

A Study on Illness Writing in *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* from the Perspective of Spiritual Ecology

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Received: 13 Jun 2026; Received in revised form: 08 Jul 2026; Accepted: 13 Jul 2026; Available online: 18 Jul 2026

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Abstract— Terry Tempest Williams's nonfiction *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* interweaves family trauma and ecological crisis through a dual narrative, standing as a classic spanning nature writing, trauma literature, and women's literature. Using Lu Shuyuan's Spiritual Ecology theory as its core framework, this paper focuses on two manifestations of spiritual ecological imbalance reflected in the work's illness writing, spiritual vacuum and behavioral incompetence, analyzes the underlying causes behind the imbalance, and explores the practical paths for the reconstruction of spiritual ecology. The study finds that ecological pollution caused by nuclear tests and alienation from nature driven by anthropocentrism jointly lead to the imbalance of individual spiritual ecology. However, the restoration and reconstruction of spiritual ecology can be achieved through individuals' self-reconciliation with illness and the reconstruction of spiritual connections between humans and nature. The similar fates of the community of women and bird species in the work not only reveal the dual crises of spiritual ecological imbalance and natural ecological destruction in modern society but also provide a literary reference for contemporary people to address spiritual predicaments and ecological challenges.

Keywords— *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*; *Spiritual Ecology*; *Illness Writing*; *Spiritual Ecological Imbalance*



I. INTRODUCTION

The renowned contemporary American author Terry Tempest Williams (1955-) is a writer who integrates feminism, Mormon faith, scientific inquiry, environmental activism, and social engagement, with her prose distinguished by exceptional beauty and passionate conviction. *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (1991),¹ her representative work, is hailed as a classic of American nature writing. Based on the author's own life experiences, the work constructs two interwoven

narrative threads: one traces the family's history of women battling cancer—Williams's grandmother, maternal grandmother, mother, and aunts all contracted breast cancer due to long-term residence downwind from the U.S. nuclear test site, becoming the "Clan of One-Breasted Women"; the other recounts the ecological transformation of the Great Salt Lake, where rising water levels submerge the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge near her hometown, causing birds to lose their habitat and face a survival crisis.

The book's thirty-six chapters are titled after bird species, with each chapter noting the lake's elevation beneath the title. The fluctuating water levels subtly echo the progression of her mother's cancer and the fate of the

¹ In this paper, full title of the book will be given at first reference but shortened in subsequent references as "*Refuge*".

bird refuge. As Anson puts it, "...both the feminine and the natural world as concurrent *loci* of Foucault's biopolitical power. And it is the amalgam of land and woman that situates both to be what can be seen as victims of biopolitical race war" (69). By blending personal grief over loss, familial trauma from illness, and ecological crisis, Williams depicts through delicate prose the physical and psychological torment of disease, as well as the process of drawing strength from nature to reconstruct the meaning of life. By the Great Salt Lake, the fates of the community of women and the bird species are closely linked, and their shared circumstances forge them into a "community of life" (Li and Wang 96). The work's unique structural design, profound ecological reflection, and sincere emotional expression make it a cross-genre classic that transcends nature writing, trauma literature, and women's literature.

Since the rise of industrial civilization, particularly in the twentieth century, the excessive exploitation and development of natural resources have severely damaged the ecological environment, triggering a series of ecological crises. Meanwhile, the rapid transformation of modern society and the phenomenal growth of the economy have far exceeded humanity's adaptive capacity, plunging modern individuals into various spiritual predicaments. These crises not only result in individual psychological imbalance and loosening of social bonds but also pose systemic challenges to the evolution of human civilization on a macro level. "Applying the concept of 'Spiritual Ecology' to the interpretation of 'historical experience' can offer valuable insights for contemporary social development" (Lu 10). Against this backdrop, ecocriticism in both Eastern and Western literary studies has turned its attention to the human spiritual sphere, gradually giving rise to spiritual ecology as a subfield of ecocriticism, seeking to uncover the ecological wisdom embedded in literary texts and explore pathways to resolve the spiritual ecological crisis.

