

# Hemingway's Ecological Consciousness in "An African Story"

Yufeng Wang

Xiamen University of Technology, Fujian, China

**Abstract**—Ernest Hemingway's stories with African Safari themes play a significant role in his abundant works and they deserve an in-depth investigation. However, little academic scholarship has been devoted to these African stories compared with his other works. As eco-criticism has become an important perspective of the Hemingway studies, this article is an eco-critical interpretation and deep exploration of the ecological consciousness in "An African Story". In this story, Hemingway revealed man's cruelty towards the animals and presented his contemplation over the conflict between man and nature from an innocent little child's point of view. Through the detailed description of the protagonist David's experiences as a bystander of an animal slaughter, Hemingway exposed the conflict between human beings and nature. The story is actually a presentation of Hemingway's sympathy for the destroyed ecology, which also reflects the writer's pursuit of spiritual home and his criticism against the human exploitation of nature.

**Index Terms**—Hemingway, An African Story, nature

## I. INTRODUCTION

As one of the great writers whose footprints were set in many parts of the world, Ernest Hemingway took advantage of the rich experiences in his life and made his books great charms to readers at home and abroad. It is widely known that the life in Africa covers a large part of Hemingway's legendary biography. In 1933 and 1953 Hemingway traveled twice to Africa, a mysterious place with ancient civilization and wild beauty. In the ancient place, Hemingway enjoyed the pleasant hunting experiences and appreciated the beauty of nature. Because of the traveling experiences Hemingway not only gained a title of a world citizen but also formed a vivid outlook about nature. These experiences in Africa provided Hemingway with abundant writing materials, inspiring him to compose such African stories as *Green Hills of Africa*, "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber", "The Snows of Kilimanjaro", "An African Story", *The Garden of Eden*, *True at First Sight*, and his posthumous work *Under Kilimanjaro*. These novels or short stories based on African themes formed a considerable amount of journalism and correspondence and obtained great popularity among Hemingway's literary works. But surprisingly little academic scholarship has been devoted to these African stories compared with the author's other works. Today, as eco-criticism has become an important literary criticism from which many famous writers and their literary works have been re-interpreted, Hemingway's works together with his life are frequently considered typical examples of the academic research. This article, taking "An African Story" as a case, endeavors to explore the ecological consciousness in the story and means to present another important perspective of Hemingway studies.

## II. "AN AFRICAN STORY": THE CONFLICT BETWEEN MAN AND NATURE

Hemingway's African stories are often related to the moral ideal in his thought. From the perspective of eco-criticism, many scholars believe the stories illustrate the harmony or conflict between human beings and nature. For instance, in Hemingway's first venture into non-fiction *Green Hills of Africa*, which chronicles the writer and his wife's adventures on safari in the early 1930s, the readers can not only appreciate the beauty of the wilderness but also detect an ancient and magnificent place is threatened by the incursions of man. Woodcuts, animal killing, and exploitation of natural resources scattered throughout the book, add another dimension to the view of the hard-edged, rugged world of wild Africa. The scene coincides with Linda Wagner Martin's statement that "*Green Hills of Africa* would show the more human side of Hemingway. And much of that human side might be read as weakness" (Martin, 2007, p.110). In this "absolutely true" non-fiction that was based on his own hunting expedition to Tanganyika, Hemingway, on one hand, described the beauty of the forests, the prairie, the mountains, the blue sky and all kinds of wild birds and animals, the exciting hunting experiences and the simple yet civilized country life in the ancient place; on the other, the writer presented his disappointment towards the modern civilization and his strong yearning towards the natural beauty. "An African Story" is another Africa-based works that root in the ancient and mysterious continent of Africa and form a remarkable part of all his literary achievements. With the omniscient third-person-singular point of view, "An African Story", a short story covering less than ten pages, gives a detailed description of how an old elephant is hunted and cruelly killed by two hunters. Little David is the hero, who, like a cinematograph, told the readers in detail about the impressive story. Different from the main idea of "Big Two-hearted River", what Hemingway expressed in this story is not the harmonious relationship between man and nature; instead, he in the work intended to reveal his view on man's

cruelty towards the animals and the conflict between man and nature through the inner thought of an innocent little child.

The short story began with David's nocturnal searching for the trail of the old elephant to prove his masculinity so that he could become a pride of his father. Under the moonlight and with his dog Kibo, David found the trace of the elephant and reported it to his father, who was not a professional hunter but went to the African prairie to taste the experience of hunting and embark on the hunt for the ivory-laden animal. David tried his best to follow the elephant and was totally exhausted after the task was accomplished. Then he woke once because he "thought of the elephant with his great ears moving as he stood in the forest, his head hung down with the weight of the tusks" (Hemingway, 1987, p.547). He felt from the bottom of his heart an uncertain deep sense of hollow. But what did such a feeling come from? David at that time took for granted that it was due to his hunger. However, the fact is that "It was not and he found that out in the next three days" (Hemingway, 1987, p.547). What happened in the next three days informed David that he had actually done a very regretful thing for all the life.

