

Environmental Relationships and Our Changing Nature:  
A Study of Hemingway and Harrison's Northern Michigan Writings

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*I dedicate this work to my parents, Sally and Phil Biggs, my eternal guides along the trail of life.*

*I am truly lucky to have followed in your footsteps.*

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## Abstract

As we forge ahead into a new century, we are experiencing unprecedented environmental decline, which calls for a reevaluation of how we interact with the ecological environment. To better understand how we may best move forward and reevaluate our behavioral dispositions toward the environment, we must understand these dispositions and how they have been shaped over time. This thesis identifies and criticizes humanity's attitudes as evinced by our interactions with the environment as they arise in literature, specifically in the Northern Michigan writings of Ernest Hemingway and Jim Harrison.

Hemingway's Nick Adams stories relate the quasi-autobiographical narratives of a boy growing up in the woods of Northern Michigan in the early 1900s. Harrison's characters in his novels *Wolf*, *True North*, and *Returning to Earth*, echo, expand, and reject the attitudes presented by the earlier Hemingway. The writings of these authors capture a snapshot of the environmental attitudes of their respective eras, ultimately revealing the iterative changes throughout the Twentieth Century that provided the scaffolding upon which we construct our cultural behaviors toward the environment today.

The critical school of ecocriticism provides the foundation for inquiry into these writings of the North Woods. Pioneered by Lawrence Buell, ecocriticism's multidisciplinary approach to analysis of literature through an environmentally-tinted lens places emphasis upon textual treatment of the setting and environment in relation to the text as a whole. The argument begins by employing an ecocritical deconstruction of the pervasive binary between man and nature, which has haunted our cultural treatment of the environment for generations. Following, an extended inquiry into authorial treatment of the relationships between characters and the environments in which they are placed reveals the ways in which environmental attitudes and behaviors can be categorized and analyzed within physical, intellectual, and spiritual frameworks, or "relationships," with the environment.

Ultimately, this thesis attempts to reconcile these three relationships together into the baseline for what could be considered an environmental identity—the simultaneously personal and communal correspondence we feel toward our ecological surround. The various relationships that Hemingway and Harrison build into their characters offer insight into how we should—and how we should *not*—balance and adapt our environmental relationships today, so we can pattern them after moral and ecological principles and build an environmental identity ready to withstand the environmental and existential challenges we must face in the coming decades.

Keywords: Hemingway, Harrison, environment, ecocriticism, nature, identity

## Introduction

Ernest Hemingway walked through woods I will never see. I visited these woods, walked the same trails, but the woods themselves are not the same as the ones he lived in. They were not the same for Jim Harrison, another Northern Michigan writer, who both echoes Hemingway and recasts him, as a writer and as a man. For today's wanderers of the woods, the understanding of how to simply *be* in them in a physical, bodily way, is not second nature. We are not at home in the woods like Hemingway's doppelganger Nick Adams was. However, we know more about how the woods work, how all ecosystems work, at a scientific level. We have a deep understanding of the ways we impact these natural places that those in Hemingway's day never could. And across the ages, there still lingers a primal connection with our natural world, one perhaps best described as spiritual. Yet as time has marched on since the days of Hemingway's woods, the way we approach and consider these three filters through which we experience our environment—physical, intellectual, and spiritual—have shifted in varying ways. I will not walk in the same woods as Hemingway because I do not know the tricks that he knew as he darted down the trails. I cannot look at the woods through his eyes. I feel and I experience the woods differently. The stories of the forests that Hemingway and Harrison pen capture the differences in how they looked at the environment. We have much to learn from their forests.

Such learning is crucial right now. We as a species seem to have forgotten that we are completely subsumed by our environment—our forests, rivers, mountains, fields, oceans, animals, and yes, our cities, highways, and people. Or, at least, we choose to ignore this fact. Instead, humanity generally views the environment—the biotic and abiotic system in which all humans participate at all times—as something apart from ourselves. Methodically and surgically, humanity has worked to exploit the environment, terming it “nature,” a separate place that we

may use and conceive to our own ends. We have Otherized nature as we have tried to move away from it, making it a dwelling place for gods and demons, but not ourselves. We have deluded each other that nature is not a part of us, nor are we a part of it. We may know more about how environmental processes work today than ever before, but we interact less with our woods (a common trope for human formulations of nature, and used emblematically as such in this thesis), and our spiritual connection wanes with each fallen tree and raised suburb. How can we find the balance we need to staunch the wounds?

My thesis asks: how did Hemingway's Nick Adams practice so much skill roaming the great outdoors as a boy in Northern Michigan, and why did he feel the need to return after outlasting the horrors of war? Why does Harrison's Carol Swanson yearn to visit the Upper Peninsula, yet simultaneously believe that the wilderness is lost? How did David Burkett come to replace his Christian religion with an environmental spirituality? In what ways do Carol Swanson and the Burkett family both echo and reject the ecological beliefs and practices of Nick Adams' generation? How do these characters chart the changes of both the environment and our relationship with it?

I look to the writings of Jim Harrison and Ernest Hemingway, to their wayfaring protagonists, for answers, and I see several disparate, yet insightful examples of our previous reckonings of the environment. Some may ask, what can characters in literature, past and present, tell us about how this environmental self has drifted—and more specifically, degraded—over time? We can see from these characters what environmental attitudes and practices were like in the past and learn from their successes and their failures. As Lawrence Buell states, “Literary institutions, like all others, are cultural barometers as much as they are agents of change” (*Environmental Imagination*, 3). These institutions are composed of works of literature



that set down their time in the written word, and express their culture through the mouths of their characters. In his latest work, Buell carefully delineates the fact that text cannot serve as an absolute, representational mimesis. He writes: “even designedly realistic texts cannot avoid being heavily mediated refractions of the palpable world” (*Future of Env. Criticism*, 33). Yet this does not prevent them from reflecting truth and capturing zeitgeist. Perhaps Carlos Baker, eminent Hemingway biographer, presents this idea best when discussing Nick:

The story of Nick’s education, so far as we have it, differs in no essential way from that of almost any middleclass American male who started life at the beginning of the present century or even with the generation of 1920...The story of Adams is a presented vision of our time. There is every reason why it should arouse in us, to use the phrase of Conrad, “that feeling of unavoidable solidarity” which “binds men to each other and all mankind to the visible world: (Baker, 131).

Literature, especially the novel form, serves as written record of cultural ideas that furnishes a means to look back and analyze how we treated nature and the environment in the past and present, and thereby divine what these concepts mean to us today.

For this reason, I intend to analyze the characters of Hemingway’s Nick Adams stories and Harrison’s novels to discern the relationships these characters had with their environments. I argue that the exploits of these characters reveal three distinct means of interacting with the wilderness: a physical relationship, best exemplified by Nick Adams’ command of the unbeaten northern trails; an intellectual one, as seen by Swanson’s and David’s recognition of humanity’s destruction of the environment’s delicate processes; and a spiritual one, in which each character develops a unique recognition of their existential relativism to the ecological whole. The afterword suggests how these three relationships point towards an environmental identity.

The characters of Nick Adams in “The Nick Adams Stories,” Carol Swanson in *Wolf*, and David Burkett and his family in *True North* and *Returning to Earth* each exhibit unique relationships to their environments that chart how our current impoverished environmental relationship has come to be. They show us the three ways in which we interact with our environment and thereby reveal that, though we still need to physically inhabit “nature” as Nick did, such fulfillment grows harder and harder to achieve as time marches on and we continue to destroy our ecological surround. They show us how we must keep in mind the science of the environment, so we can grasp our human impact. And they each cultivate a spirituality that reminds us why we must keep fighting to protect the last tracts of wilderness.

I locate my inquiry of these literary texts within the field of ecocriticism. The goal of ecocriticism is to view texts, cultures, and the human condition in a holistic manner, one relative to our environmental surround. It accomplishes this by looking closely at attitudes toward the environment and the methods by which we argue about that construct known as nature. I look to the words of Lawrence Buell, considered by many to be the founder of ecocriticism, as a starting point. He acknowledges the need to inquire into our formulation of the environment as a construct:

If, as environmental philosophers contend, western metaphysics and ethics need revision before we can address today’s environmental problems, then environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination, the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imaging nature and humanity’s relation to it. (*Environmental Imagination*, 2)

While I wholeheartedly believe that we must change how we image nature, I also find that Buell’s final statement, our relation to the environment, deserves more inquiry. Our physical, intellectual, and spiritual capacity for interacting with the environment dictates our overall

understanding of it, and therefore must also be considered through an ecocritical lens. Literature can give us examples to change not just how we image nature, but how we act toward it as well. One must not necessarily precede the other.

John Knott, in his book *Imagining the Forest*, blends history and biology with literary analysis to provide an ecocritical gaze into the formulation of ideas surrounding Northern Michigan and the Upper Midwest. I intend to explore further his take on the various ways in which humanity has constructed a man-nature binary, conceptualizing nature as both a “howling wilderness” and a “temple,” focusing on how these disparate notions may have contributed to the decline of environmental identity in today’s culture and tinged how we form our various relationships with the environment.

Hemingway’s *The Nick Adams Stories* collects all of the short stories written over Hemingway’s career that involve its eponymous protagonist. Though written at different times, this collection, edited by Philip Young, places the stories in chronological order, thus creating a novel-like arc for Nick that spans from his childhood to his parenthood. Most of the stories I address center on Nick as he summers in the Northern Michigan woods in the early 1900s. Harrison, another Michigan writer, echoes both Hemingway’s style and Nick Adam’s character in several of his novels. Two of Harrison’s later novels, *True North* (2004) and *Returning to Earth* (2007), detail the life of David Burkett and his lumber baron family, set in the mid 1960s through the mid 1980s. Unlike Nick, David lives life more feebly and with less self-assurance. But he too struggles with the examples that society sets for him, perhaps even more so—David’s father, psychically destroyed by World War II and drunk on his inheritance, inadvertently pushes David out of a world David views as privileged and vile. David transitions away from theological studies (chosen in resistance to his bacchanalian parents) to craft an exhaustive essay

of his family's history of exploiting the white pine. *Wolf: A False Memoir* (1971) is Harrison's quasi-autobiographical detailing of Carol Swanson, a broken man in search of a wolf (and himself) in the Upper Peninsula's Huron Mountains. *Wolf* provides a counterpoint to Adams and Burkett, as Swanson reflects on his late teens and early twenties. He too cannot find much solace in society, be it the institutions or the people. His stream of consciousness relates his hapless adventures in several big cities. Unsurprisingly, Swanson returns to the Upper Peninsula to put his life in order. Commonalities develop between all the characters: David Burkett has been called a latter day Nick Adams; the qualities of Harrison abound in both Swanson and Burkett; and Adams and Swanson both lust for adventure to vent their brazen attitudes. But the divergences in their characters, as well as the divergences between Hemingway and Harrison as writers, tell the tale of how our conceptions of the environment profoundly influence the way we interact with and evaluate it, and perhaps even how we interact with and evaluate our very identities as people.

