincts in order to produce this artifact, this human living. And yet it is equally true that we breathe and our human hearts beat and we survive as a species because we are wild.”  

Berry finds the complexity of culture-nature dichotomy similar to the domesticity and wild nature of our own bodies.

When human beings participate in human economy the human culture is alive. But human economy itself grows out of soil, which is wild in nature. Berry explains this paradox with great clarity of vision:

“The top soil, to the extent that it is fertile, is wild; it is a dark wilderness, ultimately unknowable, teeming with wild life. A forest or a crop, no matter how intentionally husbanded by human foresters or farmers, will be found to be healthy precisely to the extent that it is wild – able to collaborate with earth, air, light and water in the way common to plants before humans walked on the earth.”

Man’s effort to alienate human culture from its larger frame of wildness is seen as a reductive activity as it “reduces our largeness, our mystery to a petty and sickly comprehensibility.” Berry portrays the plight of a man alienated from the soil in the poem, ‘The Bird Killer’ in his Collected Poems:

“His enemy, the universe, surrounds him nightly with stars . . . He sits in the doorway and swiftly
plays his guitar, his fingers are stiff and heavy
and touch the string, not dexterously, so that he plays
his own song, not true copy of a tune; sometimes the notes
go away from melody, form singly and die out.” (p.16)

Berry reminds modern man about the danger of all attempts to sever culture from nature:

“To be divided against nature, against wilderness . . . is a human disaster because it is to be divided against ourselves.”

In the ‘Window Poems’ of the section ‘Openings’ in Collected Poems each poem becomes a vignette depicting the poet’s observations of nature; in them Berry succinctly captures the plight of human beings in a world where culture and nature are maintained as separate entities:

“. . . Within things
there is peace, and at the end
of things. It is the mind
turned away from the world
that turns against it.
. . . .
Let men, who cannot be brothers
to themselves, be brothers
to mulleins and daisies
that have learned to live on earth.
Let them understand the pride
of sycamores and thrushes
that receive the light gladly, and do not
think to illuminate themselves.” (p.89)

Though Berry considers culture and nature as indivisible, he is aware of the
difference between the status of human beings and other creatures. The
transformation of ‘biological’ man to a complete human being who is an artifact of
culture is a complex process. It needs a ‘human making’ process performed by
human culture and once that process is completed man gains a place at the apex of
the pyramid of creation. Though Berry is not reluctant to allot this highest position
in the hierarchy to human beings, he feels that the power that they gain from that
superiority can make them more dangerous than natural calamities. Yet he warns
man that this difference should not create a sense of discomfort or restlessness in
him while he is in the midst of other beings of nature because, as ecopsychologists
point out, such a sense of discomfort can make him strike at nature aggressively. In
*The Landscape of Harmony* Berry points out how difficult it is for man to overcome
this sense of discomfort that he feels in nature:

> “Nature is not easy to live with. It is hard to have rain on your cut
> hay, or flood water over your cropland . . . it is hard when nature
does not respect your intentions, and she never does exactly respect
them.”

Yet, he considers it the duty of human culture to inculcate qualities of
prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance and other virtues in all human beings so
that they will learn to wield the unmanageable power vested on them.
This concept of the interrelatedness of culture and nature invests human culture with tremendous responsibility. According to Berry, being loyal and responsible to both culture and nature, though inescapable, is really confusing to human beings. Yet, they should try to recover the harmony of life which is the product of such a symbiosis because,

“In the recovery of culture and nature is the knowledge of how to farm well, how to preserve, harvest, and replenish the forests, how to make, build and use, return and restore. In this double recovery, which is the recovery of our humanity, is the hope that the domestic and wild can exist together in lasting harmony.”[110]

Berry believes that an ideal culture should be self-evaluative in nature, that is, it should constantly measure itself by nature, by its own best work and also by the best works of other cultures. This self-evaluation helps a culture to live harmoniously and to develop a sense of responsibility to itself and to nature.

Berry describes the possibility of two phases in human culture’s relationship with nature:

“Harmony is one phase, the good phase, of the inescapable dialogue between culture and nature. In this stage humans consciously and conscientiously ask of their work: Is this good for us? Is this good for our place? And questioning and answering in this phase is minutely particular. It can occur only with reference to particular artifacts, events, places, ecosystems and neighborhoods. When the cultural side of the dialogue becomes too theoretical and abstract,
the other phase, the bad one, begins. Then the conscious, responsible questions are not asked; acts begin to be committed and things to be made on their own terms for their own sakes, culture deteriorates, and nature retaliates.”

