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Camryn Scott

Brigham Young University - Provo, nyrmac11@gmail.com

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Ernest Hemingway:

The Modern Transcendentalist

Camryn Scott

The childhood of Ernest Hemingway was one of opposites. Growing up in Oak Park, Illinois, the “genteel, strait-laced, rigidly Protestant” suburb of Chicago, he was poked and prodded by his parents to adhere to the strict, respectable, and elite expectations of town residents (Meyers 4). This atmosphere existed because of the church, which was “the dominant influence” both “in the town and in the Hemingway household” (5). Yet each summer of his youth, beginning when he was seven weeks old, Hemingway left “the stuffy culture” of his hometown by going to stay at the family cottage on Walloon Lake in northern Michigan (17). These trips into the wilderness were liberating for the boy, who found great pleasure in learning to fish, hunt, and explore the natural world, far removed from the town that seemed so stifling. Perhaps because of the atmosphere of Oak Park, Hemingway developed a deep love of nature. I believe he would echo Ralph Waldo Emerson’s claim that “In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages” (5). It became his escape from expectation, from the stormy relationship he had with his mother, and the place he would return to again and again in his writing. Because of this dichotomy of place he experienced in his childhood, the settings he later created in his writing, and especially those of nature, are incredibly rich and full of meaning.

“Place-centered criticism,” as scholar Laura Godfrey calls it, forms a long-standing discussion in Hemingway scholarship that continues to draw wide

opinions and interpretations of the landscapes he created. I believe his landscapes continue to captivate us because, as Godfrey says, “Geography and place lie at the heart of Hemingway’s art, as they did in his life” (48). But most critics, like Godfrey, are more interested in talking about setting generally. They narrow in on the specific setting of a particular work and discuss its meaning and function. And while nature inevitably forms a part of their arguments, as it shows up in so many of Hemingway’s major works, it is never the focus. This leaves a hole in “place-centered” Hemingway scholarship that needs to be filled, specifically regarding his treatment of nature across multiple texts. For many of his characters, the wilderness is the place for healing, reflection, and peace, much like it was for the nineteenth-century transcendentalists of New England. I propose that Hemingway created a modern version of transcendentalism, at least in terms of his portrayal of wilderness in his works, which pointed to nature as the only place where solace and the hope of rejuvenation could be found amidst the war, disillusionment, and depression of the early twentieth century.

In order to understand Hemingway’s transcendental revival, we must first comprehend the transcendental ideal of nature. No better text exists for this endeavor than Emerson’s essay “Nature,” where he, as the voice of the original movement, articulates the ideas that formed the foundation of transcendentalism. Published in 1836, “Nature” was written during a tumultuous time in American history. With increasingly violent tensions mounting over slavery, as well as the encroaching influence of the industrial revolution on the land, Emerson retreated ideologically to the woods. And there he found a place “unchanged by man,” where his senses could be “truly adjusted to each other,” and he could be healed by nature’s “medicinal” power (2, 4, 9). Shielded by the outstretched arms of noble trees, Emerson says, “I feel that nothing can befall me in life . . . which nature cannot repair” (4). But not only is nature a place of healing and rejuvenation for Emerson, it is also a place where understanding can be found and ultimately, where spiritual, emotional, and intellectual transcendence can occur. He refers to nature as “the vehicle of thought” and “the symbol of the spirit,” where one can come and be “gradually restored to perfect sight” (14, 46). It is not strange then that Hemingway, who as a young man saw death and destruction as an ambulance truck driver in World War I, left the front lines with legs full of shrapnel, and lived in a world scarred not once, but twice by war, also turned to nature both in his life and in his writing. And the two best examples of Hemingway’s transcendentalism come from characters who also seek solace in the wilderness after traumatic experiences in the war.

