

Returning to Nature: An Eco-critical Study of “Big Two-Hearted River”

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Abstract—“Big Two-Hearted River” is one of the Nick Adams Stories from Ernest Hemingway’s short story collection *In Our Time*. The story is told in a detailed description of Nick’s “trivial” experience in his Michigan resort after the veteran was back from the First World War. Up to now, the Nick Adams stories together with Hemingway’s other works have been interpreted by literary critics from different perspectives, among which the code hero image, death consciousness, nihilism, alienation and the artistic features are usually focused upon. This article intends to investigate “Big Two-Hearted River” from an eco-critical point of view. The study points out that Hemingway expressed his ecological consciousness in this short story about the harmonious relationship between man and nature; through the detailed narration of Nick’s simple experience of camping and fishing, “Big Two-Hearted River” vividly exposes the theme of returning to nature. The study actually reflects Hemingway’s ecological consciousness based on his yearning towards the beauty of nature.

Index Terms—Hemingway, Big Two-Hearted River, nature

I. INTRODUCTION

Ever since the appearance of eco-criticism in the last few decades of the 20th century, the eco-critics began to re-read literary works from an eco-centric point of view, with a particular emphasis on the representation of the natural world. As the theorist Greg Garrard pointed out, “Eco-criticism is unique amongst the contemporary literary and cultural theories because of its close relationship with the science of ecology. Eco-critics may not be qualified to contribute to debates about problems in ecology, but they must nonetheless transgress disciplinary boundaries and develop their own ecological literacy as far as possible” (Garrard, 2004, p.5). With such questions in mind as how nature is represented in the literary work, what role the physical setting plays in the plot, and whether the values contained in the work are consistent with ecological wisdom, eco-critics investigate the literary works and mean to make possible the connections among self, society, nature, and text so that human beings can be introduced to a further understanding of the plight we are facing as we step into the highly-developed industrial era and take it as a duty to protect the natural resources. Under such a circumstance, the arousal of respecting and protecting nature lies not only in nature writings, but also in many modern narrative fictions, as Leo Marx pointed out in his pioneering book *The Machine in the Garden*, “There can be little doubt that it affects the nation’s taste in serious literature, reinforcing the legitimate respect enjoyed by much writers as Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, and Robert Frost” (Marx, 1979, p.6).

In 1925, Ernest Hemingway published the book *In Our Time*, his first collection of Nick Adams story. The work consists of fifteen short stories, among which “Big Two-Hearted River” is the last and longest one. And in the year 1950, Hemingway confessed to the public that ““Big Two-Hearted River” had been published for twenty five years, but very few people could really understand the work. It is quite true that the style is plain and the plot is simple, for Nick is the only character in the story; and the whole work seems to be nothing more than a description of Nick’s camping and fishing in his Michigan resort after he was back from the First World War. But why did Hemingway complain about people’s lack of understanding about this work? The answer is clearly that the writer, in the short story, attempted to demonstrate a deeper meaning than the literal surface. And the deep meaning can be explored through an eco-critical point of view. That is to say, what Hemingway expressed in this short story is his ecological consciousness about the harmonious relationship between man and nature.

II. THE HARMONY BETWEEN MAN AND NATURE IN “FATHERS AND SONS”

Hemingway is productive in his writing of novels, novelettes and short stories. The publication of Hemingway’s short stories can be traced back to his middle school life. Throughout his writing career, Hemingway finished a great many short stories which are generally collected into four volumes, namely, *In Our Time*, *Men without Women*, *Winner Take Nothing* and *The Fifth Column and First Forty-Nine Stories*. In many of the short stories, Hemingway created a special character called Nick Adams who is a largely autobiographical figure of the writer. He is, like Hemingway himself, the son of a doctor as written in “The Indian Camp” and “The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife”; In “Big Two-Hearted River”, we see him relish fishing and hunting in the northern peninsula of Michigan as Hemingway often did. And as Hemingway himself, Nick Adams also went abroad during World War I and suffered a knee wound as shown in “In another Country”. Up to now, the Nick Adams stories together with Hemingway’s other works have been interpreted by literary critics from different perspectives, among which the code hero image, death consciousness,

nihilism, alienation and the artistic features are usually focused upon. But as a canonized writer, Hemingway and his works will definitely remain new in American literature. Today, living in the worsening situation of eco-crises, we find it is of great significance to re-examine the works through an eco-critical point of view. "Big Two-Hearted River" is a typical example showing Hemingway's ecological consciousness of returning to nature.