When David was told by Juma, the native guider and aboriginal hunter, about the history of the old elephant, he realized that the elephant was lonely and wretched; and it was intimate and warm-hearted to its friend, who had been cruelly killed by Juma about five years ago. A strong sympathy for the old elephant came quickly to the boy's mind and he began to hold a kind of hatred towards Juma and his father. The poor elephant had been dead for such a long time but the traced one was still so reminiscent that it often came to have a look at its old friend with no fear of the danger of being slaughtered. We can strongly understand the old elephant's deep emotion towards its lifelong companion when Juma pointed out to David and his father "where the great elephant they were trailing had stood while he looked down at the skull and where his trunk had moved it a little way from the place it had rested on the ground" (Hemingway, 1987, p.550). David was compassionate about the elephant, for he knew he has Kibo, the close dog friend, and Kibo had him. But as for the poor old elephant, its good friend had been cruelly killed and it itself, who wasn't doing any harm, was being tracked and about to be slaughtered without any mercy for the mere sake of the tusks which weighted two hundred pounds apiece at the place where it came to see its friend. David, sickened by the elephant's suffering and despair, thought it was all his fault and began to feel a sense of conscience and guilt from his innocent heart:

The bull wasn't doing any harm and now we've tracked him to where he came to see his dead friend and now we're going to kill him. It is my fault. I betrayed him.

...

Juma would not have found him if I had not seen him. He had his chance at him and all he did was wound him and kill his friend. Kibo and I found him and I never should have told them and I should have kept him secret and had had him always and let them stay drunk at the beer shamba. Juma was so drunk that we could not wake him. I'm going to keep everything in secret always. I'll never tell them anything again. If they kill him Juma will drink his share of the ivory or just buy himself another goddamn wife. Why didn't you help the elephant when you could? (Hemingway, 1987, p.550).

Paralleled with the description of David's regret of telling the two hunters about the elephant's trace, Hemingway's consciousness of protecting the animals and nature was also embodied in David's dissatisfaction towards the ruthlessness of Juma and his father. As a child, David had no right or power to control the adults' decision, but he was bold enough to express his protests against their cruelty in a quiet and soft voice "Fucking elephant hunting" (Hemingway, 1987, p.551). He said to himself, "I'll never ever tell him or anybody anything again, never anything again. Never ever never". (Hemingway, 1987, p.551). Facing the scene that they are going to kill the old elephant, David "turned him against Juma and made the elephant his brother" (Hemingway, 1987, p.551). He cursed them as the goddamned friend killers. The little innocent boy even went so far as to imagine that "They would kill me and they would kill Kibo if we had ivory" (Hemingway, 1987, p.551), which was virtually an unrealistic imagination but highly illustrated human beings' greed in the process of conquering nature.

Hemingway was a keen hunter who had also been to many places for his exciting hunting experiences. In the description of other works about hunting, Hemingway often praised highly the courage of mankind and gave a vivid portrayal of the heroes' excited mood after they succeeded in gaining their trophies. However, what we come across in this work is nothing but a strong sense of guilt and conscience from the heart of David, the real hero of the short story. Just as John Simons' statement in one of his book about animal rights goes, "anyone who thinks deeply about the environment and his or her responsibility towards it is likely also to be thinking about animals" (Simons, 2002, p.76). To a certain extent, it was Hemingway's personal experiences in hunting that resulted in his rethinking about the relationship between man and animals. "An African Story" is a typical work reflecting the fact that Hemingway had sensitively become aware of the conflict between man and nature and formed his ecological consciousness that is quite different from the thoughts in his other Africa-based works such as *Green Hills of Africa* and "The Short, Happy Life of Francis Macomber" demonstrating human beings' tough image in the course of conquering nature. Little David is actually a weak symbol, watching over the beginning and ending of the story with his puzzled eyes. The little child was "a helpless spectator, forced to witness an event that he abhors" (Roe, 1998, p.323-324). Why can't human beings live in peace with elephants? Why is it necessary for them to conquer the innocent animal with violence? Just for the mere sake of their enjoyment and happiness? How selfish they are! Throughout the human history, "the animal has surely often been regarded in its own right (and rite) as 'other', not as what lies between us and 'the other'. But may it... be... the

animal not the human subject alone that brings the meanings into the world?" (Bleakley, 2000 p.20). In "An African Story", David's inner voice in the story informs the readers that human beings are actually able to get along well with all the innocent animals instead of taking them as our slaves.