My first chapter lays foundations for my inquiry, briefly investigating the "man-nature binary" that seems to tinge so many of our environmental relationships. The following chapters use close reading to unveil the motivations and the mentalities of the characters. The second chapter investigates the characters' physical relationship with the environment. Nick Adams clearly feels more comfortable and confident in the woods than his latter-day counterparts. Uncovering his physical ease leads us to question its later absence. The third chapter discusses the characters' intellectual relationship with the environment. How much did Nick Adams know about natural science, and how much did Harrison's characters? As science progresses, our knowledge of nature's mechanisms grows more complex and difficult to comprehend, leading to varying conclusions of how damaged the environment truly is. Finally, the last chapter explores

the various spiritual connections these characters forge with their environments and how this spiritual recognition of a limitation of rational understanding locates the characters more fully within their environments. I conclude by synthesizing these three aspects of environmental relationships, theorizing how these relationships contribute to constructing the various elements of an environmental identity within us, and finally balancing these three elements to develop a model for our use today. In between each chapter, I have inserted interludes of prose based on my experience backpacking in the forests of the Upper Peninsula. I spent time finding some of the places that these characters and authors incorporated into their stories, and made my own. These brief interludes are meant to illustrate my own self-conscious appraisal of my environmental relationships and my struggle to realize an environmental identity.

Our collective environmental relationships have been on the whole replaced with technology and materialism, as we have left our forests, ignored the science, and forgotten the spirituality of the woods. The more bloated our societies become, the more our reciprocal relationship with the environment will wither, until it may be gone forever. If it goes, if we cannot regain it, we will lose something that makes us fundamentally human. Our knowledge of our role in a system and our place in a subset of the environment will be lost, a joy and comfort known only to our forefathers. We must be able to track and define all the ways we interact with the environment in order to resurrect it. I hold, without a shade of doubt, that rekindling of such environmental relationships is the first step to building a workable environmental ethic that will save us from the scores of dire environmental challenges that plague the world today. It may just let me walk through Hemingway's woods.

*It was going to be too dark. I knew that, though I still managed to smile wryly at the juxtaposition of my current physical place, a dirt logging road into the heart of the Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore, and the song “Hollywood Nights,” by Bob Seger. I sang out the window, holding my phone, thinking not of the darkening, pinkishly phantasmagoric sky, but rather of the destiny that lay ahead of me, in a direction I could not see, but was starting finally to feel.*

*I parked the Ford Edge just as the sun dipped below the treetops. I focused on filling the pack with the essentials, which for me was entirely too much. But my trappings, like camera and laptop, though entirely incongruous in this wild, holy place, would come. I needed them. Maybe these artifacts of my old life would help me retain my sanity, or regain it. At least they would help me log its waxing or waning, come what may.*

*By the time I was finished, only the last vestiges of feeble light, those stunning shades known to photographers as “the blue hour,” were all I had left. I grabbed my Mag Lite and glanced at the trailhead. Well over two miles to Chapel Hill. Couldn’t do that in the dark. Looked like the beach at Mosquito Falls would be my final destination, just over a mile and a half. The thick of the woods enveloped me as the last rays flicked behind the gentle rolling of Superior, somewhere beyond me, obscured by the trees. My final night in these woods began. Yet I had no inkling of the trial that twisted imperceptibly in the dark before me.*

## Chapter 1: Man and Nature—A False Binary

When people first moved out of the forests and mountains and assembled into concentrated villages and towns, they sowed the seeds that would one day grow into the mindset most of us now maintain: we are not a part of those wild places anymore. In our ancestors' minds, they had left these wild places behind and had become human, something different in kind to everything else. And thus, they erected a binary, making the environment into an Other called "nature" that can be both conceived and used to humanity's own ends. In order to understand healthy, functional relationships with nature, we must investigate where this false binary comes from and how it can be expanded to accommodate such relationships.

"Nature" is the term that encapsulates the binary thinking that divorces humans and the wild places they think they left behind. This usage can mean anything that is not human.

Timothy Clark writes:

... 'nature' names the non-human world, the non-artificial, considered as an object of human contemplation, exploitation, wonder or terror. In this sense culture and nature are opposed. Being other than or superior to nature in this sense forms a definitive part of many modern conceptions of human identity, and of the enlightenment project of the 'conquest of nature.' At the same time, non-human nature also acquires connotations of the untouched, the pure, the sacral' (Clark 7).

Though this definition captures much of the complexity surrounding the term, I want to expand more on the "opposition" between culture and nature. In one sense, it is certainly true that human culture opposes nature by objectifying it, as Clark states. But this opposition exists only at the surface level. Culture opposes nature by setting it apart—but more importantly, through this act of setting apart, culture also *creates* nature simultaneously, by constructing and thereby defining

its own interpretation of it. Our culture has conditioned our ideas about the environment for millennia, and still shapes our thinking about the environment, and our identification (or lack thereof) with the environment. This conditioning is fluid; Clark notes the difference between “modern conceptions” of identity and the mode of identity extended by the Enlightenment era “projects” that took hoe and torch to wild nature. Many look at the environment as nature, taking the man-nature binary for granted. But just exactly how people consider nature to be different from themselves can vary vastly. Clark touches on two of these diametrically opposed tropes: that nature can be plundered and controlled via “conquest,” and that it is “untouched” and “pure,” holy because it has yet to be sullied by human contact. We must investigate the array of these cultural tropes to uncover the roots of humanity’s “nature” mindset and see how the binary became so entrenched in our thinking.

In *Imagining the Forest*, Knott blends history and biology with literary analysis to provide an ecocritical gaze into the formulation of ideas of forests and nature surrounding Northern Michigan and the Upper Midwest. In his introduction, he analyzes how these imaginings are produced. He explores two metaphors that extend Clark’s two tropes of human separateness from nature: the forest as “howling wilderness” and as “temple or cathedral.” In both of these instances, the metaphors demonstrate the pervading belief that these natural spaces, here forests, exist outside of the human system, as something cut off and distinctly separate from the normal person’s day to day experience. These beliefs were (and in many cases still are) so popular because they had appeal: howling wildernesses can be conquered, and temples can be rejuvenating.

The first metaphor, howling wilderness, implies both Biblical and pioneer contexts, both of which established nature as a separate place that can be exploited. Knott explains that



“howling” derives from an obvious place: the howls of wolves, which represented the danger and evil that lurked in the woods, often heard from the beds of anxious settlers. Knott addresses both of these contexts in his discussion of this metaphor:

As has often been noted, the English settlers who arrived on Cape Cod in the early seventeenth century were culturally conditioned to see the North American forest as a hostile wilderness. It recalled for them the dark forest of European tradition, thought to be evil as well as dangerous, and also the inhospitable, desert wildernesses of the Old Testament (Knott 7).

Portraying nature negatively as a wicked place of dark, knotted groves and wild, savage creatures provides a justification for its destruction. The trope became popular as more and more settlers arrived in America, bursting with an Old Testament, Christian philosophy of dominion over nature. They needed materials to build a new nation; they extracted the plentiful resources from these wild places for that purpose. Thinking of nature as evil and savage kept their consciences clear as consumption grew and extraction increased in intensity. It also made the elimination of the extraneous, non-useful components of the wilderness, such as the “wastelands” of swamps and even the Native Americans, not only reasonable but to their minds often necessary. This cultural view of nature as Other that should be feared and dominated persists to this day, though not to the pernicious extent that it did several centuries ago. Many still view the environment as nature in this sense, remote and intimidating, to be avoided at all costs and worthwhile only for the resources it can provide humanity.

Knott’s second metaphor, the forest as temple, sheds light on another popular conception of nature as a holy place. On its face, this take on nature may not seem to fall in line with a human-nature binary. However, this consideration develops the binary in precisely the opposite

manner to nature as “howling wilderness.” Rather than subjugating nature as a separate and inferior entity, nature as “temple” elevates it to a plane above humanity. The Romantics and Transcendentalists were perhaps the most famous for this consideration of nature. Knott quotes Thoreau as a perfect example of such spiritual thinking:

Henry David Thoreau played the most crucial role in redefining the American understanding of wilderness and wildness and in arguing that transcendental truths could be found in natural facts. He discovered in the forests and swamps of the landscape around Concord, Massachusetts, metaphors for the spiritually and intellectually energizing effects of contact with wild nature: “When I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest wood, the thickest and most interminable and, to the citizen, most dismal swamp. I enter a swamp as a sacred place, a sanctum sanctorum. There is the strength, the marrow, of Nature” (Knott, 7).

Thoreau’s language at first calls to mind the howling wilderness metaphor, with its dark and impenetrable places; he purposefully embraces the wildness of these places as opportunities to witness the sublime and transcend human experience. Notice Nature is spelled with a capital N, an effort to highlight the lofty virtue to be found within. The Romantics upheld nature as a separate place one may enter and exit as needed for spiritual invigoration. Thoreau and others still viewed nature as something separate from and opposed to society and humanity. Despite their positive characterization, they considered nature as a place to be used for their edification; a quiet, sun-dappled copse served them the same aloof utility as a marble altar. A temple, after all, is not a home, or a community—it sits atop a hill, esoteric and aloft in its pursuit, apart from the everyday experience of the common person.

Like the view of nature as howling wilderness, the concept of the spiritual power of the

forest as temple exists today, though for many it has progressed and evolved. Some may still consider the forest as their healing cathedrals, but others look to different forms of invigorating utility the forest can provide. Knott alludes to another possible metaphor for nature: the forest as a “playground” refers to the trend of visiting nature for recreation as the National Parks Service came into existence. Stemming from the rejuvenating aspects of nature as a temple and secularizing them, people looked at the woods as a place for tourism: hop in the camper, feel reenergized, and then leave. Set aside and preserve far-off plots of land for enjoyment, but don’t consider these places to be anything more than a novel destination.

Though the specific expression of the human-nature binary may vary drastically, the existence of this variance clearly shows the belief that the environment is an Other named nature, that humanity exists separately from everything else, can manifest itself in many forms, and is a belief many people feel comfortable holding. People may not believe they are a functioning part of the environment, but they are. We may be able to destroy wilderness, create built human environments that do not look like “nature,” but we cannot escape the fact that we are always a piece of the complex system of the environment—interdependent, interlocking gears of a global machine.