These two phases in human culture’s interactions with nature are realistic and accounts for the birth of the present ecocatastrophe. Berry is also aware of the irony of culture-nature relationships; humanity is completely dependent on nature for its existence, while nature’s survival is ensured by humanity’s understanding of it and forbearance. This view brings Berry to the ultimate paradox in this relationship:

“The only thing we have to preserve nature with is culture; the only thing we have to preserve wilderness with is domesticity.”

Though paradoxical, this view enables Berry to emphasize the need to bridge the gap between culture and nature by focusing on the truth of their interrelationship. What he suggests is that the preservation of the wild or wilderness has direct connection with a country’s domestic behavior and domestic economy. Wilderness preservation is impossible in localities and communities that do not value durability of goods. In order to prove this view Berry describes the concept of good craftsmanship. In creating wooden artifacts, good craftsmanship is a careful and loving work that takes care of the entire process, both the natural and cultural. This kind of a concern comes from the awareness that if we want our forests to be saved, we should make more durable wood products. Berry believes that the forests threatened more by shoddy workmanship than by fire or clear-cutting. Hence he
feels that a good worker may never nurture the industry’s contempt for raw material. Explaining the role of good craftsmanship further, Berry describes how such a work can merge culture and nature:

“The good worker loves the board before it becomes a table, loves the tree before it yields the board, loves the forest before it gives up the tree. The good worker understands that a badly made artifact is both an insult to its user and a danger to its source . . . good forestry begins with the respectful husbanding of the forest that we call stewardship and ends with well-made tables and chairs and houses, just as agriculture begins with stewardship of the fields and ends with good meals.”

This image of the creation of wooden artifacts explicates how culture and nature are integrated in the thoughts of Berry. He calls for a replacement of the present economy with a “loving economy” – an economy that rewards and enforces good use- an economy, “which would strive to place a proper value on all the materials of the world, in all their metamorphoses from soil and water, air and light to the finished goods of our towns and households.”

The present economy lacks the any kind of affection; it is characterized by a kind of callous disregard for the life of the spirit. Berry refuses to consider it materialistic as our society does not value things for their own worth; a possession becomes valuable only if it can be exchanged for something else that a person desires for. Berry calls this economy “a limitless economic process based upon
boundless dissatisfaction.” Only in combining the spiritual and the practical in human life man can lead a complete life.

Berry thinks that if wilderness has to be preserved, a change in our economy is essential. In modern ‘energy economy’ the ‘machine-derived’, mechanic energy is preferred over the biological energy. What is appreciable in the ‘biological energy economy’ is that apart from ‘production’ and ‘consumption’ a third term, ‘return’, is also added and all bodies, plants, animals and human are joined in a kind of ‘energy community’. Berry explains the complex energy exchange between the indissoluble links of an energy community:

“They are not divided from each other by the greedy “individualistic” efforts to produce and consume large quantities of energy. They are indissolubly linked in complex patterns of energy exchange. They die into each other’s life, live into each other’s death . . . They do not produce waste. What they take in they change, but they change it away in to a form necessary for its use by a living body of another kind. And this exchange goes on and on, round and round the wheel of life rising out of the soil, descending through the bodies of creatures.”

The wheel of life, which Berry projects as a ‘governing cultural metaphor’, is firmly rooted in the soil because he considers soil as a “connector of lives, the source and destination of all. It is the healer and restorer and resurrector, by which disease passes into health, age into youth, death into life.” This concept makes it
inevitable for the community and culture to take care of the land because without it, community has no existence.

In Berry’s view agriculture is the ideal means to live responsibly on earth as it promotes an intimate and sensitive knowledge of the land. Healthy agricultural practices confer a healthy culture on humanity because,

“A healthy farm culture can be based only upon familiarity and can grow only among a people soundly established upon the land; it nourishes and safeguards a human intelligence of the earth that no amount of technology can satisfactorily replace.”