In "Big Two-Hearted River", Hemingway dealt with the emotions of a character that has been both psychologically hurt and physically traumatized by war and is striving for a meaningful retreat. The story is about Nick, a veteran's returning to the Michigan forest after the war, yet there is not a single reference to the word "war" in the work. The violence and devastation of war are never directly mentioned; instead, what the story stresses is Nick's intention to regain his psychological equilibrium, relaxation and comfort after he was back from the spiritual and physical torture in the European battlefield. After all, "the devastating experience of the war can only serve to deface the environment of Nick Adams Childhood" (Seo, 2016, p.448). At the beginning of the short story, the readers can see the burned-over country, fire-split stone, and the burned-off ground surface, and the thirteen saloons that had lined the one street of Seney had not left a trace. The dreary landscape of Seney can be interpreted as corresponding with Nick's mental anguish, or his spiritual wasteland. And this description actually symbolizes Nick's miserable experiences and psychological torment in the cruel war, as Sheldon Grebstein claimed "the burnt-over land which Nick crosses on his way toward the river can be equated with his war-scorched nerves" (Grebstein, 1973, p.20). A sense of spiritual comfort arose consequently from the harmony between Nick and the natural beauty around him.

The experience in the war is a heart-struck one to Nick. In trying to heal his inner and outer wounds, Nick decided to leave the inhumane modern world and find solace in the woods. The veteran put himself in the wilderness, appreciated the beauty of nature, gradually forgot about the misery and gained the recovery of his comfort. It is the beautiful wild life that enabled the veteran to steer clear of the misery and appreciate the beauty of life. Being in the place far away from modern civilization, Nick Adams was able to take possession of the sense of mental balance. The clean river, the swimming trout, and the flying kingfishers were all so beautiful that Nick kept watching them for such a long period of time. "It was a long time since Nick had looked into a stream and a trout. They were very satisfactory" (Hemingway, 1987, p.163). Nick was so attracted by the scene that he almost forgot about his own existence. It was quite a hot day and his muscles ached; however, for Nick, it was even a happy job to walk uphill, because "He felt he had left everything behind, the need for thinking, the need to write, other needs. It was all back of him" (Hemingway, 1987, p.164). This recovery is somewhat similar to one of Hemingway's hobbies that whenever he finished writing a book, he would run immediately to the west or Florida to revive his energy. In doing so, they derive a certain pleasure from the day-to-day toil.

Normally speaking, people living in the developed civilization pay not so much attention to the natural environment around. But when a person is back to nature, like Nick Adams, all of his or her feelings tend to be recovered through the careful observation. In the short story we are able to detect that Nick was so absorbed in natural beauty that the author even began to describe vividly his notice of the color of the grasshoppers along the road,

The grasshopper was black. As he had walked along the road, climbing, he had started many grasshoppers from the dust. They were all black. They were not the big grasshoppers with yellow and black or red and black wings whirring out from their black wing sheathing as they fly up. These were just ordinary hoppers, but all a sooty black in color. (Hemingway, 1987, p.165)

In the meantime Nick began to smell the flavor of the sweet fern. "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, 1987, p.165). Even the feeling of hunger is different because "he did not believe he had ever been hungrier" (Hemingway, 1987, p.167). The experience in such a beautiful place enabled Nick to harbor the sense of the harmony and vitality of the great nature. It is also in this harmonious atmosphere that both the kingfishers and the trout were enjoying their happy lives. "As the shadow of the kingfisher moved up the stream, a big trout shot upstream in a long angle" (Hemingway, 1987, p.163-164). There is no interruption among them but they are closely related to one another. The grasshoppers all became black because they wanted to live in the burned land. And as for the pine trees,

The trunks of the trees went straight up or slanted toward each other. The trunks were straight and brown without branches, the branches were high above. Some interlocked to make a solid shadow on the brown forest floor. Around the grove of trees was a bare space. It was brown and soft underfoot as Nick walked on it. This was the over-lapping of the pine needle floor, extending out beyond the width of the high branches. The trees had grown tall and the branches moved high, leaving in the sun this bare space they had once covered with shadow. Sharp at the edge of this extension of the forest floor commenced the sweet fern. (Hemingway, 1987, p.166).

The whole setting is only a small ecological environment, but everything exists for its own reason and one is dependent on another. It is in such a beautiful environment that people are able to remove their mental intensity and regain their pleasure and relaxation. This assumption is also embodied in the following words written by the British poet Thomas Traherne in his *Centuries*: "You never enjoy the world aright, till the Sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens, and crowned with the stars: and perceive yourself to be the sole heir of the whole world". (Simons, 2002, p.192). A picture of harmony between man and nature practically appeared in front of our eyes.