While on a trip to Spain with a dysfunctional group of friends in the novel *The Sun Also Rises*, former soldier Jake Barnes decides to leave the city and go fishing in the wilderness. Hemingway gives us clues that this place will be a transcendent landscape even before Jake gets there, by describing the land he is leaving behind as “brown” and “barren,” where there “was no grass beside the road” (113–114). He also uses the word “up” repeatedly in these passages. Jake explains to a man in a bar that he is going “Up to Burguete to fish” (113). Their bus goes “up the road” several times and, if it wasn’t obvious enough, Jake then remarks that the place he is going is “high” and “must be twelve hundred metres” (114). The closer Jake gets to his fishing spot, the greater the incline is, and the thicker and greener the woods become (122). By employing this language, Hemingway suggests that Jake’s natural destination will help him to rise above his physical and emotional wounds obtained in the war.

He stays for a week, fishing and relaxing and enjoying himself in the wilderness, until telegrams from his friends inform him of their arrival in Pamplona and compel him to leave the beautiful, green landscapes of Burguete and accompany them to the fiesta. Like Emerson, it appears Jake could agree that “To the body and mind which have been cramped by noxious work or company, nature is medicinal,” as he is surrounded by very noxious company indeed (9). Each damaged in some way by the war, they all drink relentlessly and seek fulfillment in sexual encounters, chasing after things that will not bring them the peace they desire. Though Jake drinks heavily as well, he also chooses to seek healing and solace in the wilderness. He chases the “nobler want of man...served by nature,” which Emerson says is “the love of Beauty,” while his friends pursue the base, carnal desires of man (8). Hemingway juxtaposes the violent, pitiful, and self-destructive actions of Jake’s associates, which make up the rest of the novel, with the small, tranquil passage of him going fishing in the mountains to show us that spending time in the wilderness is the only way that a sort of peace can be obtained after such destruction. But Jake is not the only character of Hemingway’s who comes home from the war and finds himself drawn to the forest, and in the short story “Big Two-Hearted River,” the transcendental message is more noticeable, and therefore more powerful.

One of the reasons this story is the best example of Hemingway’s new transcendentalism is because the action of the story both begins and ends with the shell-shocked Nick Adams alone in nature. With the entire focus of the story on Nick Adams and his experiences in the wilderness, unlike *The Sun Also Rises* where many other settings and issues are emphasized over Jake’s brief vignette

in the mountains, Hemingway is able to provide a greater amount of detail, pointing more directly to transcendentalism and offering closer evidence of Nick's inner turmoil. And with this detail, we see that the similarities between Nick's actions and the pioneers of the original transcendental movement are striking.

Like a modern-day Emerson or Henry David Thoreau, Nick wanders through the wilderness carrying all the necessities for survival upon his back. He reverts to the simpler state, stripped of the irrelevant possessions that the transcendentalists shunned. "He felt he had left everything behind" (Hemingway 164). Nick feels comfortable in his natural setting, not needing "to get his map out," for "he [knows] where he [is] from the position of the river" and keeps "his direction by the sun" (165). But this is no ordinary leisure trip through the woods—Nick has been wounded emotionally in the war and is seeking healing and rejuvenation. While Hemingway does not explicitly say this, he provides many references to the damage Nick has suffered.

First, the land he walks on, that he used to know as a child, is "burned over and changed" (164). Like this land, Nick was literally burned and scarred in the war, causing him to be a different man. He is like the grasshoppers along the trails that "had all turned black from living in the burnt-over land" (165). Nick can also be compared to the trout he studies so carefully in the water who are "keeping themselves steady in the current with wavering fins," and "holding steady in the fast water" (163). He, too, is wavering in a current of pain and terrifying memory, struggling desperately to swim normally among those around him who cannot comprehend the damage he has suffered. Because of his dreadful experience in the war, he has become a broken shell of a man in the grasp of society's problems. He has lost himself—lost what makes him an individual. But despite this ongoing struggle, shown in the short, repetitive sentences Hemingway uses when giving us glimpses into Nick's suppressed mind (167), the important part is that he is still there, still existing, just like the grasshoppers.