The characters analyzed in this thesis—Nick Adams, Carol Swanson, and David Burkett, among others—do not fully fall prey to the human-nature binary. Rather than perpetuate a false belief that they are separate from nature, they engage with it, crossing this binary, displaying its falsity, as demonstrated by at least one, if not more, of the three types of environmental relationships. The relationships they have with the environment, though exigent in varying degrees, do not view nature as separate from man, at least not in the rigid, strict sense of the binary described above. Their physical relationships are not limited to entitled extraction; their

intellectual relationships do not define the wilderness as a place to fear or to be used as entertainment. Spiritually, they develop a connection to varying degrees, but not in the compartmentalizing manner of the Romantics. Deconstructing the binary between man and nature requires developing such relationships with the environment. The following chapters outline the manner in which each of these characters develops and maintains these necessary ties to the environment.

*The pack's straps bit into my shoulders with every unsteady step. How much was I carrying? Perhaps eighty pounds. And it was all only for one night, the last night I camped, before returning home and facing the strange, paradoxical newness that always accompanies the end of something. Still, the weight was therapeutic. Made the hike more like a trek. Maybe that's what I wanted, a trek. It was only a few miles to the Lake, but for me, I could count it as a trek, because time and space were quickly evaporating into the darkness around me. I did not check my watch, I did not play music. The moon was not out, no stars shone; the tops of the trees merged into a seamless black sky. All that existed appeared in the beam of my flashlight; everything else, behind and to the side, fell away into treacherous ether.*

*Often, I held my walking stick (a piece of driftwood with a few pernicious-looking spikes on the end I thought could warrant it as a makeshift cudgel if need be), across my chest, partly to balance myself, partly as a shelf to rest the flashlight. It did not take long before I could hear the Mosquito River near me, below in a gulch; efforts at shining the light on it proved difficult, as its blackness blended with the rest of the forest dark. So I focused on its sound, a gentle burbling, one of the only interruptions in the quiet of the night.*

*I prayed to the path. It was my only hope now; I had seen no lights, heard no voices. I was alone. As the ground swelled up, forcing me to use tree roots as handholds, and spilled back down again, requiring the walking stick as a third steadying leg during the descents, it dawned on me that I had no idea what I was doing. The scant knowledge of the few years of Cub Scouts and one year of Boy Scouts would not sustain me should anything go wrong. No one knew where I was, outside of my friend behind me in Marquette, over an hour away, who only had a vague idea I'd be somewhere in the Pictured Rocks. And even if anyone did know where I was, I couldn't contact them with my phone. For the first time in my life, I was absolutely alone.*

*But I kept walking forward, despite the load, and the dark, and every part of me wanting to stop and turn around, or at the very least set up camp. No. Not here. Not yet. I would reach the shores of Mother Superior. I would make this mean something.*

*Baptism by fire. As I hobbled along, I felt like an old man of the forest. And I realized old men of the forest need to start sometime.*

## **Chapter 2: Navigating the Woods: Physical Relationships with the Environment**

Nick Adams' exploits in the forests surrounding Walloon Lake in Northern Michigan remind us of how skill in the woods used to be a matter of course. To be sure, many people today display profound adeptness in the wilderness; these are by no means lost arts. However, the ability to be at home in the woods has become more esoteric. Most ordinary people today would be completely at a loss if they were plopped in the middle of the woods. This lack is a product of today's era. Nick did not have any special wilderness survival training. He was just a kid who spent summers in the UP, if we are to extrapolate closely from Hemingway's life. Nick's keen ability to navigate in the woods speaks to a greater sense of place within them. The woods are not foreign or alien for Nick; the same cannot be said for Swanson or David Burkett. They may journey the woods, but unlike Nick, they get lost. Their forays into the northern Michigan wilderness teach them that they have much to learn about the ways of the wild. The revelation that they are not so skilled in this terrain unveils a feeling of alienation. This alienation, however, precedes their learning the necessary skills, and so prevents true mastery of those skills—the mindsets of foreignness maintained by Swanson and David preclude them from feeling a physical linkage with the Northern Michigan woods to the same extent Nick Adams does.

When Nick Adams arrives in the Upper Peninsula for his now infamous solo trout fishing expedition in "Big Two-Hearted River," he does so with purpose. As soon as he steps off the train in Seney, he puts civilization behind him and enters into the wild. Though we witness many moments of Nick's prowess with the rugged country, such as setting up camp, building a fire, and of course fishing for his beloved trout, his mastery of the outdoors is perhaps nowhere better evinced than by his skill with navigating the woods unaided: "Nick sat smoking, looking out over the country. He did not need to get his map out. He knew where he was from the position of

the river” (Hemingway, 179-80). His ability to move through the terrain relying on nothing but his own skill reflects his confidence in himself and in his physical connection with the environment. He does not think or guess where his destination is—he knows. The verb ‘to know’ is repeated throughout the story, and further perpetuates Nick’s character as a denizen of the wilderness. Nick relies on his physical knowledge and working relationship with the environment to stay true to course:

Nick kept his direction by the sun. He knew where he wanted to strike the river and he kept on through the pine plain, mounting small rises to see other rises ahead of him and sometimes from the top of a rise a great solid island of pines off to his right or his left. He broke off some sprigs of the heathery sweet fern and put them under his pack straps. The chafing crushed it and he smelled it as he walked (Hemingway 181).

Nick’s sheer confidence in himself and his surroundings rings through. All he needs is his own knowledge and the sun above him; he is completely self-reliant. Notice especially the surety in the verb “strike.” Even as the variable landscape sprawls and shifts around him, Nick intuits his objective precisely. He knows where he is going and why. The action of grabbing the sweet fern and placing it under his straps further embellishes his sense of ease within the environment. Nick lightens the pain of his straps’ heavy burden while simultaneously freshening the air around him. He stays in command of his surroundings, a true woodsman. We can read much of Hemingway’s machismo into Nick; though they may not be complete or accurate reflections of one another, Nick is indebted to Hemingway’s life. With every footstep on the forest floor, Nick leaves the print of Hemingway and his take on masculinity in the early 1900s.

Harrison’s characters, however, come from a later time; compared to Nick’s surefooted roving of the forests, they betray their woeful lack of his physical mastery of the wild. Carol



Swanson may be cocky when wooing women and confident in his culinary tastes, but when he decides to escape civilization and flee from his careening life into the dense remove of the Huron Mountains, he discovers that he cannot be so cavalier in the wild:

I closed the tent flaps, gathered my binoculars (which I would quickly lose) and a worthless .30-.30 rifle with bad sights my father had owned, and took a compass reading which I knew would be inaccurate and pointless as the ground in the area was full of varying amounts of iron ore. But I fixed on a knoll a mile or so away and then on the supposed direction of the car several miles directly south by southwest and set out for a hike. Two hours later I was unfathomably lost (*Wolf*, 19).

Swanson totes much more equipment than his earlier counterpart Nick, which ironically does him no good. The equipment reflects Swanson himself—lost, damaged, ineffectual. Where the rolling, shifting terrain buoys Nick, it unnerves Swanson. Swanson describes the feeling of being lost as “first of all embarrassment mixed with a little terror” (*Wolf*, 19).

David Burkett also falls prey to getting lost in the North Woods. After his dog Carla runs off after a porcupine, David sets off into the dense overgrowth to retrieve her. Despite being somewhat near the cabin, however, he completely loses his bearings. Having left his compass and “bug dope” (insect repellent) at the cabin, he attempts to navigate with the sun, as Nick had done. But, instead of calmly smoking a cigarette and appraising his surroundings, David finds his situation becoming quite “unpleasant” (175). Harrison provides the humorous image of David foraging through the underbrush, carrying a tired and annoyed dog through “a low boggy area” with thick mosquitoes and blackflies. No broken ferns behind him provide evidence of his blazed trail. He climbs a pine tree for a vantage point, unsuccessfully, and Carla yowls thinking she has been abandoned. David, who is mildly crippled with an ankle injury, finds nothing but fatigue for

some time: “I had tried to move too swiftly and that made me thirsty and my ankle sore” (*True North*, 175). As with Swanson, David journeys unversed and unsure through the backcountry, made into a pathetic character. Neither man displays aptitude with the skills to navigate Michigan’s woodlands. Though each of the men reveres and respects this wilderness, only Nick possesses physical fluency with the environment.

Why might that be? An answer quite likely rests in Nick’s childhood spent roving the woods. In “The Last Good Country,” an incomplete, yet lengthy story fragment (one of many included by Young in his edition), we meet a young Nick Adams, somewhere in his teens. Even at this tender age, he exhibits confidence. While on the run from two game wardens, he leads his little sister Littles deep into the far reaches of the woods. As they walk through dense old growth forest, he takes her to a secluded place where he has camped in the past:

“How did you come to it straight through the woods with no trail and no blazes?”

“Didn’t you see the direction sticks on the three ridges?”

“No.”

“I’ll show them to you sometime.”

“Are they yours?”

“No. They’re from the old days.”

“Why didn’t you show them to me?”

“I don’t know,” Nick said. “I was showing off I guess” (Hemingway, 91-2).

Nick’s knowledge of the “direction sticks” from the “old days” displays his seemingly natural proficiency in the woods. He maintains this knowledge through his continued exposure to the forest, so much so that the signs he travels by fade into the background, second nature to him. It is unclear whether he has been taught these secrets; in some ways, Hemingway’s sparing

language and Nick's supreme confidence generate an aura of mystique: Nick seems to have access to arcane and privileged information that Swanson and David (and even Nick's sister) simply do not. Nick had the benefit of growing up in a time when the woods were not seen as a separate space apart from people. For him, the "old days" refer not to days past, but venerable tradition. A relic from an earlier era, Nick's navigation feats illustrate the fluid relationship that many people had with their environment at the turn of the twentieth century, or at least one that men like Hemingway idealized and praised.

David's childhood experiences in the woods do not portray the seamless integration at a young age that Nick did. After having words with his uncle during a canoe trip when he was sixteen, David darts into the woods to be alone. Despite stating he is "fairly good in the woods," we find him quite at a loss. Unlike the poised Nick, David realizes he "hadn't paid enough attention to the position of the sun when [he] was first lost to have it be of help" (*True North*, 13). He finally gets his bearings and notices Lake Superior's dunes "too many heartless miles away." He covers himself with muck for relief from the insects, but blackflies encroach into his pant legs. Only after his uncle's dog finds him and delivers a canteen left tied around his collar by David's uncle does David's pitiful state improve. Simply having access to traversing the wild as a boy is not enough for David—this suggests that Nick's physical relationship differs staunchly in kind to David's.

Nick derives his physical relationship with the woods from his sense of place within them. He does not view the forests as separate, nor does he question his presence among the streams and rivers. Hemingway repeatedly describes him as "happy" and "excited" as he tromps around in "Big Two-Hearted River," breaking trail and scaring up trout. His comfort in his belonging comes through clearly after he breaks camp: "He had made his camp. He was settled.

