

Scorched Earth, River, and Swamp: A Deep Ecological Reading of “Big Two-Hearted River”

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“Big Two-Hearted River” is the final short story in Ernest Hemingway’s collection *In Our Time* in 1925. Nick Adams, the protagonist, as he returns to the wilderness of Michigan for a fishing trip after the war, explores along the river and interacts with the trout in the water, and finally stops before the dark swamp with awe. While achieving mental healing, the consciousness of deep ecology runs through the whole journey. Along with spatial changes, he realizes the intrinsic value of all beings, and his inner ecological self gradually matures.

Keywords: “Big Two-Hearted River”, Ernest Hemingway, deep ecology, ecological self

Introduction

As the global ecological crisis intensifies and environmental awareness becomes more widespread, scholars have begun to reflect on the limitations that the traditional anthropocentric perspective has imposed on literary criticism, calling for a shift in focus toward depictions of nature and ecology in texts that have long been overlooked by humans. The theory of “Deep Ecology” was proposed by Arne Naess in the 1970s. This theory strongly criticizes traditional anthropocentrism and advocates an ecological value system that views humans and all of nature as an equal and interdependent whole. Applying Deep Ecology to the study of Hemingway’s works can break away from past mechanistic interpretations that viewed nature merely as a tool for human spiritual healing. Instead, it allows us to explore, from a non-anthropocentric perspective, the consciousness of ecological self and intrinsic value embedded within the texts, thereby providing a new theoretical foundation for reflecting the existential predicaments of modern humanity.

In the short story “Big Two-Hearted River” (Hemingway, 1970), Nick’s journey is both a psychological journey of healing from personal trauma and a journey of ecological awareness transformation. The story’s depiction of three distinct places reveals Hemingway’s profound understanding of deep ecology. As the scenes shift, Nick undergoes an ecological self-realization, transitioning from a mindset of “binary opposition” to one of “harmony between humanity and nature”, representing a deep ecological vision in which humanity rebuilds its ecological identity and ultimately moves toward a state of symbiosis with all lives.

The Scorched Earth: Ruins of Anthropocentrism

Nick’s journey begins on the scorched earth of Seney Town. This place has borne the brunt of the disasters brought about by the hubris of anthropocentrism. “There was no town, nothing but the rails and the burned-over

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country” (Hemingway, 1970, p. 133). This visually striking scene stands as a powerful indictment of human industrial civilization. Arne Naess (1989, pp. 189-191) argues that the crisis of modern Western civilization stems from viewing nature as both slave and raw material. Rather than launching into an explicit diatribe against the evils of modern industry, Hemingway utilizes a detached, objective, and minimalist style to lay bare the ruins of anthropocentrism. As a trauma inflicted upon the Michigan wilderness, the scorched earth is just an ecological mirror to the war-torn landscape of Europe. World War I represents the zenith of industrialized mass slaughter, and though Nick has escaped from the European battlefields, he confronts another form of “post-war ruins” within the nature of his homeland. In the framework of deep ecology, the ruthless exploitation of nature and human warfare share many similarities; both are rooted in the brutal trampling of life. Through this minute yet harrowing biological image, Hemingway ruthlessly shatters the illusion that environmental destruction is either confined to the inorganic world or ultimately inconsequential. Besides, he profoundly exposes how humanity inflicts deep trauma and alienation upon every single member of the ecological community, down to its most minuscule participants.

What is even more moving and theoretically profound is Nick’s attitude toward this blackened grasshopper. Faced with this creature alienated by environmental catastrophe, he does not regard it from a lofty human vantage point, nor does he show any disgust toward this insect covered in soot. The scorched earth of Seney constitutes the ruins that symbolize the collapse of anthropocentrism. Standing on this scorched earth, Nick begins to relinquish his sense of human superiority and embarks on a journey of ecological symbiosis.

The River: Awakening of the Ecological Self

Achieving self-realization is one of the core goals advocated by deep ecology. The “Self” in self-realization transcends the isolated ego of modern Western thought, whose primary purpose is the satisfaction of its own desires, and merges into nature—that is, the “ecological self” based on biocentric equality that symbolizes the organic whole (Devall & Sessions, 1985, pp. 67-68). From the depictions of the art of camping by the river and the philosophical reflections on fishing in the river, Nick’s ecological self has awakened, and he comes to feel a sense of identification between human and nature.