David realized that the old elephant wanted to live in peace with human beings. Even at the moment when it was about to leave the world, its eyes were still full of vitality and they became the most alive thing he has even seen. David thought the elephant could have killed Juma though it was so old and tired, but it didn't mean to do so; and "He didn't look at me as though he wanted to kill me. He only looked sad the same way I felt. He visited his old friend on the day he died"(Hemingway, 1987, p.553).The pitiful and wretched expression seemed to David that the poor old elephant was asking for a rescue from him. But David was so weak that he had no ability to restrict the adults' action or prevent the brutal butchery and the conflict between human and nonhuman. He had no choice but to stand there watching the sad scene. He remembered clearly what happened at the moment when Juma

pushed the muzzle almost into the earhole and fired twice, jerking the bolt and driving it forward angrily. The eye of the elephant had opened wide on the first shot and then started to glaze and blood came out of the ear and ran in two bright streams down the wrinkled gray hide... Now all the dignity and majesty and all the beauty were gone from the elephant and he was a huge wrinkled pile(Hemingway, 1987, p.552).

Faced with this cruel scene of slaughter, David was indignant but he had no access to any way of help. What he could do is just helplessly warn himself not to convey true words to other people any more. David was disappointed and angry at his father and Juma for their greed and violence. At this moment, we can claim that the death of the elephant had two levels, namely, "the death of the elephant and the death of David's love for his father"(Nagel, 1989, p.336). David's attitude here in some way fits into the opinion of Mary Austin, an American natural writer, that animals can survive very well in the wilderness and "it was so-called civilization, not wildness, that changed their homes into dangerous places" (Nelson, 2000, p.48).To David, the only thing that existed at the bottom of his heart was the feeling of extreme loneliness when the other "hunting heroes" were celebrating their victory, sitting and drinking beer while the big drum started and the ngoma began to build. His hatred towards them was so strong that when his father attempted to talk to him after the brutal butchery that the elephant was a murderer to many people, his responses were, "They were all trying to kill him", "I wish he'd killed Juma", and Juma is "not any more"(Hemingway, 1987, p.553). my friend. In David's heart, "the animal is not just biological, but legitimately psychological and conceptual" (Bleakley, 2000 p.20).

David's indignation over the conflict between man and animals was portrayed again as he followed his father and Juma when they tracked the elephant back to the skull of the elephant's friend, who had been killed in an earlier hunt. The living elephant seemed to mourn the loss of his friend. Recognizing the power of the elephants' bond, David rejected the enterprise of elephant hunting altogether with a taboo piece of adult language "Fuck elephant hunting". In this exclamation "David's overwhelming sympathy for the vulnerable but manifestly intelligent, sensitive animals depends fundamentally on his awareness that elephants do in fact mourn" (Moddelmog, 2013, p. 223-224). After all, nature means not only human world, but also nonhuman world. "Every human is an animal. Every animal, and every plant, is related to every human"(Nichols,2011,p.16). These voices contributed greatly to the consolidation of the ecological theme of the short story.

Human beings are the product of the development of all the creatures on the earth. With the special ability of our labor force, we become the socialized group today. The main difference from animals is that we human beings have a special sense or consciousness, which results directly in our leading position in all the creatures living on the earth. Being endowed with this advantage doesn't necessarily mean that human beings are omniscient in everything or superior to animals in every aspect. In an article called "The Lowest animal", Mark Twain's question to human beings' ruling position on the earth and his condemnation on the hypocrisy and cruelty of human race are very picturesque. According to this famous writer, human beings are not what we think we are; instead, we are even not reasoning animals. He announced to human beings that "the strongest count against their intelligence is the fact that with the record back of him he blandly sets himself up as the head animal of the lot; whereas by his own standards he is the bottom one"(Twain, 1967, p.180). His words tell us that animals, instead of being taken as slaves, should be treated as man's good friends because of the fact that animals also have their superiorities over human race and they can teach people useful things and provide us with some daily necessities; and "animals are subjects of rights, capable of feeling pain, desire, and understanding. In this thinking, humans as a dominating species need to avoid 'speciesism' that carries the ring of 'racism' and 'sexism'" (Bronner, 2005, p.412).The argumentation in Mary Austin's work *The Flock* pointed out by Barney Nelson is instructive "Humans teach animals useless 'tricks,' which are usually never new to the animal but something the animal is already capable of doing: fetch, roll over, lay down, bark. Animals, on the other hand, teach humans survival skills: trails, patterns for society, and medicinal uses for plants" (Nelson, 2000, p.33). It also informs us that human beings are closely related to other lives on the earth. Now, as human beings are changing and conquering nature with our wisdom, it is necessary for us to take into consideration the close relationship between the Mother Nature and ourselves. The long-held anthropocentrism is an irresponsible thought and must be eliminated. Nature is a physical place for human activities and is not just something we use to serve their various personal purposes. Human beings, with our characteristic sense and consciousness, must bear the responsibility on the whole nature as well as on ourselves. If we mistreat nature with an inhuman attitude, destroying and damaging the harmony, one day we will receive the payback arranged by the law of nature. After all, as a kind of creature on the earth, we human beings have to