Nick obtained the psychological comfort that he had been looking for in the beauty of such a wonderful natural world. The complete unity with nature had given Nick such a wonderful sense of release that "his neck and back and the small

of his back rested as he stretched” and “the earth felt good against his back” (Hemingway,1987, p.166). Towards the end of the first day, Nick pitched his tent and crawls inside, noting with pleasure how homelike the space seems. He thought, “He was settled. Nothing could touch him. It was a good place to camp. He was in there, in a good place. He was in his home where he had made it” (Hemingway,1987, p.167).At the beginning of the second part of the story, when Nick crawled out of the tent and looked at the morning, he found that “he was excited by the early morning and the river” (Hemingway,1987, p.173).While Nick was sitting on the logs, smoking, drying in the sun that was warm on his back and preparing for the fishing, he could perceive that “slowly the feeling of disappointment left him” (Hemingway,1987, p.177).To a certain degree, “the story seems to be giving us a twentieth century version of Thoreau’s retreat to Walden Pond”(Flora,1989, p.59). Just as Huck feels relaxed all over when he runs away from the civilized society and places himself in nature in Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which is highly praised by Hemingway as the best work in American literature, Nick sensed the beauty of nature and the degeneration of modern civilization. All the detailed descriptions above showed us that Nick had actually become a part of nature, living in great harmony with the vital integrity and enjoying a true self and happy life. Like Thoreau, Emerson, and Mark Twain, Hemingway also “decenters the epic of human history by way of an ecological scale of atoms within an energy circuit”(Meehan,2013,p.310).With the interdependent unity of human and nonhuman, the beautiful nature purified Nick and provided him with indispensable spiritual enjoyment and nourishment.

The main character’s harmony with nature lied as well in the fact that he showed concern and affection to the creatures in the beautiful place. Nick found some grasshoppers when he was tired and sat down against the charred stump to have a rest. He at that moment carefully reached the hand down and took hold of a hopper by the wings only to find that it was all black as a result of the burned land. Seeing this, a sense of sympathy for the little animal arose in Nick’s heart. He spoke out for the first time, “Go on hopper. Fly away somewhere” (Hemingway,1987, p.165).The readers can see that before the appearance of this sentence there was not a single monologue or dialogue except the author’s third-person-singular narration. The very reason why Hemingway designed such a monologue here is that he intended to stress Nick’s intimate friendship with the little creatures. What’s more, as Ju-Hyun Seo observed, the black hopper was the emblematic of modern people who had lost their potency and strong will, surviving and adapting to the somber post-war world. They became somebody whom Nick sympathized and were related to Nick’s self-emancipation,

They have turned black, an adaptive process that allows them to survive the burned fields. They cannot even think of escaping from this blackened land. They have given up their willpower already. It is possible that these blackened locusts are emblematic of modern people, surviving and adapting to the sombre post-war world. They have lost their potency, their strong sense of identity and life force, yet still survive. If Nick Adams returns to civilization, there is a distinct danger that he will succumb to the demands of modern technology or, worse, be enslaved to dominant material values. If such a thing happens, he might (not unlike the lifeless black locusts) lose his own sense of identity and life force. Therefore, when he exclaims to a hapless locusts, “Go on, hopper”. It can be read as a declaration of self-emancipation. In addition, his aimless, unhurried amble through the scarred landscape becomes a ritual freeing himself from the traumatic memory; his toil, a refusal to conform to the modernized world. So to speak, his physical endeavor is a stimulant against self-paralysis, the kind of modern temptation which prevents him from responding to his dynamic life force. (Seo,2016, p.455).