Nothing could touch him. It was a good place. He was there, in the good place. He was in his home where he had made it” (Hemingway, 184).

Swanson and David cannot say the same. Once these two spend time in the wilderness, they come to learn the true depth of their ignorance, and this forces them to feel separate. During one of his musings in the Huron Mountains, Swanson realizes that, though the wilderness offers him a solace, that solace stems from its strangeness relative to himself:

What would happen to me if there were no woods to travel far back into—or when there is no more backcountry what will I do. Not that I am competent at it or feel truly comfortable. It is after all an alien world still existing, though truncated, in many places but its language largely forgotten” (*Wolf*, 70).

He looks at the woods as a distant refuge that, though comforting in its existence, is not a comfortable place to inhabit. For Swanson, the idea of the forest supersedes the actuality of the forest—knowing it is there gives him the comfort, not the actual time he spends within it. This is unsurprising, given his difficulty traversing the place. But, the true insight lies in the ordering of his thoughts. As *Wolf* is a stream-of-consciousness novel, the thought patterns’ procession and meanderings have bearing on his character. Immediately following Swanson’s admission that he does not feel comfortable or competent in the woods, he describes them as “alien” and truncated. This represents an important causal relationship. Swanson feels uncomfortable *because* the woods are foreign to him, disappearing from the far edges of his world. It is not simply his lack of skill that makes him feel alien and apart—the fact that he is alien causes the lack of skill itself. As he says, the language of the forest, the requisite abilities to prowl and thrive within them, have faded. He does not have the native tongue to be conversant like Nick Adams.

Like Swanson, David reveals that he too feels out of place while in the woods. During his first day of his white pine stump surveying, David trots along with Carla and fantasizes hearing a voice in his head calling him “stupid”—his own internal recognition of the size of his project in juxtaposition with his lack of true knowledge of the land. The chorus in his head unnerves him, forcing him to realize he feels he does not belong:

Aside from the slightest smattering of knowledge the landscape was incomprehensible other than the sleeping Carla. I took out my notebook and drew an absolute blank with my poised ballpoint. The “stupid” I was hearing wasn’t contemptuous, just true. I had flushed a number of sandhill cranes when I drove down the two-track into the area and now one was returning with its curious and loud prehistoric honk and squawk. Carla leapt to her feet and scooted to my lap for protection. I felt thoroughly comic (*True North*, 163).

David admits to his limited understanding of the landscape, but he was aware of his lack of knowledge of this remote, forgotten area before entering it. Yet it is not until he enters the landscape that his knowledge gap billows into his feeling of being out of place. As with Swanson, he appreciates his ignorance once he appreciates his alienness; David’s physical presence within the environment throws his ignorance and lack of skill into relief, thus prompting him to feel apart from the environment itself. Not only does he feel “stupid,” he feels foreign—he characterizes the calls of the sandhill crane as prehistoric, something beyond the scope of human empirical knowledge. But most telling of all, David feels “comic.” The comedy arises from irony, as most good comedy does. His recognition that he does not belong, that he is out of place, that he is the unexpected, the ironic, generates this comedy.

When bidding his on-again off-again lover Vernice goodbye after her first visit to the Upper Peninsula, David receives an incredibly cogent statement from her: “At the airport, she looked off at the lovely green hills of the runway and said ‘you live in a beautiful place and you don’t act like you know it’” (*True North*, 267). In many ways, he does not. Despite living there, and in many ways being more native than Nick Adams to the Northern woods, David begins his relationship with the woods at a psychological distance. Though he has spent time in the woods growing up, he has not been spent time in the field like he is doing now. He does not recognize this distance until he physically tests himself in the forest. His inability foments feelings of incongruousness, as it does with Swanson. Nick has no such distance, and as such he feels properly at home and competent in the forest. For Nick, reentering the forest is coming home, and he lets his tried and true skills shine.

Nick’s physical involvement with his natural world, exemplified best via his navigation within it, epitomizes this phenomenon of his time; a character like Nick is much more conceivable in Hemingway’s day, as access and understanding of the wilderness would have been much more common, practiced, and celebrated. For David, Swanson, and those who came after, the default mentality of viewing the woods as foreign provided a barrier to creating a deep physical connection with the forests, and so prevented them from gaining the natural freedom Nick exhibits. However, though their physical knowledge of the forest is less than Nick’s, they understand much more about how humans impact the forest, how we influence and shape the environment on a scientific, macro level. They see and respect the fragility of nature in a way Nick cannot—an awareness that offers an additional and equally necessary component of an environmental identity: progressing beyond a physical understanding into an intellectual one.

*A scream flew past me, brushing the tops of the ferns with its chill. I stopped dead. What on earth could that be? Shoving my flashlight into my chest, I listened, unsure if I really wanted to hear anymore. My knuckles drained to white as I clutched my walking stick-cudgel, holding it before me at a 45-degree angle, my pathetic attempt at preparedness.*

*I held steady, poised in that agonizing limbo between fight and flight for perhaps a minute before walking on. But no more than another thirty feet down the trail, the shriek jolted through the blackness again, piercing my chest even more than my ears. I repeated my prior response, staying still even longer, how long I couldn't say. If banshees drift across our world by night, they sound like whatever else was lurking in these woods with me, my fellow wanderer of the night.*

*But banshees don't haunt the earth, as far as I knew. So what could that be out there? I thought of my slightly-above-rudimentary grasp of Michigan ecology. At first I thought it could be a bobcat. Or maybe a fox. Something totally harmless and uninterested in me. I knew that. But all the same, I felt the absence of the knife I had lost on the hike the day before.*

*After my sense of safety had been jarred, I couldn't help but think of the black bears that were quite common in the area; they were typically nonaggressive but I still shouldn't try to climb a tree to escape. Wolf packs roamed these hills, but they never attack humans. There had been reports of several cougar sightings in the UP recently, but the odds one stalked me were almost astronomical. These were tidbits of near certainty, and I was glad for them. Yet I still felt the hair on my neck raised at the prospect of these wild creatures sharing the night with me.*

*I walked on in blackness and trepidation. As much as I knew about the forest, there was so much I didn't understand. My ignorance swallowed me as the forest did. The path continued ahead, into the darkness.*

### **Chapter 3: Is Nature Dead? Intellectual Relationships with the Environment**

Without a doubt, Nick knows what it takes to be a skilled outdoorsman; the woods are second nature to him. However, Nick's physical knowledge of the Northern Michigan landscape only provides him an understanding of one aspect of the woods—he remains ignorant of a relational knowledge of the woods, of knowing the extent humanity can influence and impact the woods themselves, or even the underlying science that dictates their processes. When faced with the question of whether their wilderness has been destroyed, Nick, Swanson, and David believe and react in very different ways, according to their level of knowledge and their personalities. Nick is handicapped by the knowledge of his era, and so cannot fathom the true impact of people on his beloved woods. Swanson and David know much more about human influence on the environment, with 60 years of additional knowledge at their disposal. Yet despite similar access to scientific knowledge of the environment, and even the same belief that nature has in many ways been ruined, their conclusions diverge starkly.

While taking his sister Littles deep into the woods to escape the game wardens and find their sanctuary in “The Last Good Country,” Nick forges a circuitous path through the dense Northern Michigan backcountry and stumbles across environmental destruction. They journey through overgrown logging roads, past creeks and farmland, until they encounter areas of “slashing,” or the worthless wooden debris left behind after logging has taken place. Nick describes the origin of the place to Littles:

“All this beyond was hemlock forest,” Nick said. “They only cut it for the bark and they never used the logs.”

[... ] “Is the secret place beyond all this slashing?”



“Yes. We go through the slashing and then some more road and then another slashing and then we come to virgin timber.”

“How did they leave it when they cut all this?”

“I don’t know. It belonged to somebody that wouldn’t sell, I guess. They stole a lot from the edges and paid stumpage on it. But the good part’s still there and there isn’t any passable road into it” (*Nick Adams*, 87).

Nick explains the machinations of the logging industry in a markedly matter of fact tone. The fact that the loggers here paid “stumpage,” or price per stump, indicates the vast extent to which the area must have been stripped for timber. The “slashings” referenced are an alternate form of the word “slash,” the common name for the wood scraps left by lumbering. For a young teenager, Nick knows much, and relays this information clinically to his sister, without tingeing the information with much, if any, emotion. But the significant statement he makes is that they are going to the “good part.” He simply categorizes the hot, desolate slashing areas as “the bad parts,” paying them little attention in his quest to reach their destination, the “good part.”

As they pass through a second “bad part,” Littless voices her displeasure with the forest’s state of affairs:

“Damn slashings,” she said to Nick. They were resting on top of a big log ringed where they sat by the cutting of the barkpeelers. The ring was gray in the rotting gray log and all around were other long gray trunks and gray brush and branches with the brilliant and worthless weeds growing (*Nick Adams*, 88).

Littless’ childhood innocence and indignation provoke her “hate” of the slashings, leading her to curse them. She states the “damn weeds are like flowers in a tree cemetery if nobody took care of it” (88). Nick, however, remains stoic—he does not seem to share as fully in her sentiments. Like

his sister, he looks upon the “gray” relics of the ancient trees around him. He also dislikes the weeds, calling them “worthless.” (He likely also stated “brilliant” due only to the bright colors of the weeds, which are yellow ragweed and magenta fireweed, residing in the slashing clearings, which he notes earlier.) But unlike her, he does not despair, instead remaining quiet and calm. While his sister becomes preoccupied with the immediacy of the destruction, Nick knows to hold out, anticipating the untouched, unspoiled “good part.” By providing this contrast between the siblings’ reactions, Hemingway rivets our focus on the destruction, and how we may be expected to feel about it. The author himself may well inhabit both mindsets—angry at the destruction of the North Woods, but confident in their resilience. The stakes of the loss do not seem very high.

When they arrive at the “good part,” Nick describes the “great trees” rising “sixty feet high before there were any branches” (89). The impenetrable canopy renders the air much cooler and more pleasant than the sun-pierced clearings of slashings. They absorb their surroundings with an air of reverence and solemnity. Nick tells Littleless: “This is the way forests were in the olden days. This is about the last good country there is left. Nobody gets in here ever” (89). Nick’s acknowledgement of the change in the forest clearly indicates that he knows the forest has been degraded. However, his comment that “This is all the virgin timber left *around here* [my emphasis]” (89) indicates that Nick could consider the scope of the destruction to be localized to the area, and as such may not be the *absolute* “last good country.” For Nick, Nature has not been destroyed in a sweeping sense; the local country may have seen better days, but the preservation of the old growth and his surety that “nobody can get in” alleviates his worry. But even if he does consider the destruction to extend beyond his localized experience, he does not internalize this consideration. Instead, he passes through the last good country, drinking it in as he goes; but once he leaves, it no longer weighs on his mind. If Nick believed that nature was

destroyed to the extent that Swanson and David do, if he knew how poorly old growth forests truly regenerate when stripped so, he would not be so dismissive of the pernicious reach of the slashings, nor would he be so confident in the impenetrability of the “last good country.” Nick’s understanding remains limited and naïve, even in the face of clear desolation. Ironically, he has no inkling of the even further edges to which the woods will shrink in the coming decades.