Berry laments the loss of such a culture that existed in farm communities where each farmer was a ‘complex entity’ created by a healthy farming culture that ensured a caring and nurturing relationship with the land. Modernization of agricultural techniques and fast-paced globalization are considered the two major causes for a revolution not only in the earlier agricultural practices but also in the mindset and perception of a generation of human beings, thus creating an agricultural crisis. Man’s sole concern has become finding newer ways to draw more from the earth. The excessive desire for increased production in a profit-oriented economy has transformed ‘agriculture’ into ‘agribusiness’. Berry regrets this change as it has subverted the economics of nature, energy and the human spirit. He observes how “man himself has become a consumptive machine.” He attributes ‘agricultural crisis’ to this ‘crisis of culture’ and he expresses his strong conviction that food which is completely a ‘cultural product’ cannot be produced by technology alone.
In order to highlight how cultural trends and agricultural practices are linked, Berry shows how modern homes have distanced themselves from the production and preparation of food and have become mere centers of consumption. He finds them more institutionalized than the Government and universities:

“With its array of gadgets and machines, all powered by engines that are destructive of land or air or water, and are connected to work, market, school, recreation etc. by gasoline engines, the modern home is a veritable factory of waste and destruction.”¹²⁰

Berry views this changed situation as the reason for an element of destructiveness entering the modern households and spreading to the rest of the world. Human culture too reflects this destructive nature. Apart from the element of destructiveness, institutionalization of households is seen as another factor that disconnects man from the source of his bodily life. Berry observes:

“... as people, we no longer know the earth we come from, have no respect for it, keep no responsibilities to it.”¹²¹

He attributes this “displacement of human mind” to a “vision” or “dream” or “psychic lure” that is nothing but an “occult yearning for future.” A specialized group of people from all fields create this lure to trap the common man in this fantastic dream and once he falls for it he forgets the reality of the present. Then the responsible way of leading a life is completely forgotten. In Unsettling of America; Culture and Agriculture Berry discusses the implications of this trend:
“The future has been envisioned, dreamed, projected, painted for us by prophets of every kind: scientists, comic-book writers, novelists, philosophers, politicians, industrialists, professors . . .”122

These futurists provide a rosy picture of the future as a time when science has solved all problems that humanity faces. They portray the planet as an earthly paradise. Berry is aware of the paradox implicit in guaranteeing such a future without emphasizing the need for responsible behavior in the present. He does not seem to believe in the practicality of such a concept of the future and hence he suggests that it would be more sensible to be prepared if humanity has to face an apocalypse. In the case of an eventuality, man should cleanse himself of “slovenliness, laziness and waste” and boldly take up the responsibility of a future, however uncertain it may appear:

“We must learn to discipline ourselves, to restrain ourselves to need less, to care more for the needs of others. We must understand what the health of the earth requires, and we must put that before all other needs. If a catastrophic famine is possible, then let us undertake the labors of wisdom and make the necessary sacrifices of luxury and comforts.”123

The sense of irresponsibility promoted by the futuristic technological and economic developments of modern society has already proved detrimental to the private ownership of farmland and the public concern for the health of farming. Berry thinks that modern man’s attempt to have complete control over the land empowered by technology, is an act of foolishness because in that process, he is
trying to remove all resistance in the soil. Such a soil loses all its capacity to adjust to pests, parasites, diseases, climatic fluctuations and other extreme conditions and becomes unhealthy. Modern man neglects the signs of a sick land in his urge to maintain his superiority among the creatures of nature. The modern trend of separating home from the workplace is seen by Berry as a symbol of man’s egoistic nature.

Berry’s concept of a series of disconnections that exists in our culture causing a condition of critical ill-health to human beings as well as to all other creatures resembles the view of ecopsychologists. A healthy human culture and economy becomes an indication of man’s healthy relationship with nature. Hence restoring the broken links seems to be the only solution for maintaining a healthy culture-nature relationship.

The most practical and rational suggestion put forward by Berry to achieve a balanced culture-nature relationship is to reject the monoculturalism of industrial society and to opt for a natural landscape that is characterized by great diversity and maintain the wild in its margins. The practical knowledge gained from farming enables Berry to visualize and suggest the concept of ‘margins’. In most of his writings he tries to explain the role of margins as an area where culture and nature meet and merge. In *The Landscape of Harmony* he defines them:

“The margins are of utmost importance. They are divisions between holdings, as well as between kinds of work and kinds of land. These margins – lanes, stream sides, wooden fence rows, and the like – are always freeholds of wilderness, where limits are set on human
intention. Such places are hospitable to the wild lives of plants and animals and to the wild play of human children. They enact within the bounds of human domesticity itself, a human country toward the wild that is one of the best safeguards of designated tracts of true wilderness.”