As a branch of ecology, spiritual ecology emerged in the course of ecological development. In the process of reflecting on ecological crises and spiritual confusion, in addition to the natural and social environments, spiritual ecology has increasingly been emphasized and gained theoretical support. Lu Shuyuan posits that "spirit" primarily encompasses human emotional, cognitive, and volitional activities, which are outwardly manifested in value orientations, reflective capacities, and the pursuit of belief. Observing that ecology encompasses a vast array of subjects, and inspired by "the trichotomous research paradigm" at home and abroad, Lu divides ecology into three components: first, natural ecology, which focuses on the relatively independent natural world; second, social

ecology, which centers on the political and economic life of human society; and third, spiritual ecology, which takes human inner emotional activities and the spiritual world as its object of study. While closely related to the first two, spiritual ecology can nonetheless be defined as a relatively independent field of inquiry (Lu 145-147). Lu defines spiritual ecology as "a discipline that studies the interrelationships between spiritual subjects (primarily humans) and their environments (including natural, social, and cultural environments). It concerns, on the one hand, the healthy growth of spiritual subjects, and on the other, the balance, stability, and evolution of an ecosystem under the coordination of spiritual variables" (148). Therefore, an individual's spiritual ecology is an indispensable component of the overall ecosystem, and its state of health directly affects the harmony and stability of Earth's ecosystem. The research scope of spiritual ecology encompasses both the subtle connections between the inner spiritual world of humans and the external social and natural environments and the complex relational networks formed by the interaction of individual spirits among people. The harmonious coexistence of these two types of relationships is key to fostering a virtuous cycle within the ecosystem. Once they become imbalanced or discordant, they can easily become triggers that exacerbate ecological degradation. Lu argues that when the modern spiritual realm suffers from ecological pollution, it manifests in five symptoms: spiritual vacuum, behavioral incompetence, homogenization of lifestyle, existential alienation, and reification of the psyche (153-157). These five symptoms are sometimes not isolated but intertwine and reinforce each other, collectively forming a complex picture of the spiritual ecological imbalance of modern people.

Since its first publication in 1991, *Refuge* has garnered widespread academic attention. Scholars at home and abroad have approached the work from multiple dimensions and interdisciplinary perspectives, enriching and expanding its literary research framework and interpretive space. Current studies have covered autobiographical genre characteristics, elegiac narrative strategies, material feminism, Mormon cultural context, reconstruction of memory and natural/cultural landscapes, body writing, phenomenology, and archetypal criticism. Among the many research directions, ecocriticism has consistently been the core focus, with mainstream ecological theories such as land ethics, ecofeminism, ecological Marxism, ecopsychology, natural value theory, and deep ecology already incorporated into textual interpretation. However, it should be noted that existing research has not yet deeply explored the spiritual ecological connotations embedded in the illness writing of the work, nor systematically clarified the logical

interconnections between illness and the imbalances in natural, social, and spiritual ecology. Specialized research on illness writing from the perspective of spiritual ecology remains relatively underdeveloped, with further space for expansion and deepening.

In *Refuge*, the traumatic experiences of the women in Williams's family suffering from cancer resonate with the spiritual ecological imbalance revealed by Lu Shuyuan's theory. This paper, taking this theory as its core framework, focuses on two manifestations of spiritual ecological imbalance in the characters, namely, spiritual vacuum and behavioral incompetence, analyzes the causes of this imbalance, and explores feasible strategies for achieving spiritual ecological restoration and reconstruction through specific paths, aiming to provide literary insights and practical references for contemporary society in addressing spiritual predicaments and ecological crises.

II. ILLNESS AS MIRROR: MANIFESTATION OF SPIRITUAL ECOLOGICAL IMBALANCE

Spiritual vacuum refers to modern people losing not only the instinctive confidence of animals but also the measure of value at the cultural level, causing life to lose direction and meaning, and individuals to fall into a spiritual predicament of boredom and despair (Lu 152). In *Refuge*, the cancer experiences of the women in Williams's family are not merely physical ailments but manifestations of spiritual ecological imbalance on the bodily plane. The cancer progression of her mother, Diane, runs through the book, serving as a microcosm of the collapse and struggle of the individual and family spiritual world. In 1971, at age thirty-eight, Diane was first diagnosed with breast cancer; the trauma of a mastectomy left not only a bodily scar but also planted a latent fear of death in her heart. In 1983, when the cancer recurred and metastasized to her abdomen, this second blow utterly shattered her expectations of a stable life. Her muttered confession, "I think I have denied having cancer for years... I guess I'm giving up all sense of who I am" (Williams 200), reveals the collapse of self-identity: beyond her roles as wife and mother, her individual existence is completely dissolved by the disease, plunging her into the spiritual vacuum described by Lu.

