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### **Personifying the Earth: Terry Tempest Williams's Technique Towards Equality**

The nature writing of Terry Tempest Williams is extremely effective in stirring up emotion in the reader. She discusses many different themes in her writing, a few of these being politics, the beauty of nature, religion, family aspects, and also historical information. Her writing is prose-like and poetic, which sets her apart from many other nature writers, especially those who focus on politics. Uniquely, Terry Tempest Williams makes her political statements stand out in a different way. She writes of family, religion, and other universals to tug at the heartstrings of the government officials she is trying to sway. One strong element Williams uses in both her political and non-political nature writing is personification. Williams uses this technique to equalize the value of both human life and the natural world.

According to Dictionary.com, personification can be defined specifically as "A figure of speech in which inanimate objects or abstractions are endowed with human qualities or are represented as possessing human form." In Williams' work, she creates a human-like place when describing a rock, a tree, an animal, or other natural elements. In doing this, the audience experiences an unconscious reaction that puts nature and humans on an equal playing field. This technique is especially effective in her political messages because in those pieces she must always defend nature from human acts. Whether or not her use of personification completely reverses a government proposal is somewhat extreme, but the technique she uses in her writing is definitely effective and important to some degree. Two works in which personification is prevalent are "Labor" and "Desert Quartet." Both of these will be examined closely to see both examples of personification, and the underlying message Williams is trying to portray.

"Labor" is an essay describing Williams' decision to not have children. As a Mormon, she has faced a great deal of religious pressure to produce offspring, but has chosen to give birth in another way. Williams' claims to metaphorically give birth to the land, creating the same connection a mother would possess with a child. Throughout the essay, Williams provides encouragement to the reader, repeating the line "We can begin to live differently" (159, 162). She speaks of the land in human-like ways, and often makes claims that land and humans should be balanced on the earth.

There are two different ways in which Williams sends her message of equality. Throughout the essay, there are times when she makes direct statements referring to her desire for balance, but also, she makes indirect statements, that unconsciously relay the same message to the reader, as do her blunt statements. Two nearly identical statements are made by Williams in "Labor" that straightforwardly speak her message. One of these is found when she writes, "Perhaps it is time to adopt a much needed code of ethics, one that will exchange the sacred rights of humans for the rights of all beings on the planet" (159). The second statement suggests that "Our human-centered point of view can evolve into an Earth-centered one" (162). Although these quotes are defending nature, the interesting and strong point is that Williams does not place nature above humans, but instead suggests that nature and humans can be placed on equal ground. Williams makes a personal statement on her message also, saying, "I trace my genealogy back to the land. Human and wild, I can see myself whole." She continues on this

idea, stating that “Our genetic makeup is not so different from the collared lizard, the canyon wren now calling, or the great horned owl who watches from the cottonwood near the creek” (157). Williams is asking her audience why, if we are so similar to animals are humans considered a dominant and more important part of the world?

Williams voices her opinion of value that can be found in nature by saying that “The wide-open vistas that sustain our souls, the depth of silence that pushes us toward sanity, return us to a kind of equilibrium” (158). This implies that not only are humans and nature so close in importance physically, but on a psychological level as well. Nature has the ability to pull humans down from the frantic state they have ironically fallen into from other human contact. Williams sends out a warning here, saying, “the weight of our species will only continue to tip the scales” (158). Although Williams is attempting to portray nature and humans as equal, it is clear that she places the blame of the imbalance on the human half of the equation. It is the humans that have ignored or destroyed the nature, not the other way around.

Beyond these obvious statements, Williams strongly supports her argument by interjecting unconscious descriptions of nature in human-like form. She personifies the natural world in her poetic writing to not only make the work appeal to the reader musically, but to instill more thought from the audience on her proposal. One immediate example of personification can be found in the opening descriptions of her essay. Williams writes about the “Birthing Rock”, which creates the idea that the rock is somehow related to the human element of giving birth (154). Not only does this bring life to the non-living rock, but also incorporates a sense of personal relationship. Birth symbolizes family, recreation, and biological connection, and by placing the rock/human relationship in the category, nature and humans are depicted equally.

Williams continues to describe the Birthing Rock, and claims that when carved, the rock will bleed red (155). Again, this assertion is not a blunt political comment, but a reference to her message. Bleeding signifies pain and suffering, which gives emotion and physical feeling to the rock. This implies that not only is it immoral to hurt another human being, but it should be considered just as wrong to “hurt” or treat unfairly earth’s elements. Not only does Williams give emotion and physical feeling to the rock, but she also supplies it with intelligence when she writes, “One feels their intelligence held in the rocks” (155). With these three traits the rock moves closer and closer to a human-like object.

Gender is also an issue in personifying nature. There is the ageless reference to Mother Earth that is often overlooked as giving gender to nature, but in Williams’ work she speaks a bit more clearly about gender. When speaking about the boulder she is near, she writes, “It feels male but it could be female” (155). Not only is this implying gender of the boulder, but it is also relating gender to a feeling, rather than to physical distinctions. Doing this highlights the idea that all things can transcend specific meaning. Something can “feel male” when it is not human, and something can give life through “birth” when really it isn’t physically capable. Williams really brings balance to humans and their environment with her words when she implies that both aspects are capable of things that are normally only considered “human.”