Berry perceives these ‘margins’ as a “landscape of harmony”, characteristically democratic and free compared to the totalitarian “landscape of monoculture”. Maintaining margins as areas where culture-nature integration takes place at a realistic and practical plane has been a part of the earlier farming practices. In Edward Abbey’s novel, The Fools Progress: an honest novel, the protagonist, Henry makes a mention of the wildlife thriving in the margins of Henry’s ancestral farm. For Berry even the hedgerows are marginal areas, “little thorough-fares of wilderness closely crisscrossing the farmland and in them agriculture is constantly renewing itself in direct response to what threatens it.”

When Berry describes margins as a ground for the integration of culture and nature, he is sending a message to humanity that solving the problem of various dichotomies that haunt human society is practically possible if man does not irrationally reject the time-honored agricultural practices.

Bill McKibben also accepts the culture-nature divide as an old, elemental reality. His apocalyptic vision projects human society as an establishment that exists in a “postnatural age”. According to him, the ‘end of nature’ is wrought by one of the milestones in human culture – global industrialism. As any idea or
relationship can become extinct, like plant or animal life, he finds that nature has also become extinct:

“The idea in this case is “nature”, the separate and wild province, the world apart from man to which he adapted, under whose rules he was born and died.”

The perception of nature as a world distant from the human world to which he has adapted reflects his attitude to the culture-nature dichotomy. What McKibben laments here is the loss of the conceptual ground of nature, the pristine wilderness. He is aware that throughout the history of United States it was available for man as an escape from human society. Hence it appears quite apt for man to idealize the prospect of being lost in the woods as it provides him a chance to be in ‘a world apart from man’. McKibben believes that every man has a right to search for a place in the wilderness where there is nothing to remind him of human society and in such a wilderness he can “... get caught up in the timeless meaning of the forest.” This reminds one of Edward Abbey’s privilege to float down the Colorado River before the construction of the dam and his urge to move on to the depths of wilderness where the tentacles of human culture has not reached to leave its imprints.

Even when it is not practical to run away from urban life to pristine wilderness, man has the option of imagining a trip to such places when he is sure of the existence of such places on the planet. McKibben ruefully observes how the contemporary world has lost even that “psychic territory.” When he points out that nature has ended, he assures us that natural processes still occur, but everything
that happens in nature bears testimony to the intense impact of human culture on
nature:

“The climate – the temperature and the rainfall – has become a
product of our life-style.”129

To experience nature as natural as it is, now there are no pristine areas left
untouched by human beings:

“The sound of the chainsaw does not blot out all noises of the forest
or drive the animals away, but it does drive away the feeling that you
are in another, separate, timeless, wild sphere.”130

To show how irksome such incursions of human culture into nature
experiences are, McKibben gives an account of his encounter with the social reality
while swimming in the Adirondack Lake:

“During the week we swim across and back, a trip of may be forty
minutes – plenty of time to forget everything but the feel of the
water around your body . . .

But on the weekends, more and more often, someone will
bring a boat out for waterskiing, and make pass after pass up and
down the lake. And then the whole experience changes, changes
entirely.”131

While searching for the roots of the destructiveness in human culture,
McKibben recognizes certain psychological reasons behind the changing lifestyles
of modern man, the impact of which he is unaware:
“Our pursuit for a better life – in pursuit of warm houses and eternal economic growth . . . could alter the power of sun, could increase its heat. We have produced CO₂, we are ending nature.”¹³²

McKibben wonders why modern society refuses to own its responsibility in bringing about such a significant change in nature. Even when there were people like Thoreau or Gandhi who had proved that a it is not beyond human potential to opt for a simplification of life-styles, contemporary human society dismisses their lives as exceptional and beyond the reach of the common man. There is a refusal to exercise any will power to pursue the path they chosen by such pioneers.