Behavioral incompetence means that "modern people are subjected to invisible, debilitating control and compulsion; individuals appear increasingly powerless and increasingly dependent, which in turn triggers inner tension and anxiety" (Lu 153). The spiritual trauma caused by illness in the book is highly contagious, spreading throughout the family's emotional world. In caring for her

mother, Williams not only endures the pain of losing a loved one but also falls into identity anxiety over whether she herself will also fall ill, given the family history of cancer. Particularly striking is her phone conversation with her cousin Lynne, who asks whether it is merely coincidence that "Three women in one family unrelated by blood, all contract cancer within months of each other?" "Terry, I'm scared for you and me" "So am I. So am I" (261), thus becoming trapped in a cycle of fear, avoidance, and confusion. For her father, John, learning of his wife's illness replaces his former steadfastness with a sense of powerlessness; he even loses emotional control in his fear as his wife nears death, rushing upstairs and shouting at the cars filling the driveway, "Get out! All of you! This is my house and my wife!" (227), and Williams feels her father's eyes look like "a rabid dog's" (228). Her brothers grew up under the shadow of their mother's possible departure; Hank, in particular, becomes silent and withdrawn during his mother's critical illness, burying his fear and grief deep inside. He is "the child who, since memory, has lived with the fear that his mother may die. He could not speak" (207). With grandmothers Lettie and Mimi and other female members in the family successively dying from cancer, a chain of intergenerational trauma is formed. Every family member becomes sensitive and fragile under the shadow of illness, and the family, once warm and close, grows distant and suffocating.

This trauma also manifests as doubt about the meaning of life and the collapse of spiritual pillars. During chemotherapy, Diane experiences intense physical pain and mental torment. During her first treatment, she feels "so cold, even blankets wouldn't help" (42). The side effects of subsequent chemotherapy like vomiting and hair loss cause her agony, but more painful is the despair of losing control over her life. She hesitates and says, "I'm not afraid of my own death, but I am afraid of the pain" (155). Behind this fear of pain lies a sense of powerlessness over life's dignity being stripped away by disease. Life is no longer a hopeful journey but has become a long standoff with a terminal illness, as her spiritual world gradually crumbles under repeated blows. When Williams and her family care for Diane, they experience times when "horror splashes our skin like scalding water as we watch her writhe with nausea and pain" (213). Although Diane "is still the peacemaker trying to create a calm in the midst of her death" and "there is nothing she can do to ameliorate the situation" (214), Williams herself comes to believe that "An individual doesn't get cancer, a family does" (214).

III. TRACING THE ROOTS: CAUSES OF SPIRITUAL ECOLOGICAL IMBALANCE

Behind the high incidence of cancer among Williams's female family members lies a hidden ecological contamination. The environmental pollution brought about by nuclear testing becomes a deep-seated cause of spiritual ecological imbalance. The author's family had long resided by the Great Salt Lake in Utah, which happened to lie downwind from the Nevada nuclear test site. From 1951 to 1962, the United States conducted numerous above-ground nuclear tests in the area, and radioactive fallout blanketed the surrounding land and water sources, as the military deemed the desert around the Great Salt Lake "an ideal place to experiment with biological warfare" (241). Even an Atomic Energy Commission official referred to the area as "a good place to throw used razor blades" (242). In the epilogue, "The Clan of One-Breasted Women," Williams recounts her father's clear memory of driving through the area on September 7, 1957, and witnessing "this golden-stemmed cloud," "mushroom," and "a light ash was raining on the car" (283). This chain of evidence proves that the contaminated environment became a direct trigger for the high cancer rates among the family's women.

Nuclear testing brings not only physical contamination but also long-term spiritual trauma. This trauma is insidious and intergenerational: the harm of nuclear radiation to the human body is not immediate but erupts in the form of diseases like cancer after a decade or even decades. The women in Williams's family lived for years in the contaminated environment without knowing it. "Children growing up in the American South-west, drinking contaminated milk from contaminated cows, even from the contaminated breasts of their mothers, my mother-members, years later, of the Clan of One-Breasted Women" (283); people were unaware of the lurking danger. This deception deepens the family's spiritual predicament once they learn the truth: their loved ones' deaths and their own illnesses were not accidental but consequences of man-made environmental disaster. When Williams realizes this, she falls into suspicion of authority and anger at fate, feeling, "I realized the deceit I had been living under" (283). This realization utterly subverts her once steadfast Mormon faith and respect for authority, shaking the very foundation of her spiritual world.