Nick Adams returns to the forests of Northern Michigan as an adult in “Big Two-Hearted River,” and his time away has not reduced his belief in nature’s resilience, nor its healing powers. Nick unquestionably views nature as a place to heal himself, but his attitude clearly shows that he also views nature as a place capable of healing *itself*. Nick visits the town of Seney for a restorative fishing trip. Unlike his observations about logging in “The Last Good Country,” Nick does not acknowledge the full extent of the destruction he would have witnessed in the area around Seney. As Terry Engel writes, “according to Michigan historian Jack Jobst, the pine had all been clear cut by the 1890s, and Adams would have seen thousands of acres of chest-high white pine stumps” (5). Instead, Hemingway’s description of the town’s environs focuses on the charred remains that followed in the wake of a fire that consumed the whole town. This fire is a product of Hemingway’s fiction, however, as Jack Jobst discusses in “Hemingway in Seney”: “In his story, ‘Big Two-Hearted River,’ Hemingway’s narrator, Nick Adams, tells of a fire that destroyed the town, but this never happened. By 1919 the countless acres of pine were gone and the town had shrunk to only a few buildings” (Jobst). Why, then, does Hemingway ignore the absence of pine that clearly defined the landscape? Engel offers the beginnings of a theory:

Hemingway does not emphasize the stumps in “Big Two-Hearted River,” most likely not an oversight but an authorial choice. There is only one reference to a stump in “Big Two-Hearted River,” occurring where Adams stops to rest and smoke... Although

Hemingway's omission of the pine stumps may suggest his generation's imperialism, analyzing the differences in how Hemingway and Harrison see and use the landscape is not as profitable as focusing on the spirituality of the characters' journeys (Engel, 9).

The stump Adams sits on exists in isolation; we do not learn anywhere within Adams' narration of the vast extent of the pine stumps. Hemingway did not want to include them, perhaps because the stumps would distract from the symbolism of the fire, which provides the driving metaphor of Adams' experience with war and rebuilding of self within nature (discussed below). But to brush aside the absence of the stumps as simply a product of imperialism without any support, as Engel does, seems mistaken. If we look at the pine's absence as a product of Hemingway's thrifty prose and resulting lack of sweeping description, then his symbolic treatment of the fire's renewal could be applied to the pines as well; perhaps they have regenerated without mention.

Adams refuses to succumb to the devastation of Seney: "Seney was burned, the country was burned over and changed, but it did not matter. It could not all be burned. He knew that" (*Nick Adams*, 179). It is worthwhile to note that the "change" in the country could refer to the stumps left behind by logging in addition to the effects of the fire. Regardless, Nick's confidence that "it could not all be burned" establishes faith in the resilience of the natural world. Later, Nick sits upon his burned stump and surveys the land: "Two hundred yards down the hillside the fire line stopped. Then it was sweet fern...and clumps of jack pines; a long undulating country with frequent rises and descents, sandy underfoot and the country alive again" (Hemingway, 181). The fire's destruction does not seem to reach very far, a mere couple hundred yards. In addition, the fact that at the fire line's edge, the ferns and pines are reappearing buoy Nick—he believes that the country is "alive again." Both the fire and the implicit logging could only damage so much, and that damage has already begun to reverse. As he does in "The Last Good

Country,” Nick may consider some of these wild places to be destroyed, but he feels assured that the environmental damage remains localized; despite any total destruction, he believes that nature always has the ability to bounce back. Nick fails to understand how fragile the forest ecosystem is. Nick is armed only with his knowledge of navigation and survival within the forest, and not the survival requirements *of* the forest—he cannot fathom how delicate and interconnected are the threads of life that tie the forest and its denizens together, nor how easily those threads may be disrupted, to disastrous consequences. Nick confidently places faith in nature and its indestructibility, unable to know the environment in a holistic or realistic manner.

Jim Harrison’s quasi-autobiographical character Swanson in *Wolf: A False Memoir* maintains none of Nick Adams’ sanguine trust in the environment’s resilience. Rather, Swanson oozes fatalism, espousing in no uncertain terms that we have wrecked nature irreparably. Having stranded himself in the Huron Mountains, an incredibly remote area, he contemplates humanity’s effect on the environment; he does not think hopefully about the state of relations between people and wilderness:

There were no inviolate places, only outposts that were less visited than others. The Arctic was drilled for oil, great pools of waste seeping through glaciers...I felt desperate. The merest smell of profit would lead us to gut any beauty left, there was no sentimentality involved (*Wolf*, 44).

In stark contrast to Nick Adams’ detached assuredness in nature’s ability to withstand human encroachment, Swanson refutes this belief and reacts with desperation. He does not think of destruction at a local level, but globally. Furthermore, Swanson judges even protective measures as only exacerbating the destruction: “Even our instincts to save were perverse; we made parks which were in fact ‘nature zoos’ crossed by superhighways...It was almost a comfort to think of

how many people the grizzlies...might take with them in their plummet to extinction” (*Wolf*, 44-5). Once touched by humans, the last vestiges of the “natural” world can only be thought of as a “zoo,” marred by the marks of our intrusion. The extinction of our great, iconic animals such as the grizzly is taken for granted, and prompts nothing but savage bitterness in Swanson. According to Swanson, no matter whether we intend to destroy or to protect, the end result remains constant.

In “Natty Bumppo Wants Tobacco: Jim Harrison’s Wilderness,” John Rohrkemper compares Harrison’s characters, including Swanson, to both Nick Adams and Natty Bumppo, the rugged frontiersman hero of Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans*. But, unlike their predecessors, Harrison’s “descendants” are doomed from the start, unable to find the wilderness that so defined their idols who came before. Rohrkemper finds it “clear” that, for Swanson and many others of Harrison’s heroes, “paradise is lost, and as much as we might long for it, no gods will let modern man off the hook. With the passing of the American wilderness, wilderness man has passed away, and all the nouveau Nattys will be sympathetic fools...looking for a lost America” (Rohrkemper, 9). Indeed, Swanson believes we have fallen, and there is no redemption—wilderness as we had known it has been lost. Swanson’s fatalist attitude can be summarized in one quote:

For years now I’ve found the earth haunted. Azoological beasts rage in untraceable configurations. They are called governments. Wounds made that never heal on every acre and covered with the scar tissue of our living presence. The argument at bedrock: I don’t want to live on earth but I want to live (*Wolf*, 102).

For Swanson, humanity has utterly ruined the environment. We inflict the wounds and we cause the hauntings. Nowhere is safe. Swanson despairs so completely, he considers all the earth to be

soiled, and entangles himself in a hopeless limbo that cannot be escaped. If you want to live, you live on the earth. Swanson's failure rests in his inability to accept this simple truth. He knows the information regarding the destruction of the environment, but he cannot handle it, and thus falls apart.

Harrison's latter hero, David Burkett, does not fall into Swanson's quagmire of hopelessness, despite sharing many of Swanson's beliefs about environmental degradation. Unlike Nick, David has access to knowledge that affords him a holistic view of natural systems beyond what he can see and conclude for himself. And unlike Swanson, he does not curl up in a ball of pity and woe. Instead, David seeks to understand what he is presented and make the most of what remnants of wilderness he is given. Thus, David maintains an informed stoicism in the face of environmental destruction: "There is a beauty in desolation, because that's all we have, I thought, the land shorn of its native self with the soil far too depleted to reenact its former glories" (*True North*, 163). David enters into this line of pondering shortly after first entering into the field to begin his extended survey of the white pine stumps left by his family's logging exploits. When gazing upon the expanse of stumps, he tries to imagine them as full trees, but finds this as futile as "asking a contemporary Lakota to imagine a million buffalo" (163). Harrison's analogy to the loss of the buffalo offers a compelling insight into the unfortunate privilege of knowledge that David has over Nick and those of this time. Harrison is in a position to fully understand the capacity humanity has to destroy the environment in a way Hemingway never was. He uses this knowledge to imply a moral argument—David has a duty not to forget the knowledge he has, and to apply it, as he does with his survey of the stumps.

David's language of desolation echoes Swanson in many ways, but he eschews Swanson's desperate conclusions. David is still able to notice redeeming beauty, and resigns

himself to such beauty being all he can have, given the circumstances. David refuses to let the stark realities of environmental decline dictate his life; immediately after recognizing that the “native” land has been “shorn” of almost all it had been, he releases the knowledge: “despite these melancholy thoughts, I was relieved of my ‘self’ and my head felt lighter than I could remember” (163). David does internalize the environmental issues he witnesses, like Swanson and unlike Nick, but he does not let them dominate him.

When David brings his poet lover Vernice out into the field with him and shows her the stump graveyard, she tells David: “‘Build yourself a cabin. You already told me how we’ve destroyed religion and nature. It’s time to save yourself, kiddo’” (197-8). David does believe that we have mutilated religion and nature, but he does not take these truths to be absolute or final. Just as David works to cultivate his own religion throughout the novel in reaction against traditional Christianity that he comes to see as corrupt, so too does David find a modicum of wilderness that is not totally tainted. He is still able to show Vernice a side of life she has never seen, as she takes a “grass bath” naked in the field and they viscerally ride out a thunderstorm underneath David’s favorite temple-like stump. Though the experience may not have been “nature” in the pure sense that Nick Adams believes he witnesses and Swanson knows is lost, they still find value in it: “She thanked me ever so slightly for showing her ‘another world.’ We talked then about how we think of ourselves as Americans but there are many worlds in the United States if you stray very far from freeways and stay away from televisions” (199). David does not believe that the destruction perpetrated against the natural world has had a totalizing effect on it; with diligence, people may find these pockets off the beaten path, and discover other worlds that still lie in wait.