McKibben’s message to humanity is that if it wants its place in the universe, it should change its present attitude:

“We may have to develop an enormously powerful social taboo against progress of that defiant INERTIA OF AFFLUENCE, the push of poverty, the soaring population – these . . . make me pessimistic about the chances that we will dramatically alter our ways of thinking and living that we will turn humbler in the face of our troubles.”¹³³

McKibben dreams of a humble world, where a return to the old world is possible by abandoning the modern machines and urbanization, in order to bridge the culture-nature divide. He warns his fellow human beings that there is no meaning in loving nature for the fear of an imminent ecocatastrophe and that they have tremendous power in them to change their perception of man-nature relationship:
“Should we so choose, we could exercise our reasons to do what no other animal can do; we could limit ourselves, voluntarily, choose to remain God’s creatures instead of making ourselves gods.”134

In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard declares her stance on human relationship with nature:

“‘I’m getting used to this planet and this curious human culture which is cheerfully enthusiastic as it is cheerfully cruel.’”135

This stance as an observer of culture and nature enables Annie Dillard to gaze at the complex interactions between these two fields with wonder and curiosity. She considers herself to be a product of culture, but imagines that she has left that world to lead a life harmonized to the rhythms of nature. As in the case of Edward Abbey, her view of her position in relation to culture and nature seems to emphasize the need to sever the ties with the world of culture in order to have a nature experience. The irony of the situation intensifies when Dillard expresses her conviction that human beings’ perception of nature is molded by their culture. Nature seems to have her own way irrespective of how man perceives her:

“What we think of the weather and the behavior of life on the planet at any given season is really all a matter of statistical probabilities; at any given point, anything might happen. There is a bit of every season in each season . . . The calendar, the weather, and the behavior of wild creatures have the slimmest of connections.”136

When she leaves the terrain of culture to enter the natural setting, Annie Dillard becomes aware of a sharp contrast between the two worlds. The brutality
that exists in the midst of the startling beauty of nature shocks her. And in a tone of wonder she describes the planet as a mysterious place where culture and nature encounter each other in a way that is beyond human expectation and control:

“I have to look at the landscape of the blue-green world again. Just think: in all the clean beautiful reaches of the solar system, our planet alone is a blot; our planet alone has death. I have to acknowledge that the sea is a cup of death and the land is a stained altar stone. We the living survivors huddled on a flotsam, living on a jetsam. We escapees. We wake in terror, eat in hunger and sleep with a mouthful of blood.”¹³⁷

The natural world seems to be different from the world of human culture in its concept of human supremacy. Nature appears to be totally unconcerned either about the tremendous fecundity at the lower strata of the animal world or about the equally prevalent death in their lives. Dillard gets confused about the strange ways of nature and struggles to adjust to it:

“Must I then part ways with the only world I know? I have thought to live by the side of the creek to shape my life to its free flow. But I seem to have reached a point where I must draw a line. It looks as though the creek is not buoying me up but dragging me down. Look. Cock Robin may die the most gruesome of slow deaths, and nature is no less pleased; the sun comes up, the creek rolls on, the survivors still sing. I cannot feel that way about your death, nor you about
mine, nor either of us about the robin’s – or even the barnacles. We value the individual supremely, and nature values him not a whit.”138

The conflict in Annie Dillard’s mind seems to have originated from the paradoxical situation she finds herself in. To shape her life to the flow of the creek, she believes she has left the world of human culture which was her home. While she opts for nature as her new home, she finds it difficult to unlearn the values she has imbibed from her original home. Hence, she is unable to accept death as an insignificant, yet an inevitable part of evolution. Brutality pains her as she believes that a chance to a decent life should be offered to every living being.

The nature-culture encounter that Dillard experiences creates a conflict in her mind. Sometimes she wonders whether she has to abandon nature completely but the prospect of being forced to return to the world of human culture, which she has left behind, seems a painful option for her. Witnessing the brutality and indifference of nature she wonders:

“It seems for the moment as though I might have to reject this creek life unless I want to be utterly brutalized. Is human culture with its values my only home after all? Can it possibly that I should move my anchor-hold to the side of the library? This direction of thought brings me abruptly to a fork in the road where I stand paralyzed, unwilling to go on, for both ways lead to madness.”139

Dillard professes that she has left the world of culture in order to be in the world of nature. The library is a symbol of the world that she has left behind. The
shocking experiences during her encounter with nature make her wonder whether she may have to return to the library.