More seriously, behind the nuclear testing lies the suppression of individual citizens by governmental power. In 1950s America, at the height of the Cold War, nuclear testing was deemed vital to national security, with public health relegated to secondary importance. The government deliberately concealed the dangers of nuclear testing, publicly claiming that tests "may be conducted with adequate assurance of safety under conditions prevailing at

the bombing reservations" and even stating that "We find no basis for concluding that harm to any individual has resulted from radioactive fallout" (284). This disregard for individual life turned people living downwind from the test site into anonymous victims. Williams "records on the surface her mother's illness and the decline of the birds..." but "the Mormon culture's advocacy of forbearance and withdrawal is the underlying cause behind this tragedy that cannot be ignored" (Zou 71). Under the influence of the Mormon cultural emphasis that "authority is respected, obedience is revered, and independent thinking is not", Williams was taught as a young girl who does not "make waves" or "rock the boat" (Williams 285), and the women in the family initially choose to bear their suffering silently. Diane, diagnosed with breast cancer in 1971, said "I have never acknowledged my anger over losing my breast as a young woman" (200); grandmother Lettie endures silently after falling ill, and grandmother Mimi puts on a brave face before surgery. This passive acceptance further exacerbates the spiritual ecological imbalance: when individuals cannot face harm squarely or dare not resist injustice, the spiritual world sinks into repression and numbness.

Another critical crux of spiritual ecological imbalance lies in human's distorted perception of nature's value. In the development of modern civilization, humans have gradually fallen into the trap of anthropocentrism, positioning nature as the "Other," a silent and passive recipient, and assuming the right to explore its mysteries, tame its wildness, and plunder its resources (Zhang 126), while neglecting its fundamental value as a source of spiritual nourishment. For a long time, people have focused only on the economic value of the Great Salt Lake, ignoring its ecological value as a core ecosystem component. When rising lake waters threaten industrial facilities and human habitation, people first think of engineering solutions such as breaching the causeway or building dams to divert water, or extreme plans like "nuking the lake, creating a cavern by the atomic explosion" or "dye the lake purple" to increase evaporation (248), attempting to control nature through human intervention rather than reflecting on the damage human activities have caused to nature. This failure to recognize nature's intrinsic value has gradually weakened the spiritual connection between humans and the natural world. Williams poignantly observes: "We miss the eyes of birds, focusing only on feathers" (95). People see only the economic or ornamental value of birds, forgetting that they "mediate between heaven and earth" (95). The wetlands around the Great Salt Lake have been extensively developed for farmland irrigation, industrial production, and urban construction, causing bird habitats to shrink

continuously. When wetlands are destroyed and birds depart, humanity loses not only natural landscapes but also a spiritual anchor. Williams always finds peace and strength in observing birds. Cheng Hong writes in her translator's preface that the California gulls' tenacity in flying fifty to one hundred miles daily for food teaches Williams to persevere in adversity (9); the white pelicans' nesting and their "inclusive community" allow her to feel the warmth of solidarity (8); the Canada geese's nocturnal flights reveal to her the tranquility of life (8). When these birds are displaced by ecological destruction, the human spiritual world also loses an important source of nourishment.

More troublingly, this alienation from nature has formed a kind of collective unconsciousness. The initial indifference toward the Great Salt Lake's rising water crisis and the apathy toward the birds' plight exemplify this collective unconsciousness. When Williams tells construction workers building a dike about the Wilson's phalarope's habit of "spinning sixty revolutions per minute" for feeding, the workers are unimpressed and even joke: "Who in the hell would spend their life counting how many times a bird spins around?" (63). When the government plans to pump water from the Great Salt Lake to the western desert, more people are concerned about the economic benefits of the project than about its long-term ecological impact. This indifference to nature is, in essence, the desertification of the spiritual ecology. When humans cease to revere nature and cease to draw wisdom and strength from it, the spiritual world becomes utilitarian and narrow, ultimately falling into self-imposed isolation.

IV. HEALING ILLNESS AND THE MIND: PRACTICAL PATHWAYS FOR SPIRITUAL ECOLOGICAL RECONSTRUCTION

"There can be no place for 'spirit' in the human ecosystem?" (Lu 26). The core starting point of spiritual ecological reconstruction is the individual's reconciliation with illness and the reconstruction of self-identity. Diane, throughout her cancer journey, undergoes a transition from resistance to acceptance, which signals an awakening of the spiritual world. Initially, she is filled with fear and anger toward cancer, refusing chemotherapy and viewing it as poisoning her body; but the will to survive shifts her mindset, and she asks Williams to help her visualize chemotherapy as the Colorado River flowing through her body, "washing away" the cancer cells. As her condition progresses, she gradually realizes that "It feels good to finally be able to embrace my cancer. It's almost like a friend" (Williams 156). This positive psychological reframing is essentially a re-embrace of life: no longer

treating disease as an enemy but as part of life, seeking meaning in living alongside it.