David, unlike Nick and Swanson, is a man of science. He boasts more knowledge of natural systems than either of them, and he takes particular notice of the degradation occurring; indeed, that is why he walks the woods, to attempt to quantify the damage done by his logging family. While walking through the pine stumps, he hones his focus in an attempt to sharpen his understanding: “On the way I began counting the visible stumps until I reached the truck, then wrote in my notebook, ‘547 stumps.’ The world had opened up for me in a significant way, however untraceable” (164). Bearing witness to the destruction does not close him off, like it does for Swanson, but rather makes him even more aware and attuned with each “untraceable” moment he spends paying attention and contemplating. His attunement to destruction combined with his recognition of redeemable remnants of wilderness equips David better than either of his counterparts to embrace a holistic spirituality and a deep, true engagement with the environment, beyond Nick or Swanson. `

*The first signage I had seen in over an hour shortly delivered me to an open campground. Bear boxes stood guard on each end; sitting logs encircled the center fire pit. I unslung my pack and rested. This was the best place I had seen to pitch the tent, and I was exhausted. I sat soundless in the night's hush, and then I heard them. Waves gently lapping ashore. My journey wasn't complete.*

*Re-shouldering my load, I scouted the perimeter of the campground and found a sign directing me to Mosquito Beach. The trail quickly sloped into a gradual descent, the first in some time, and before long slick gravel, moistened from the river's mist, replaced the packed dirt. Then the trees broke and I joined the Mosquito River in coming home to Mother Superior.*

*The river trickled over several long stair step falls into the Lake. Enormous white pines, old growth, lined the perimeter of the narrow beach. One lone, derelict teepee stood down the beach, its opening fixed on the water, the only testament to humans having ever been there. I had done it. I threw my pack down and stripped naked, diving into the cool water.*

*As I surfaced, my Mag-light, perched on a rock behind me, threw my silhouette out into the water, the cold white LED lining my elongated frame, as if I were an alien whose UFO door had just opened onto an unsuspecting world, just like the movies. Shadows cast by the waves lapping in the light looked like fellow pilgrims in passing, the ghosts of natives long lost and teepee fires long extinguished.*

*I returned to shore and noticed a track in the sand, wide paws and long claw slits—undeniably a black bear. But I felt comforted. We walked the same beach, shared the same world. His time here had not been so different as mine. As I hunched into the teepee, I realized that I was no alien. I belonged here. I had found a part of me that I never knew existed, in a place that, but for chance, I never would have discovered.*

*My eyes gazed out into the expanse before me. The absence of light and the mist in the air matched the shade of the water with the sky; their slate greys mixed and became one. All encompassing, endless. Not stopping at this shore, or at Canada. Not anywhere. And I was a part of it all. My trial was over, and I had succeeded. The grey washed over me, and I was absorbed in the ancient, present landscape.*

#### **Chapter 4: Sacred Symbols—Spiritual Relationships with the Environment**

One final mode of environmental relationships worth investigating here is the spiritual relationship people are capable of feeling in the winds and the trees, the soils and the waters they encounter. Unlike the two other relationships previously established, a spiritual relationship with the environment entails the metaphysical, existential aspect of connecting oneself to one's native ecological setting and recognizing the inherent reciprocity between the two. The extent to which one cultivates a spiritual relationship with the environment is the extent to which one actualizes emotional and psychological fulfillment that springs from an interior awareness and recognition of one's contingency within the natural world. Hemingway and Harrison both employ symbols to communicate this spiritual connection between humans and their natural surrounding; analysis of the symbols provides a glimpse into the potential extent of the spirituality.

Nick and Littless' experience of the "good part," the old growth of Nick's self-proclaimed last good country, presents Hemingway's era's iconic consideration of the intersection between nature and spirituality. As discussed above, the Romantics introduced the idea of nature as a separate sphere of holy refuge, a discrete and distinct place where one could go to feel the invigorating spirituality of nature on one's own terms, a place disconnected from the rudimentary travails of human life. Accordingly, the corresponding symbol for this conception of spirituality became that of the forest temple, church, or cathedral—verdant bowers folding together to craft the lofty arches of a place of worship, light filtering through the leaves to dapple the trunks as stained glass paints church walls.

The profundity and solemnity of church can intimidate young children, to be sure. Therefore it is no surprise when Littless feels such solemnity acutely when she enters this natural analog to the other places of worship she has visited before. She herself calls the place "solemn"

and states she would “be afraid if [she] were alone” (Hemingway, 89). When she questions her brother if he feels the same, he states, “No. But I always feel strange. Like the way I ought to feel in church” (Hemingway, 89). Failed attempts at quantifying their nebulous thoughts and feelings riddle this exchange between the siblings. Both seem to settle on the word “strange” as the best descriptor, which is not entirely helpful at expressing the true nature of their interior state. But perhaps this is Hemingway’s point. They simply do not know how the deep solitude and solemnity seeping through the bastion of old growth should make them feel, and as such they cannot capture that feeling in words. Nick describes the affect as how a church “ought” to make him feel. We cannot ignore the imperative tone of this word. Nick characterizes his emotion as that which he should feel, not necessarily as that which he elects to feel voluntarily. As with the imperiousness of a Sunday schoolmarm on a recalcitrant pupil, his emotional interaction with the towering trees is unidirectional. Whatever spirituality Nick feels thus becomes a prescribed one, emanating from a source outside himself—not from his own consideration of the ancient trees themselves, but rather from social constructions of what trees should be and mean. Without reciprocity of self-reflection and analysis, such spirituality cannot be obtained.

The dictatorial aspect of this quasi-spirituality perhaps derives from the conditioning of the day, as expressed within the church symbol itself. Nick and Littleless reveal this potentiality as their conversation continues. Littleless, prompted by the strange affect of the woods, inquires after her brother his belief in God. He replies that he doesn’t know, but promises that he will remind his sister to say her prayers at night at her request. Littleless is appreciative:

“Thank you. Because this kind of woods makes me feel awfully religious.”

“That’s why they build cathedrals to be like this.”

“You’ve never seen a cathedral, have you?”

“No, but I’ve read about them and I can imagine them. This is the best one we have around here” (Hemingway, 90).

Nick’s response directly channels the cathedral symbol, providing insight into the spiritual remove displayed by the two children. The woods represent an imposing cathedral, but it is the “best” possibility at spirituality that the children have. Their feeling of being simultaneously pushed away by the strangeness of the cathedral-like trees and pulled toward them as their sole reference point to a spirituality worthy of a cathedral likely stems from Hemingway’s own ambivalent convictions regarding the spiritual; his imagining of the woods and their reaction likely reflected attitudes of the day.

Hemingway and the expatriates of the time felt utterly disillusioned with religion and spirituality as a source of answers to the horrific world they were experiencing; Hemingway could reflect this disillusionment and confusion in the apparent gulf between the children and their forest cathedral. Still, however, Hemingway seems to offer an undeniable spiritual solace that can be found within nature, as evinced by Nick’s later encounter with the spiritually purifying Big Two Hearted River (which has received much criticism that need not be expanded upon in this thesis). The tension between Hemingway’s era’s distrust of conventional spirituality and a yearning for another workable model of spirituality to be found in nature likely provides the strange, uncertain, yet undeniably pious behavior of the children within their living Cathedral. Their encounter with this Holy symbol, however, provides a moment’s reflection and nothing more—there is no evidence that the old growth stirs in them a spiritual awakening, and thus their relationship with the environment remains stilted in this regard.

James McClintock discusses Harrison and his take on spirituality in relation to James Hillman, a post-Jungian psychologist whose work focuses on the connections between creativity,

dreaming, and their role in the construction of the “soul,” a process he calls “soul-making.” Hillman has often been referenced by Harrison explicitly, McClintock claims, and as such Hillman’s psychological theories provide clear subtext for Harrison’s work. Using Hillman’s words, McClintock characterizes Hillman’s thinking: “The making of soul, Hillman writes, ‘calls for dreaming, fantasizing, imaging’ because ‘in the beginning is the image; first imagination then perception; first fantasy then reality’” (McClintock, 192). McClintock extends this thinking to writers and how writers similarly use imaginings and symbols to develop the “souls” of their characters. McClintock ascribes to Harrison specifically a “faith that begins in the love of images,” which manifests in characters undergoing reflection and imagining, ultimately leading to an “interior reality of deep significance” (McClintock, 206).

McClintock’s explanation of just what he means by “soul” is tenuous at best, but I agree that Harrison develops his characters in a manner according to Hillman’s theories, at least to an extent. Harrison repeatedly places symbols and symbolic events in the path of his characters, forcing them to expand their consciousness and their thinking, and thus to consider the environment in relation to their spiritualities, to varying degrees of success.

Swanson’s vague spirituality also does not provide a viable model for a spiritual relationship with the natural environment. Harrison makes Swanson obsessed with an unobtainable symbol, the wolf, which is fitting, given that existential peace with himself and his surroundings seems wholly unobtainable for the wayward drunk. The wolf represents the wildness he craves, yet cannot fully unite with on a metaphysical level. He unquestionably desires this union:

“I walked along [the creek’s] bank, thrashing through brush with an eye out for wolf tracks on any sand bars. There were supposedly a dozen or so in the area and I wanted to

see one desperately... They are rarely heard and even more rarely seen... I felt that if I could see one all my luck would change. Maybe I would track it until it stopped and greeted me and we could embrace and I would become a wolf” (*Wolf*, 83).

Swanson does not want to find his own existential or spiritual place within a greater surround; he instead seeks to reject himself, his humanity, discarding it for a supposedly pure incorporation into the wildness the wolf represents. His spiritual desires do not map to himself; he does not want to understand himself. Instead, he masochistically yearns for the impossible, doomed from the start to fail. Yet Swanson refuses to believe this at first, and so the reader is drawn through the forest with him, searching fruitlessly for wolves and redemption.

The novel therefore seems to be pushing toward an inevitable climax of some chance meeting with a wolf, during which Swanson will have a moment of reckoning and reconciliation with himself and the environment, but it does not come to pass, as reader and protagonist suspect it won't. As Swanson heads out of the Hurons back to his car, he gives us hope yet that he may still be satisfied: “I headed more directly west hoping to pick up the log road and follow it south to the car. There was a vague chance too that I might see some tracks crossing the road” (*Wolf* 196-7). The reader hopes for Swanson, that the tracks might turn into something tangible that could redeem the addled antihero. We can expect nothing more from Swanson than vagaries, but the narrative arc seems to demand some payoff for his hapless excursion in the woods, and the wolf totem would be just that: a silent affirmation of Swanson having gained access to the transcendental harmony of the wild. Harrison subverts this expected outcome; instead, we are left with nothing more than a dusty, false spoor: “I slowed down to cross a rut and thought I saw some tracks in the reddish sand. I took the Murie book from my pack but they belonged to a coyote. I was still generally angry and it occurred to me as I finally drove out on the main road



that I felt none of my usual fears” (*Wolf*, 203). And so, at the last, both Swanson and the reader are foiled in both expectation and desire. Swanson’s thoughts as he leaves his efforts futilely behind him suggest an arc of conquering his fear, but just how much can we trust this claim? Just prior to this utterance, Swanson admits that he may not have learned anything at all: “Driving out of the woods I felt a new and curious calm but doubted that it would last: I had changed my life so often that I finally decided there’d never been anything to change...” (*Wolf*, 201). None of his changes or his realizations had stuck before, and it looks doubtful that they will now. Swanson simply leaves and rejoins society in the same capacity in which he has always participated in it; his first move is to go and gorge himself while getting piss drunk. He found himself unable to navigate the woods physically, have hope for them intellectually, or connect with them spiritually, and so he returns to living at the periphery of civilization, jeering at it with a whiskey-soaked lip.