While fishing, Nick reflects on the roles of other living beings in the world through his interactions with the creatures in the river, and comes to understand the true meaning of the principle of biocentric equality. In the history of Western literature, fishing has often been portrayed, much like hunting, as an activity through which humans demonstrate their power and conquer nature. Cases can be found in the whaling scenes of *Moby Dick* and hunting plots of *The Call of the Wild*. But in “Big Two-Hearted River”, Hemingway viewed fishing more as an equal dialogue with nature. The river now holds the same status and rights as human.

Furthermore, Nick’s different attitudes toward large and small trout is a crucial detail. While the narratives of industrial modernity disregard the capacity for pain and the quality of existence of non-human species, Nick’s awakened ecological self-views the trout’s protective mucous coating as no less sacred and inviolable than his own skin. He does not only grant the fish a rational right to exist, but his empathy achieves a profound trans-species extension. What Nick experiences in the river is not the thrill of conquest, but the humility of being a single knot within the net of life. Just as Thoreau (2004, p. 306) described the feeling in *Walden*: “. . .I am affected as if in a peculiar sense I stood in the laboratory of the Artist who made the world and me. . .” The moment Nick perceives and connects with other natural beings in the river is precisely the moment of awakening of his ecological self.

The Swamp: Intrinsic Value of Wilderness

Establishing “intrinsic value” of all beings is a cornerstone of deep ecology, which fundamentally subverts the instrumental rationality and pragmatic views of nature that have prevailed since the Western Enlightenment.

At the end of “Big Two-Hearted River”, Nick encounters a dark, deep swamp that evidently resists human intrusion. If his empathy for the grasshopper in the scorched earth and his angling in the river represent Nick’s practices of reconstructing his ecological self and engaging with nature on equal terms, then the reverence and restraint he exercises when gazing into the swamp constitute the ultimate tribute to the intrinsic value of the natural world, marking the full maturation and sublimation of his deep ecological consciousness. “The river became smooth and deep, and the swamp looked solid with cedar trees... It would not be possible to walk through a swamp like that” (Hemingway, 1970, pp. 154-155). Such a shadowy swamp is conventionally interpreted as a symbol of the unknown fears within the human subconscious or as trauma left by war. However, when viewed through the lens of deep ecology, this swamp precisely constitutes a living realm that remains unaltered by human activity, a sanctuary preserving the purest ecological authenticity. Every cedar tree, every stretch of water, or every organism within this swamp follows its inherent ecological rhythm, engaged in its own cycle of existence. The swamp requires no clearing to facilitate human access, nor does it demand illumination to cater to human aesthetics; its very darkness and danger serve as natural barriers, defending its intrinsic value against human encroachment.

Conclusion

The task of ecocriticism is to rectify the relationship between humanity and nature, fostering harmony between the two, and it advocates moving beyond the conquest and exploitation of nature towards a stance of respect and care (Sun & Fu, 2010, p. 170). Ernest Hemingway’s “Big Two-Hearted River” is far more than a mere story of angling or a narrative of psychological healing; it stands as an ecological masterpiece imbued with profound philosophical depth. The journey of Nick Adams’s spiritual redemption corresponds strictly to the spatial shifting of the natural world. From the scorched ruins of Seney to the lucid currents of the “Big Two-Hearted River”, and finally to the inviolable swamp, Hemingway anticipates a deep ecological vision that transcends his era. Beneath his characteristically restrained prose lies a profound love for, and anxiety over, the Earth’s biosphere. Nearly a century after its publication, amid escalating global environmental crises, the ecological wisdom embedded in “Big Two-Hearted River” has acquired even greater significance: Only by abandoning the arrogance of the conqueror, redefining humanity’s place within the world, and learning to revere the swamp as a boundary of the nature can we truly heal our collective psyche and achieve a harmonious coexistence with the entire community of life.

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