Though they are forever changed by traumatic experiences, both Nick and the blackened insects are still alive and able to find their place within nature. Hemingway does not gloss over the individual side-effects caused by the atrocities of war—he never fails to remind us of them—but a feeling of hope pervades the narrative, and we are drawn to the conclusion that Nick's time in the wilderness will help, for "He was there, in the good place" (167), the "medicinal" place Emerson prescribes for "the body and mind which have been cramped

by noxious work or company,” or, in Nick’s case, shattered by the horror of the trenches and rampant death in World War I (9). At the end of the day, while observing his modest camp neatly arranged between the trees, he notes that the pack which was once “much too heavy” as he hiked into the wilderness now looks “much smaller,” showing that nature is a place where his perspectives can change and his burdens can be lifted (Hemingway 164, 167). Hemingway, in writing this story, seems to agree with Emerson’s belief that when “embosomed for a season in nature . . . why should we grope among the dry bones of the past?” (1). Sure, Nick is scarred and changed by his traumatic past, but like the land destroyed by fire, “It could not all be burned. He knew that” (Hemingway 164). His time spent in nature in “Big Two-Hearted River” gives him hope, and therefore gives us further evidence that Hemingway was creating a new form of transcendentalism in his writing. But though there are obviously many similarities to the movement described by Emerson, Hemingway’s is revised in one important way: with the exclusion of a connection to a higher power.

A large part of Emerson’s essay “Nature” discusses the experience of being in nature as a means to connect with God in a state of transcendence. Near the beginning of the essay, he famously writes, “Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am a part or particle of God” (4). Emerson sees nature not only as a pure, healing, or rejuvenating space, but one wherein a person can even become a part of God, transcending his or her mortal state. He also connects nature to morality, saying that an “ethical character so penetrates the bone and marrow of nature, as to seem the end for which it was made,” that “the moral law lies at the center of nature,” and that nature “shall hint or thunder to man the laws of right and wrong” (24). But this religious element of original transcendentalism does not show up in Hemingway’s writing.

Though Hemingway grew up in the staunchly conservative community of Oak Park, in a “religious family,” he later “attempted to eradicate in himself every vestige” of his upbringing (Meyers 5). His stories do not reinforce traditional morals of right and wrong, and his characters rarely speak about a higher power in any terms other than sarcasm and incredulity. While Jake does visit a cathedral later in the novel, no reference to religion or a higher power appears during his week in the woods, and we have no indication in “Big Two-Hearted River” that Nick is religious at all. We can safely assume that their

desires to enter the wilderness do not involve wanting to have the “currents of the Universal Being circulate” through them or to become a “particle of God” (Emerson 4–5). Instead of connecting to God in nature, they seek to come to themselves, to gain a sort of balance and renewal and feel at peace. Their journeys are spiritual in a transcendent sense, but not in a religious one, and that is perhaps because Hemingway is, first and foremost, a modernist writer.

The modernists, heavily affected by the tragedy and destruction of the early twentieth century, sought to deviate completely from tradition—meaning traditional literary forms, traditional themes, and traditional morality—in order to properly convey the senselessness of their war-torn world. And Hemingway’s writing, overall, embodies these modern attitudes. He writes about war, depression, dysfunctional relationships, and former soldiers whose horrifying, in some cases life-damaging experiences continue to haunt them for a lifetime. In this context, then, it is simple to see how transcendentalism could resurface at this time, and why it would not be the same as it was originally.

Emerson’s claim that “the reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps, is because man is disunited with himself,” seems to have struck a chord with Hemingway (44). He saw a world falling apart just as Emerson saw a nation falling apart, and believed, like him, that there was only one way for people to come to their senses and transcend, only one place where rebirth and renewal could occur after what had happened in the world. And the answer was nature. Like Nick, war-torn and traumatized, the world could go back to the forests, back to the wilderness and heal. Though it would be forever changed, Hemingway believed, as Emerson did, that those who sought out nature would “enter without more wonder than the blind man feels who is gradually restored to perfect sight” (46). The realities of the changing world were frightening, but through his neo-transcendentalism Hemingway shows he believed that healing was possible, balance could be restored, and hope still flowed from the same springs where his forefathers had found it.

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