It is possible that Harrison, writing this, his first novel, in the seventies, did not offer Swanson any redemption, closure, or spiritual awakening because Harrison did not believe any such event was possible during the environmental distress of the day. For Harrison at the time, there was no spirit of the wild left to give to Swanson.

Harrison pervasively places the symbol of the white pine stump in David’s path throughout both *True North* and *Returning to Earth*, each serving to mark his existential, and one could argue spiritual, situation at the time. The pine stumps embody an enemy, an injustice, that tear him apart, but whose evil occurred generations before, leaving him powerless, unable to do any more than catalog and archive. David is viscerally drawn to the stumps, to the destruction they signify. The stumps incessantly revive in David the memory of what his ancestors

perpetrated all across his native land. During his wanderings, he ultimately stumbles upon the stump nonpareil, the grandest and therefore most severe reminder of his family's logging legacy:

There before me was the largest of all white pine stumps, the great mother of stumps, straddling the gully like a ten-ton spider supported by roots so massive I couldn't get my arms around them. I scrambled around to the other side and there was an opening large enough to crawl in...It was sufficiently high enough for me to sit up straight and there was light to see the ground which was a mixture of cool sand and gravel...I was enthralled, and there was a distinct feeling similar to when I had been baptized. I thought that this was as close as I could come to finding a church for myself in our time (*True North*, 176-7).

If the closest David can come to a finding a church to which he can relate is the desolate remains of a stump, then it is really no church at all, but a ruin. David reports the channeling of a spiritual gravitas similar to Nick and Little; the feeling as if he "had been baptized" recalls the religious affect of their ancient cathedral. However, David does not share their ambivalence or uncertainty. The stump affects David immediately and decisively, offering him a partial spiritual peace that is ultimately prevented from blossoming by the history of destruction, both environmental and familial, that the stumps connote for him.

David's adoption of the stump has problematic implications for his spirituality. He is stuck clutching at a phantom connection with the woods, as his stumps prevent him from entering into the living dialogue of the environment around him. He often finds comfort in the woods, and acknowledges their capacity for regeneration, but as long as he labors in the history of degradation, he is unable to fully embrace this knowledge and ease his soul. In a sense, he cannot see the forest for the stumps. Thus, David's spirituality cannot fully take hold because the

stumps prompt him to feel cut off from the forest that was instead of a part of the present in the forest that is. His family and friends complain that he places his mind in the past; he does the same with his spirit.

The stump symbol embodies how David's soul is shaped at this point—broken and gnarled like the bleached remnants of trunk with which he has become obsessed. At this point in David's development within *True North*, he has not fully embraced the natural world as the antidote to his existential doubt, despite his capacity for it. The stumps as a symbol for David's spirituality at once reveal David's innate spiritual relationship and prevent it from progressing. As a stump is only a part of a tree, so to is David's current spirituality partial. David requires another push to leave the stump behind and welcome a new and more advanced spiritual paradigm.

Nowhere can we see a more effective example of Harrison's symbols triggering a spiritual awakening than in *Returning to Earth* Harrison's deployment of the black bear symbol as a representation of the soul of a deceased relative of the characters. Harrison demands that his characters question their ecological, social, and spiritual environments. The introduction of the spiritual totem of the black bear defies the characters' logic, forcing them to submit to a greater power they cannot understand. On its face, the black bear symbol is a spiritual one, but it is an ecological symbol, and Harrison may well intend both ecological and spiritual connotations with its use. This symbol is not something that the characters chase, as Swanson does with the ghost of his wolf, but rather it is something that is encountered by the characters unexpectedly and pushes them to reassess their environmental and spiritual paradigms. The black bear ultimately brings the characters into balance with their environments as they recognize the symbol as an expansion of spiritual possibility—a revelatory next iteration in their communion with the world.

In *Returning to Earth*, David's sense of place within his multifarious environments comes full circle. Throughout the events of *True North*, David uses nature as refuge, but he views it as just that—nature. David, after successive failures to find answers in theology, marriage, and relationships in general, determines that the woods are the last place that accepts him. His perpetuation of the man-nature binary is further evinced by his view of the white pine stumps as a holy refuge. In the beginning of David's portion of *Returning to Earth*, it is clear that David feels the need for a spiritual connection with nature, but he has not yet embraced the environment as something *more* than him—an ecological unity which subsumes his being entirely—while simultaneously being a *part* of him—his connection with his environment as a foundational aspect of his very being.

However, Donald's death in *Returning to Earth* expands David's notion of what it means to have a sophisticated spiritual relationship with the environment. Donald, as an Anishinaabe (Ojibwe), cultivated many religious practices of his people that he kept incredibly private, refusing to share them even with his wife Cynthia (David's sister). Though we are never told any specifics, it becomes clear that, for the Anishinaabeg, black bears represent sacred symbols. Donald tells several stories about black bears, alluding to their deep spiritual significance:

My brother-in-law David has found some great big stumps southeast of Grand Marais... He and I sat beneath one during an August thunderstorm once and you could almost imagine the tree that lived on that spot...I went back there several times including once alone when I spent a moonlit night under there and a small bear looked in between the roots and I said, "Hello, mugwa," which means bear in Anishinabe, but there's a lot more to it than just saying "bear" (*RtE* 20).

We never know what exactly the bear means to Donald; we learn that he encountered one during his three day vision quest in Canada, and that he finds the killing of bears to be abhorrent, a lesson learned from his grandfather. The meaning of the bear is contextual for Donald. He has created his own esoteric meaning of the bear through his own lived experience. His successful vision quest revealed the bear as his personal totem, a totem that would serve as a guide in his life and establish a tether to the spirit world. The bear symbol was not taught to him, but learned via firsthand engagement with the wilderness, during his spiritual meditations about and within it.

David stumbles into an encounter with a bear shortly after Donald's death that expands his mind, in a manner that mirrors the Anishinaabe ethos of ecology and spirituality:

I had been sitting in my stump chair when I smelled something strong and rank... I was half encased in the stump and swiveled awkwardly until I could see behind me. The bear I had seen earlier was sitting in a sunlit glade not fifty feet away. I went from dry to sweaty in seconds, my breath shortening, while I thought of what to do. In all my sightings and encounters in my twenty years locally I've never had a bear behave in this manner. With bears you always part company as soon as possible, usually with the animal leaving with all possible speed...I gave up thinking, stood up and turned around and whispered a stupid "hello."... It was only when I opened the relative safety of the car door that I thought, "Maybe it's Donald" (*RtE* 154-5).

David's act of leaving the white pine stump chair is significant. The white pine stumps have proved to be the impediment to David expanding his connection with the environment. The image of the white pine has caused David to filter his experience through his past—his family's history of logging and the resulting exploitation in the North Country. But the bear forces David

to consider a new way to engage with the environment, a spiritual way that may defy the physical and intellectual mediums to which he has grown accustomed. The bear helps David turn and face a sharper image of reality. David's surreal staring contest with the bear triggers in him a questioning of his previously held certainties surrounding the natural world. Indeed, the encounter leaves him quite shaken, as he reflects on the fact that bears should never get so near to humans: "I had nowhere to go with my unrest. I had read a dozen books on black bears but none of my knowledge was doing me any good because these books were of a scientific nature" (*RtE* 157). As evinced by his clinical treatment of himself, his family, and the natural world within his essay on his family's logging empire within *True North*, David has until this point viewed nature from a coldly scientific viewpoint. Such a stance detaches David from a meaningful engagement with his subject of inquiry. When reflecting on a conversation about bears with Donald, during which David admits his "purely scientific approach to the mammal," Donald remarks, "You think a bear is just a bear" (157).

David's inexplicable encounter with this bear prods him to question whether a bear is simply a bear. No longer can he accept an understanding of the woods in the sole contexts of the physical and intellectual. In order to explain the phenomenon he experienced, David realizes that he must throw traditional scientific explanation out the window and inquire into other possibilities. This simple act of questioning provides the answer. David cannot know for certain if a bear is simply a bear or if it can be a spiritual gateway—a new way to understand the world. Similarly, he cannot know how intricately involved he is as a functioning variable within the environment, just as we cannot hope to fully grasp spirituality, be it Anishinaabe or otherwise. The trick is in the pondering, in the acceptance of the possibility there is something more, and in the act of letting go of any certainty of an answer to these questions. David admits his need to

“give up thinking,” and the result is a beautifully appropriate “hello.” This theme of release, both of control (be it of family or natural processes) and of grief, appears constantly throughout the novel; unsurprisingly, the characters experience resolution in the wake of such acceptance and release.

Shortly after his encounter with the bear, we see David enter into a state of self-actualization for the first time in his life. He has retreated to Mexico but in this case not to flee—David welcomes his newfound purpose of assisting the locals crossing into America by way of his survival packs. His new pursuit proves healthier than losing himself in the quagmire of his Burkett Family history essay. Further, we see David entering into a stable relationship for the first time. By the end of the novel, David is living a mentally, physically, and ecologically sustainable life in the jungles of Mexico as an important part of a small and loving community, complete with a seedling of a family. For such a sea change in his spirituality to occur, David needed that final push of the meeting with the bear to force him to understand that his relation to both his ecological environment and his social environment is not predicated on his wants, needs, or even his understanding. Only after his meeting with the bear does his life evolve into one marked by connectedness and fulfillment—a metaphor for his expanded spirituality.

David lets go—of grief, of control, of doubt—and thus allows himself to expand and accept the intangible existence of the interconnected system that envelops so much more than he can comprehend scientifically or spiritually. David may finally circulate properly within this system, rather than fearing and escaping it, or even trying to understand and influence it, as he does adequately on a physical level and quite deeply on an intellectual level.