An unresolved ambiguity prevails in Annie Dillard’s reflection on the culture-nature dichotomy, which forces her to choose one of the two available alternative perceptions of the complex relationship between the two entities. She feels that either nature is a monster or human beings are a freakish creation and she favors the second option:

“Although it is true that we are moral creatures in an amoral world, the world’s amorality does not make it a monster. Rather, I am the freak. Perhaps, I don’t need a lobotomy, but I could use some calming down, and the creek is just the place for it. I must go down to the creek again. It is where I belong, although as I become closer to it, my fellows appear more and more freakish, and my home in the library more and more limited. Imperceptibly at first and now consciously. I shy away from the arts, from the human emotional stew. I read what the men with telescopes and microscopes have to say about the landscape. I read about the polar ice, and I drive myself deeper and deeper into exile from my own kind. But since I cannot avoid the library altogether – the human culture that taught me to speak in its tongue – I bring human values to the creek and so save myself from being brutalized.”

Rejection of the world of culture seems to be inevitable for man in order to harmonize his life with the life of nature, yet he appears to be helpless in shedding
the values he has imbibed from culture. Dillard tries to resolve this conflict by seeking a way to accommodate culture as a supporting force when man comes face to face with the brutality and the lack of concern of nature. Thus culture becomes a mediator when man, a product of culture, encounters nature, thus reconciling the worlds of culture and nature. She describes this reconciliation in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*:

“My rage and shock at the pain and death of individuals of my kind is the old, old mystery, as old as man, but forever fresh, and completely unanswerable. My reservations about the fecundity and waste of life among other creatures are, however, mere squeamishness . . . It is true that many of the creatures live and die abominably, but I am not called upon to pass judgment. Nor am I called upon to live in that same way, and those creatures who are mercifully unconscious.”

To portray human society and its cultural base, Annie Dillard uses the imagery used by Thomas Merton when he wrote, “there is always a temptation to diddle around in the contemplative life, making itsy-bitsy statues.” She describes the tendency of modern man to drift through life, without realizing the intricate beauty and mystery that surrounds him in nature:

“There is always an enormous temptation in all of life to diddle around making itsy-bitsy friends and meals and journeys for itsy-bitsy years on end. It is so self-conscious, so apparently moral, simply to step aside from the gaps where the creeks and the winds
pour down, saying I never merited this grace, quite rightly, and then
to sulk along the rest of your days on the edge of rage. I won’t have
it. The world is wider than that in all directions, more dangerous and
bitter, more extravagant and bright. We are making hay when we
should be making whoopee; . . ."142

In her vivid description of a writer’s life in The Writing Life, Annie Dillard
reflects on how the lifestyles of modern society indicate the attitude of modern man
towards his culture and nature:

“How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.
What we do with this hour, and that one, is what we are doing."143

She feels that if there is any shortage, it is not of “good days” but of “good
lives”. Dillard does not mean “a life lived in the senses” when she refers to the
‘good life’; a life that gives importance to the senses can create only a life of greed.
On the contrary, ‘a life of spirit’ requires less time to acquire and gives sweet
experiences. To justify this argument, she describes a day in the life of a Danish
aristocrat:

“The most appealing daily schedule I know is that of a turn of the
century Danish Aristocrat. He got up at four and set out on foot to
hunt black grouse, wood grouse, wood cock and snipe. At eleven he
met his friends. . . . They converged ‘at one of these babbling
brooks”, he wrote. He outlined the rest of his schedule. “Take a
quick dip, relax with a schnappes and a sandwich, stretch out, have a
smoke, take a nap or just rest and then sit around and chat until
three. Then I hunt some more until sundown, bathe again, put on white tie and tails to keep appearances, eat a huge dinner, smoke a cigar and sleep like a log until the sun comes up again to redden the eastern sky.” This is living . . . Could it be more perfect?144

Annie Dillard identifies a mysterious and intricate pattern in nature, which is visible only to one who is willing to see, to one who finds time to see. She has taken time to see the patterns in nature and she describes them as ‘gaps’ or the “spirit’s one home” that enable her to see God:

“The gaps are the thing. The gaps are the spirit’s one home, the altitudes and latitudes so dazzlingly spare and clean that spirit can discover itself for the first time like a once-blind man unbound. The gaps are the cliffs in the rock where you cower to see the back parts of God; they are the fissures between mountains and cells the wind lances through, the icy narrowing fiords splitting the cliffs of mystery. Go up into the gaps. If you can find them; they shift and vanish too. Stalk the gaps. Squeak into a gap in the soil, turn, and unlock - - - a universe. This is how you spend this afternoon, and tomorrow morning, and tomorrow afternoon. Spend the afternoon. You can’t take it with you.”145

Direct references to culture and its impact on nature are sparse in Annie Dillard’s writings. In The Writing Life she makes a direct mention of the subject:
“Commercial intrusion has overrun and crushed, like the last glaciations, a humane landscape. The new landscape and its climate put metaphysics on the run.”146

A sharp note of irony is discernible in Dillard’s tone when she comments on humanity’s inordinate pride in its culture and achievements. She confesses her inability to find anything extraordinary in modern life:

“Are not our generations the cruel ones? For we have changed the world. Are not our heightened times the important ones? For we have nuclear bombs. Are we not especially significant because our century is? – our century and its unique Holocaust, its refugee populations, its serial totalitarian exterminations; our century and its antibiotics, silicon chips, men on the moon, and spliced genes? No, we are not and it is not. These times of ours are ordinary times, a slice of life like any other. Who can bear to hear this, or who will consider it? . . . Take the bomb threat away and what are we? Ordinary beads on a never ending thread. Our time is a routine twist of an improbable yarn.”147

Dillard wonders how modern man can nurture such a facile pride, when humanity is facing the threat of an imminent extinction:

“We have no chance of being here when the sun burns out. There must be something heroic about our time, something that lifts it above all those other times. Plague? Funny weather? Dire things happening. In fact, we are witnessing a mass extinction of animals:
According to Oxford’s Robert. M. May, most of the birds and mammals we know will be gone in four hundred years. But there have been five other such mass extinctions, scores of millions of years apart. People have made great strides towards obliterating other people, too, but that has been the human effort all long, and our cohort has only broadened the means, as have people in every century. Why are we watching news? . . . Only to enforce our fancy – probably a necessary lie – that these are crucial times, and we are in on them. Newly revealed, and we are in the know: crazy people, bunches of them.”  

The portrayal of modern man as a being who has imprisoned himself in an insular cell of his culture heightens the tone of irony. He has completely lost his adaptability and finds himself unable to face nature when he comes out of his shell:

“The blue light of television flickers on the cave wall. If the fellow crawls out of the cave, what does he see? Not the sun itself, but night and two thousand visible stars. Once I tried to converse with him, the fellow who crawled out of his blue-lit cave to the real world. He had looked into this matter of God. He had to shout to himself to be heard: “How do you stand the wind out here?”

I don’t. Not for long. I drive a school kids’ carpool. I shouted back, “I don’t. I read ‘Consumer Reports every month!’ It seemed unlikely that he heard. The wind blew into his face. He turned his
face and faced the lee. I don’t know how long he stayed out. A little
time does for me – a little every day.”

Another dimension of the culture-nature relationship that finds expression in
Annie Dillard’s works is the element of cruelty that is prevalent in both culture and
nature. She observes that human culture is prone to cruelty but the brutality that
exists in nature is antithetical to it. In nature the pangs of hunger and the urge for
existence cause killings. In the world of human culture, it is the extreme
subjectivity of human minds that results in acts of cruelty. Dillard narrates a few
instances to show that the history of human culture is replete with examples human
cruelty:

“After the battle, Emperor Qin killed four hundred thousand
prisoners. After another he located all the members of families who
are his mother’s family’s enemies, and had them buried alive. Those
were cruel ages, East and West . . .

That mass killings and genocides recur on earth does not mean that
they are similar. Each instance of human, moral evil, and each
victim’s personal death, possesses its unique history and form.”

She warns the readers not to generalize the human tendency to inflict pain,
yet accepts the truth that man derives a pleasure from his cruel acts. This aspect of
the human psyche removes man from the natural processes of the universe.

Annie Dillard contends that the general depravity and degeneration of
human culture that has affected man’s relationship with nature is not a recent
phenomenon. Degradation of human culture was indicated in the early stages of our civilization:

“The men of fifth century B.C.E, who wrote out the stories of Moses, of Abraham, and even Noah, depicted them already pleading with God to save their visibly corrupt generations. The mournings of the wise recur as a comic refrain down the vaults of recorded time.”