The heart is another thing that Williams twists into non-living things to make her claim of equality. She refers to the “heart of our nation” implying that the earth is one complete living being (157). Williams also says, “I felt the curvature of my heart become the curvature of Earth” (159). In saying this, Williams reiterates her idea of being whole when made up of an equal

combination of human and earth. The two are differently equal, and at the same time, the same. A bit later in her essay, Williams describes a metaphorical river that is pulling her along, drowning her. She says that “The river changes its heart” when she begins to gain control again (160). The river’s heart is able to choose and willingly change, which implies reason; something most believe only humans can obtain. Not only does this river have the ability to reason, but according to Williams it also has muscle. This completes the river, equaling it to humans because it has both mental and physical capability.

In the final page of Williams’ essay, she makes her final statement in reference to the personification of nature. She writes, “Someone cared enough to create life on a rock face, to animate an inanimate object. Someone believed she has the power to communicate a larger vision to those who would read these marks on stone, a vision that would endure through time” (163). Not only does this quote imply that this idea of equality was present many years ago, but it makes the reader feel as if they are not alone in this quest. Williams’ personification in “Labor” highlights the problem of human domination of nature, proposes the idea of equality, and finally gives the reader confidence to stay faithful to these views.

In “Desert Quartet,” Williams makes more significant references to the equality of humans and nature. This essay looks at four elements of nature: Earth, Water, Fire, and Air. In the text, Williams writes about her experiences with each of these elements. Each description is very erotic and describes some very intimate encounters. Williams writes towards a deeper meaning that humans and nature can join together, almost to the point where there is no distinction between the two. In this essay, Williams actually feels closer to nature than she does to humanity. She says, “I touch the skin of my face, It seems so callow. Moving my fingers over the soft flesh that covers my cheekbones, I wonder what it means to be human and why, at this particular moment, rock seems more accessible and yielding than my own species” (199). Throughout “Desert Quartet” Williams tries to explain this feeling through attempts of equalizing humans and nature.

The idea that humans and nature are the same is mentioned frequently in “Desert Quartet.” In the opening sentences of the essay, Williams writes, “I am walking barefoot on sandstone, flesh responding to flesh” (195). This statement is interesting because Williams does not merely suggest that the two elements are equal, but claims them to be the same thing. In doing this, the audience is not left with the opportunity to agree or disagree as easily as they would be if the thought were presented as a recommendation. Williams also writes, “I come to the rock in a moment of stillness, giving and receiving, where there is no partition between my body and the body of Earth” (197). Again, she uses the same term for two different elements. Both “body” and “flesh” are considered to be human-like qualities, but Williams shows no hesitation to use these terms in reference to nature.

When Williams speaks about water, she makes similar points, but this time in even more unarguable statements. She simply writes “I am water,” and then a bit later says, “We are water” (201, 202). A writer cannot be any more blunt than this. Williams believes that humans and nature are equal, but also in some ways are one in the same.

Finally, Williams repeats her idea when writing about fire. She is sitting near a fire, experiencing its heat, and at the same time feeling very much at home in the desert. She writes, “I sit back on my haunches, pleased that the fire is growing in the desert, in me” (205). In nature writing, fire is often used as a metaphor for certain feelings, such as desire, love, and sometimes

anger. Here, Williams feels comfort in the fire. She feels that where she is in this moment is where she belongs, and the fire growing inside of her connects her more securely to the desert.

Another component of “Desert Quartet” is that of giving voice to the natural world. When Williams is traveling through the desert, she puts her faith in the rocks that surround her. She writes, “the hand-stacked piles of rocks that say, ‘Trust me, turn here, I know the way’” (196). This quote is interesting because Williams does give a voice to the rocks, but at the same time, these rocks were placed here by humans to help others know where they are going. This is a bit of a paradox when applied to Williams’ technique of personification. Did Williams give the rocks voice through her writing, or had they already obtained this voice from those who placed them there? As Williams moves on, she makes some simple statements about the earth and its voice. At one point she writes, “the desert sighs,” and later that “The wind becomes a wail” (197, 210).

Voice is not the only human quality that Williams provides nature with in her essay. She goes on to mention a wide range of other qualities that add to her personification technique. For example, pulse is a strong representation of life, and not something often associated with nature, but Williams writes, “The palms of my hands search for a pulse in the rocks” (197). Breathing is another symbol of life that Williams gives to nature in her experience with the fire. She simply says, “A spark breathes” (206). This is unique because sparks are thought of to be short-lived, but to Williams, it is given the ability to breathe and to live.

Vertebrae, tongues, mouths, and lips are all also written about in reference to the earth (206-207, 209). Upon writing these human qualities into her descriptions of nature, Williams is able to create a balanced scale for the reader to see both humans and nature on equal levels. At one point in the essay, Williams even writes an example of de-personification by giving humans the qualities of the earth. She writes, “Through the weathering of our spirit, the erosion of our souls, we are vulnerable” (197). By reversing her idea in this quote, nature comes across as dominant, having control over the human. This technique serves a strong purpose by showing the audience that in some ways, they are not in control of nature.

Throughout both of these essays, Terry Tempest Williams uses her poetic language to personify nature, which results in the view of equality between nature and humans. She uses this technique to appeal to the audience, describe nature beautifully, and also to make strong political points. To Terry Tempest Williams, nature and humans contain the same amount of significance, and in turn should be treated accordingly.

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