This self-reconciliation is also reflected in a renewed understanding of life's value. After falling ill, Diane realizes that the essence of life lies not in its length but in its quality. She writes letters to encourage Tammy, who has just undergone brain surgery, telling her, "It (illness) brings life into focus one day at a time. You live each moment and when you see the sunset at the end of the day, you are so grateful to be part of that experience" (84), thus achieving self-transcendence through helping others. During chemotherapy, she buys a favorite red dress and attends a church Christmas dance, pursuing personal joy and dignity even in the final stage of life. She faces death calmly, no longer negating her self-worth because of her physical condition; even in her final moments, she reads poetry with her family until "the five of us became hysterical, laughing so hard we were sobbing" (222), using humor to dissolve grief. This shift from focusing on the length of life to valuing its quality frees her spiritual world from the shackles of illness and restores peace and strength.

In accompanying her mother through cancer, Williams also completes her own self-healing and identity reconstruction. Initially overshadowed by the successive deaths of the women in her family and at age 34, she became "the matriarch of the Mormon Tempest clan and lives herself in the shadow of this foreboding legacy of suffering and unnatural death" (Austin 14). Williams ultimately ceases to be consumed by anxiety over her family's cancer history and instead confirms her identity through writing the family story. She no longer sees herself as a victim of the Clan of One-Breasted Women but as a transmitter of her mother's spirit and a connector of humans and nature. After her mother's death, she places her mother's hair "over the tips of young cottonwood trees—For the birds—For their nests—In the spring" (233). This ritualistic act symbolizes her reconciliation with the past and with herself. Through witnessing her mother's struggle with illness, Williams finds her life's mission: to awaken reverence for nature and appreciation for life through her writing. The establishment of this self-identity marks the deep restoration of her spiritual ecology.

Returning to nature is also a crucial path for restoring spiritual ecology. "Dedicating oneself to reviving the intimate human-earth relationship and advocating the return to wilderness is the first step in Williams's vision of returning to the spiritual homeland" (Tan and Deng 56). The Great Salt Lake, as a refuge, becomes a sacred sanctuary for Williams and her mother to heal their spirits. Nature, with its inclusivity and resilience, provides the most fundamental nourishment for an imbalanced spiritual world. After her cancer recurs, Diane chooses to take a

final rafting trip to the Grand Canyon. “The heat of the sandstone penetrated my skin as I lay on the red rocks. Desert light bathed my soul...the oldest exposed rock in the West, gave me a perspective that will carry me through whatever I must face” (Williams 29). It is nature that gives her courage to face her illness. During chemotherapy, she and Williams drift for hours in the Great Salt Lake, “merging with salt water and sky so completely, we were resolved, dissolved, in peace” (78), and the saline water eases her physical pain and mental anxiety. “When self-awareness turns to a place connected by blood, a person can deeply feel the interchangeability of energy between humans and the land. In this active feeling, one gains emotional comfort and settles energy from the earth” (Yuan 35). In nature’s embrace, she temporarily forgets the torment of illness and re-experiences the vitality of life. This spiritual connection with nature becomes an important pillar supporting her fight against disease.

V. CONCLUSION

Through the cancer trauma of the women in Williams’s family and the ecological transformation of the Great Salt Lake, *Refuge* presents a shared fate between humans and nature, using literary narrative to demonstrate that spiritual ecology offers a framework encompassing nature, society, and the individual. Using Lu Shuyuan’s spiritual ecology theory as its theoretical framework, this paper systematically analyzes the manifestations of spiritual ecological imbalance in the work, revealing the modern predicaments of spiritual vacuum and behavioral incompetence. It traces their roots to anthropocentric alienation from nature, governmental suppression of individuals, and religious culture’s constraint on emotions. In an interview with Scott London, Williams states: “As a writer, I believe that it is our task, our responsibility, to hold the mirror up to social injustices that we see and to create a prayer of beauty” (Austin 51). Williams’s words remind us that only by abandoning anthropocentric prejudice, confronting trauma squarely, and revering nature can we achieve the health of individual spiritual ecology and the balance of the entire ecosystem. This is both the literary lesson the work offers to contemporary people and the inevitable choice for the sustainable development of human civilization.

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