Another reference to the degradation of human culture is the Hindu’s concept of “kaliyuga”, “the Sanskrit word for ‘our own degenerate and unfortunate times’, which means, “the end of the end” Dillard points out how the Hindus mentioned this age of degeneration as early as a time between 300 B.C.E and 300 C.E. She seems to affirm these statements about a degenerate human culture exerting its negative impact on nature.

The culture-nature divide is thus accepted as a reality of modern civilization by ecopsychologists as well as by the major nature writers of America. It is quite surprising to note that the ecopsycologists’ belief that a healthy human psyche that ensures a healthy human culture is essential for the health of the planet is shared by these writers of the ‘green’ tradition of America. Like the ecopsychologists, these writers too trace the roots of the segregation of culture and nature either to the beginning of agriculture or to the industrial revolution. The solutions that the writers suggest vary according to their perceptions of human life.
For Abbey the smooth passage from culture to nature was an indication of the integration the two worlds. He spent his entire life divided between these two entities. But the ‘middle way’ that he points out does not seem to integrate culture and nature completely. Gary Snyder’s concept of the ‘tribe’ is his attempt to solve the problem of the disturbing dichotomy; it is the middle place where the encounter of culture and nature is achieved by humanity. A smooth integration is made possible by the ancient wisdom preserved by the tribe. Wendell Berry considers agriculture as perfect ground for the integration of culture and nature. Both Snyder and Berry believe that human culture has its roots in nature and hence wilderness itself is a model for culture. The values and practices of the society assume great significance in maintaining a balanced relationship between the worlds of culture and nature. McKibben too reflects the ideas of ecopsychologists when he considers the culture-nature dichotomy as detrimental to humanity as well as to nature. In the case of Annie Dillard, however, the relationship between these two entities remains unresolved and this forces her to assume the role of an observer of the complex process of culture-nature interactions. This unresolved ambivalence is prevalent throughout her work.

Ecopsychologist David Abram’s views on the culture- nature dichotomy and its consequences provide an apt concluding note to the analysis one of the most significant topics both in ecocriticism and ecopsychology:

“Caught up in a mass of abstractions, our attention hypnotized by a host of human-made technologies that only reflect us back upon ourselves, it is all too easy for us to forget our carnal inheritance in a
more-than-human matrix of sensations and sensibilities. Our bodies have formed themselves in delicate reciprocity with the manifold textures, sounds and shapes of an animate Earth; our eyes have evolved in subtle interaction with other eyes, as our ears are attuned by their very structure to the howling of wolves and the honking geese. To shut ourselves off from these other voices, to continue by our life-styles to condemn these other sensibilities to the oblivion of extinction, is to rob our own minds of their coherence. We are human only in contact and conviviality with what is not human.”153
END NOTES

2. Roszak, Where the Wasteland Ends, 6.
4. Roszak, Where the Wasteland Ends, xviii.
5. Roszak, Where the Wasteland Ends, xxii.
6. Roszak, Where the Wasteland Ends, 10.
7. Roszak, Where the Wasteland Ends, 10.
9. Roszak, Where the Wasteland Ends, xxv.
13. Glendenning, My Name Is Chellis & I’m in Recovery From Western Civilization, 164.
14. Glendenning, My Name Is Chellis & I’m in Recovery From Western Civilization, 165.
17. Eric Todd Smith, “Dropping the Subject: Reflections on the Motives of an Ecological Criticism”, Reading the Earth: New Directions in the study of Literature and the environment, ed. Michael P Branch, Rochelle Johnson,

20. Glen Love quoted by Eric Todd Smith, 33.

25. Glendinning, My Name Is Chellis& I’m in Recovery From Western Civilization, 113.
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42. Abbey, The Fool’s Progress, 104.
43. Abbey, Desert Solitaire, 291.
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53. Adamson, 42.
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56. Peter Wild quoted by Adamson, 38.
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| 98  | Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 21.          |
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| 106 | Berry, *The Landscape of Harmony*, 35.          |
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| 122 | Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 57.         |
| 124 | Berry, *The Landscape of Harmony*, 52.          |
| 125 | Berry, *The Landscape of Harmony*, 52.          |
| 127 | McKibben, 47.                                   |

129. McKibben, 47.
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