The shadow of Donald appears again in the closing pages of *Returning to Earth*, to induce a spiritual awakening in other members of his family as well. Clare, Donald’s daughter,

and his wife Cynthia see a black bear, and want desperately to believe its appearance signifies a message from a reincarnated Donald. Following her father's death, Clare believes wholeheartedly that Donald's spirit will migrate, via some kind of metempsychosis, into a bear, and spends hours alone in the woods endeavoring to find him, going as far as attempting to hibernate through the winter to commune with him. As Donald had never deigned to welcome Clare into his interior, spiritual life, Clare is more skeptical, but even she delves into a collection of reading about the bear as a symbol at the close of the novel. The bear only appears to the mother and daughter, who have drifted apart following Donald's death, once they reconcile, both with each other and with their grief. Clare's spiritual fervor and quest to find her father slowly fades, until she decides to go south to Ann Arbor with her boyfriend. This diminishing spiritual zealotry occurs in tandem with Cynthia's recognition that she cannot dictate her daughter's grieving process, or even her actions. Shortly thereafter, Cynthia contracts a serious bout of pneumonia, which brings the women together. In the following months, the grieving process runs its course, and both Cynthia and Clare accept Donald's death, finding new purpose, in school (Clare) and a new job complete with a change of scenery (Cynthia). During a reunion, on the first anniversary of Donald's death, they decide to take a walk together:

We crept up the steep dune with difficulty in the sliding sand and peeked over the edge. About a hundred yards away and below us a large bear swagged his head between a patch of beach pea and strawberries nibbling quickly as if frantic to eat. And then the ravens above him must have warned him because he stood up and made a woofing sound. I know that Clare and I were thinking the same thing. *Is that him? Is that him? Is that Donald who is greeting us, saying a final good-bye?* The bear stared at us and Clare clenched at my hand. And then he trotted over a hill as we all must (*RtE* 280).



Harrison ends the novel with those lines, which poetically capture both the closure of the women's grieving process, as well as their surrender to the expanded, ecologically conscious spirituality Donald has blessed them with.

In *Returning to Earth*, Harrison effectively demonstrates that a chief part of "soul-making," of enriching his characters' spiritual depth, is the act of letting go of desire for total, rational understanding and control, the embracing of the possibility of an ecological surround that resonates within us spiritually. This process manifests itself in the symbol of the black bear, Donald's ghostly shadow. The bear appears only in relation to release of control and understanding and resulting acceptance of a greater, mysterious system: in David's case, as a trigger to action, and for Cynthia and her daughter, as a signal of the act's completion.

Whether or not David or Cynthia or Clare actually believes that the bear is Donald misses the point. The greater significance is their recognition of an environment that is more than themselves. The characters understand and accept that they are entwined in a system they don't fully understand, one in which the natural environment plays a direct role in their lives. The important thing for them is believing that the land welcomes their lost loved one home as he returns to the earth from which he came. The spirituality is Donald's; David and Cynthia and Clare need not adhere to his belief totally to learn from it. In Donald's death, David and Cynthia realize the same thing: life can take on new dimensions with the introduction of an environmental spirituality. Bears are not simply bears, as Donald would say.

In the end, Harrison provides a substantive spirituality that unites humans within their natural context. This spirituality is achieved by a deep introspection, unable to be channeled by Nick or his sister. They instead squirm between the opposing pressures of churchlike religion, prescribed by the social, and natural splendor, discovered on their own; the overlap of both

within their forest cathedral proved too much for them (or perhaps Hemingway) to negotiate. The flat rejection of self that Swanson adopts in Harrison's earlier *Wolf* fails at the unification achieved by the characters in *Returning to Earth*. David's arc perhaps best demonstrates the movement away from the past, static, and stump-like, to a spiritual relationship with a dynamic and interconnected metaphysical whole, blooming in the present.

*It all looked so different. Reluctantly, I had put Mosquito Beach behind me and begun the return journey. I trudged through the soggy morning, at once backtracking and blazing trail. So many details that had eluded me in the darkness became clear: the true height of the canopy, the series of the river's cascades, the verdant lushness of the place. Even the narrowness of the trail itself—the previous night it had seemed so large. The woods were brand new.*

*I could not say the length of time that the hike had felt like last night, but that it felt timeless. The whole while, my mind had raced, flitting from thought to thought with each curve of the path. As I walked now, I stopped for a few moments to take pictures and rest, my mind at ease, preoccupied with nothing more than simply being.*

*My feet devoured the trail. Soon my isolation ended with the passage of morning hikers, broken with a few polite nods. Then I was back at my car, ready to drive into Grand Marais and then nonstop to Grand Rapids and home. Before throwing my pack in the trunk, I placed my hand on the sticker of the Great Lakes. I had seen into the land here for the first time.*

*The world felt bigger, yet more intimate. I put the North Woods behind me, but I would never forget. I returned home, but I was not the same.*

## Afterword

It is fitting that Jim Harrison's most compelling insight on the dynamic between man and "nature" occurs no place in particular, someplace in the thick of the woods partway through *True North*, voiced as a passing thought by David as he stops along one of his sojourns, one just like so many others:

Sitting there against the stump on a deeply cloudy day without the sun to correct my disbelief in my compass I thought the natural world wasn't meant to be soothing which was only an abstraction. People were nature too and it was schizophrenic to try to separate them from what we ordinarily thought of as nature. When you allowed your view of world to vastly expand the questions expanded with it (*True North*, 373).

I agree that the natural world does not exist to be our balm, to be exploited as a source of pleasure or antidote to our lifestyles. However, this does not mean that it cannot be soothing. David refers to the world without the particularizing article "the," a choice that should not be overlooked. This concept of "world" proves to be the true abstraction, offering us a space, an environment, in which we live and create ourselves and our experiences, one that is not particular, but contingent, malleable and inscrutable in many ways. Our questioning of "world" increases the more we engage with it; a perfect knowledge of the confluence between man and nature, part and whole, culture and ecology, cannot be contained in the human mind. Yet that does not stop us from trying. We can draw one conclusion from our questioning, however, with absolute certainty—we are part of something greater. When we deny the "schizophrenic" impulse to privilege ourselves as something beyond and apart from our natural world, when we instead take on a role within it, when we accept that we do not control it or create it, when we put

into meditative practice the relationships described in this thesis, then we begin to know ourselves better, a prospect I at least find quite soothing.

Originally, the ultimate aim of this thesis was to lay out a definition of what I deemed to be an “environmental identity.” However, the conception of such an identity soon proved to be too massive and amorphous a concept for me to pin down neatly here. So, instead, I decided to tease out the crux of what I meant by determining how one might build an environmental identity. What would be the components, and how might they be defined? In time, I realized that there are several distinct modes by which we build relationships with our natural surroundings, operating on the three levels I have outlined: physical, intellectual, and spiritual. In the course of my writing, while analyzing the mindsets of these authors and characters, it seemed to me that what I had at first conceived as an identity might better be thought of as a sense of oneness, or wholeness, that stems from a confidence in who one is at both the individual and the communal, macrocosmic level. Additionally, a fully developed environmental “identity” could bridge this dichotomy, recognizing that the individual and communal selves are not necessarily distinct at all, but rather two overlapping and whole components of one entity.

We can feel this oneness when we ascend a mountain, holding our bodies up with weary yet invigorated legs pressing upon firm ground pushing back at us, alpine gusts blowing our hair back, flinging the sweat from our arms. When we glance left and right, witnessing the other peaks, we recall crude ideas in our minds illustrating the primeval tectonic uplift giving the peak form, the volcanic machinations that produced the granite and gave the peak substance, the mighty power of windswept pebbles and raindrops that left their mark, cleaving the crevices where the hardy trees take root, speckling the mountainside with color, enlivening the stone.

Standing longer, the connection between each peak and pebble grows clearer, as we accept the primacy each linkage holds within a grand and mysterious scheme. We locate ourselves within it.

Such experiences develop within us this unique form of identity, a twofold one that reconciles the individual self within a greater natural context—uniting internal and external, self and surround. The relationships I developed here bridge the divide between these two spheres of self-building, and as such, I believe they serve as key foundational pillars of this environmental identity. I do not consider these relationships to be the only factors that could contribute to such an identity, nor do I consider environmental identity to be a necessarily privileged identity, only one that does not get recognized as it should.

While reading Hemingway's tales of Nick Adams, I began to notice that he had imbued in Nick a special communion with the natural world, one that united him with it in a way that I found difficult to access. Nick's skills as a woodsman emblemized an ease of living within the forest that, looking back, seems for the most part endemic to his time. But I could see this communion was incomplete. Reviewing Harrison's work, I found the attempts that his characters made at recapturing Nick's skill, his gift, but to no avail. They did, however, begin to engage with the North Woods in a different, more cerebral way. Not one of these characters provides a perfect model of how to build an environmental identity, of course. But I learned something from each. Nick showed me the hardiness, the action, the happy labor of journeying into the heart of the wilderness. Though Swanson never did perfect any of his relationships with the natural world, he taught me an exuberance, an urgency, that proves powerful in these times. And finally, David showed me the need for reflection, how to balance the thirst for knowledge and the acceptance of the unknown.

I went to the Upper Peninsula to follow their tracks. I drove to the Big Two Hearted, and to the Fox River outside Seney, the trout stream Nick actually described. I hiked the Huron Mountains for a day, and even saw a wolf track. And I explored the forests outside Grand Marais, near where David would have had his cabin. As I emulated Hemingway and Harrison's characters, I began to conceive of myself as a character living his own memoir, in the process of discovering his own connections to the woods of his home state. The interludes I have included attempt to chart this progression as it culminated in the final night of my journey. Through their characters, these two Michigan authors spoke to me about this collection of special, wild places up north, and the problems we face if we let slip that connection, that identification, with places like this.

Hemingway and Harrison had distilled the various methods by which we can build our identities in relation to the natural world, but the changes in methods of that building, the differing balances of the relationships that shifted between Hemingway and Harrison, led me to believe that these identities remain fluid. This fluidity may be our undoing; it seems that our identification with our primeval wild places, our long-burrowed roots—indeed, a part of our very selves—trickles away with each passing month, year, and decade, like a pebbles in a woodland stream. As we lose what little nature we have not hijacked and distorted, we lose the means by which we construct a part of ourselves. Our identities as people owe much to the environment in which they grow, and we lose our potential for wholeness as we squander it. Perhaps Barry Lopez said it best in *About This Life*:

Year by year, the number of people with firsthand experience in the land dwindles. Rural populations continue to shift to the cities. The family farm is in a state of demise, and government and industry continue to apply pressure on the native poles of

North America to sever their ties with the land. In the wake of this loss of personal and local knowledge, the knowledge from which a real geography is derived, the knowledge on which a country must ultimately stand, has come something hard to define but I think sinister and unsettling--the packaging and marketing of land as a form of entertainment...No longer innately mysterious and dignified, a ground from which experience grows, [the real landscape] becomes a curiously generic backdrop on which experience is imposed (Lopez, 99).

Our relationships with the land give us strength. They make us better, fuller people. Aside from the myriad of benefits that a healthy, native land provides—water filtration, carbon sequestration, soil generation, biodiversity, and innumerable more intangible benefits—it offers fertile land for us to grow experiences—to grow *ourselves*. We were not meant to treat our wilderness, our landscape, our land, as an occasional set piece. We were meant to live in it, and in turn, let it live in us.



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