Unlike the intense description of the battle between man and fish in *The Old Man and the Sea*, Nick Adams’ fishing in “Big Two-Hearted River” was described in a more relaxing and gentle atmosphere. Different from Santiago’s motivation, Nick went to the fishing just for a recovery of both his mind and his spirit debilitated by war. The story abounded in details of how splendid the fishing was and of what a good time Nick was having. We can not find a clue that may signify Nick’s destruction of nature. Instead, Nick’s fishing experience in the story tends to stress the harmonious relationship between man and nature, for they are so closely dependent on each other. According to eco-critics, human beings are an inseparable part of nature. We have the right to take useful or necessary things from the natural world, on the precondition that we do not go too far as to destroy the ecological balance. Every life form in the world has the right to live and blossom. It is true that we have to kill in order to eat, but there is also a basic intuition that we are not at all entitled to destroy other living beings without sufficient reason. We know Nick wanted to get a big fish and sympathized with the small ones. In his eyes, small fishes belong to the weak as he himself does. But they are also an essential part of the ecosystem and have every reason for their own existence. That is why Nick unhooked the barb from the mouth of small trout when it was caught. And quite an unpleasant depiction came next of Nick’s continual recalling of the dead trout, “Nick had again and again come on dead trout, furry with white fungus, drifted against a rock, or floating belly up in some pool”, (Hemingway,1987, p.176),which symbolized Nick’s misery from the war and emphasizes his compassion on the little animals. At almost the end of the story, the readers can see that, though Nick’s attempt to hook the biggest trout he had ever seen ends with the trout’s escape, he had succeeded in getting two other big trout alive. Nick felt very happy and satisfied, at the same time he realized that he had got enough pleasure out of the hooking on that day and he should stop here. So “he went on a log, took a cigarette out and struck a match to light it” (Hemingway, 1987, p.179) and went back to the camp, for the reason that he did not want to hurt any more trout. It is quite true that the swamp which appeared next in some way accounted for the reason of Nick’s abandonment of more fishing at that time. However, we should also be able to notice that Hemingway is a skillful expert at symbolism. In the

following specific description he endowed the swamp with its symbolic meanings,

Nick did not want to go in there now. He felt a reaction against deep wading with the water deepening up under his armpits, to hook big trout in places impossible to land them. In the swamp the banks were bare, the big cedars came together overhead, the sun did not come through, except in patches, in the last deep water, in the half light, the fishing would be tragic. In the swamp fishing was a tragic adventure. Nick did not want it. He did not want to go down the stream any further today. (Hemingway, 1987, p.180)

Nick knew well that there were many big trout in the swamp, but he still decided to change the fishing plan. He did not want to go any further on that day. To avoid the possibility of defeat, Nick decided to postpone the adventure instead of plunging into the armpit-deep water of the swamp overshadowed by big trees, where he might “hook big trout in places impossible to land them”. The gloomy and somber swamp mentioned here is a certain admonition from the great nature just like the appearance of the sharks in *The Old Man and the Sea*. If Nick, too, for the sake of getting more and more trout, went on with the fishing without considering the possible danger ahead, maybe he will in the end receive the same tragic punishment from nature as Santiago, who went out too far to the sea and experienced “a worst form of unlucky” (Hemingway, 1980, p.5). After all, “There were plenty of days coming when he could fish in the swamp” (Hemingway, 1987, p.180) and he didn’t have to do it at the moment. As far as Nick is concerned, he had got enough pleasure and comfort from the experience. Just as Glen Love claimed in his book of eco-criticism, “Fishing intensifies the sense of simplicity and control that Nick seeks: he with his rod on one end; nature, alive, in the form of a fish, on the other; and a taut line joining the two. Thus far, the story has followed a simple pastoral line, the hero having withdrawn from some threatening scene on the horizon into the green world. Here the beauty and order of the setting permeate the young man’s spirit and act to restore his inner equilibrium” (Love, 1987, p.118). In this case, Nick’s fishing experience also contains enough ecological elements that are related to man’s spirit and plays a significant role in regaining his inner equilibrium.

III. CONCLUSION

The past twentieth century bears witness to man’s great power of changing and conquering nature. However, it is quite often the great power that accounts for the potential threat of man’s own existence. The development of economy and materialism has not only improved human beings’ living standard but also pushed people to destroy the ecological environment. In order to survive well on the earth and have further social development, it is necessary for human beings to live in harmony with nature and put more emphasis on environmental protection and conservation of the natural resources. That is what Hemingway conveyed to us in “Big Two-Hearted River”. The short story is told in such a detailed description of Nick’s “trivial” experience that some people may consider it as a tedious work and lose the patience to read it through. Nevertheless, it is the trivial camping and fishing experience that vividly reflect Nick’s harmonious relationship with the natural environment, taking mental recovery and relaxation without destroying the ecological balance. It is also in this work that Ernest Hemingway neglected the incorrect anthropocentricity and gave prominence to ecosystem. As a matter of fact, the story can be read as a nostalgia-filled journey through the natural world. It is through the short story that Hemingway tried to advise human beings to give up the human-centered point of view, come closer to the natural environment and achieve a complete unity with the great nature. In a word, “the return to origins, to unspoiled nature, is never a simple or an unqualified one in the fiction” (Messent, 1992, p.130). The readers’ environmental consciousness will definitely be further aroused after they re-examine the short story with such an eco-critical approach.

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