bear in mind that no matter how smart and advanced we are, we cannot survive without the exterior environment of the earth. Overestimate of our own ability will at last lead to nothing but a doomed future. "An African Story", through the little boy's innocent mental thought, describes human beings' greed and ruthlessness as well as the wisdom and power embodied in the process of conquering the animals and nature. In the exchange and contact of emotion between little David and the old elephant in the short story, we can detect a certain strong calling for mutual understanding and respect between man and animals.

The elephant-killing anecdote and the inner voice of the protagonist in "An African Story" coincide with another story of African themes which is written toward the end of *The Garden of Eden*, one of the works published after Hemingway's suicide. From 1946 until his death in 1961, Hemingway worked on the book which is notable for the narrator's expression of his deep disgust, as a boy, at the excesses of elephant killing in Africa by his father. In the story, the father's shooting of an elephant and removal of the tusks made his son feel so cruel that the child would no longer call him a hero. It was also for the poor elephant that David "betrayed" to his father. And "In this father-son conflict and its basis on destruction of nature versus the love and respect for its forms, we get a picture of those internal conflicts that went largely undeveloped in the author's life" (Messent, 1992, p.163). The indignation in this posthumous novel explains the boy's loyalty shifted from his father to the elephants, strengthening the ecological consciousness in Hemingway's African stories.

### III. CONCLUSION

As a sophisticated hunter, Hemingway gained a lot of trophies from his hunting experiences in Africa. That is why he always had quite a good reputation for his ability to conquer nature; and some people would even say he is himself a destroyer of nature. Hemingway's lifelong love of animals is often said to "run parallel to his fascination with killing animals while hunting and fishing" (Moddelmog, 2013, p.222). People say "Hemingway has often been known as a macho animal killer. He often was. And yet "he also had the characterization cat lover, animal sympathizer, and passionate defender of plants" (Moddelmog, 2013, p.217). In a hunting article published in 1951, Hemingway announced that "the author of this article, after taking a long time to make up his mind, and admitting his guilt on all counts, believes that it is a sin to kill any non-dangerous game animal except for meat" (Love, 2003, p.131). A year later he wrote to Harvey Breit, in a reference to Faulkner's "The Bear," that "I think it is a sin to kill a black bear, because he is a fine animal that likes to drink, that likes to dance, and that does no harm and that understands better than any other animal when you speak to him. . . . I have killed enough of them since I was a boy to know it is a sin. It isn't just a sin I invented" (Love, 2003, p.131). During his 1953 African safari, Hemingway was more interested in watching animals than in killing them. Hemingway, like David, "long possessed a fierce sympathy for elephants and many other non-domesticated animals". (Moddelmog, 2013, p.224). In this African story the readers can deeply detect Hemingway's awareness of sympathizing with the animals and protecting nature, "with animals, as in much of his life, Hemingway engaged his culture's interests with unusual intensity. He felt genuine, if paradoxical, concern for the welfare even of the animals he hunted, and his love for companion animals was always strong and pronounced" (Moddelmog, 2013, p.221). Short as the story is, "An African Story" is well qualified to demonstrate the author's sensitive realization of the conflict between human beings and the natural world. Weak as the hero's voice is, it is strong enough for the ecological critics to arouse people's consciousness of loving the Mother Nature.

The construction of ecological civilization is nowadays an important issue throughout the world. But its goal cannot be reached within a short time. Stresses should not only be put politically and economically, but also linguistically and literally. Today, eco-criticism cannot be called as a brand new literary criticism. Whereas, as long as the environmental problems are not eliminated, this literary criticism will continue to play its significant role in both literature studies and human society. It is in this situation that we find it of great importance to reanalyze the works of Ernest Hemingway from an eco-critical point of view, which is useful for our further study of American literature and the enhancement of man's harmonious relationship with the great nature.

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**Yufeng Wang** was born in Fujian Province, China in 1979. He holds a Ph.D. degree in English language and literature and is currently an associate professor for English majors at Xiamen University of Technology. He has published three books and more than 30 papers. His research field is British and American literature.