

DESERT PLACES: WILDERNESS IN MODERNIST
AMERICAN LITERATURE 1900-1940

by

Gregory L. Byrd

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Karen L. Kilcup, Committee Chair

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The central question that my dissertation attempts to address is: “Why do modernist American poets and fiction writers continue to use wilderness in their works in a time when wilderness, for most purposes, has ceased to exist?” By the turn of the century, the U.S. Census reported that the American frontier was officially closed, the North and South Poles were on their way to being conquered, and airplanes, telephones, and other inventions were making the problems of distance and topography much less important. By the close of the nineteenth century, the U.S. government established various national parks, thus protecting what used to terrify some of this country’s residents. Furthermore, by the turn of the century, Romanticism was, if not all but dead, at least thoroughly ridiculed as “serious” literature. After the First World War, it became even more difficult for poets and novelists to write about nature in the same sort of unselfconscious way as did Whittier, Bryant and Cooper. Nevertheless, naturalist writers such as Kate Chopin and Jack London, whose focus on the relationship of the inner self to the natural world is very similar to that of modernist writers, wrote of wilderness and nature; and canonical modernist writers such as Ernest Hemingway and Robert Frost focused much of their work on these subjects.

Modernist American poets and writers from around the turn of the century to about 1940 used the wilderness as a place in which their characters could come to epiphany. It was necessary for them to retreat into wilderness because the laws of the

wild are inverted or nonexistent, a condition necessary for revelation and self-understanding. This movement towards wilderness as a refuge echoes back to the Romanticism of Thoreau and Bryant in unexpected ways. The failure of civilized society symbolized by the First World War left modernist writers in need of an antidote. Mere rebellion would not suffice for Frost, Hemingway, Hurston and others as it would for Allen Ginsberg and the Beatniks a generation later. For modernist American writers, the wilderness provides a means of expression and facilitates expression. The writers on whom I focus by no means exhaust the scope of the idea of wilderness as used in modernist American literature, but they are intended to be representative of some of the trends and approaches in the period from about 1900 to 1940; they include Willa Cather, Kate Chopin, Robert Frost, Ernest Hemingway, Jack London, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings and John Crowe Ransom. Others, such as T. S. Eliot and William Faulkner, are discussed more briefly.

Some critics may certainly fault my choice of some of the earliest writers in this group. Kate Chopin and Jack London are not considered a part of the modernist canon, and many would argue even against Chopin's inclusion in the naturalist canon. When discussing modernist writers, we must consider that artistic and literary movements do not begin and end abruptly like skaters on a rink who are told periodically to change direction. Chopin's and London's characters contain elements of the modernist sensibility; for example, Chopin's character Calixta has a fractured interior self which has difficulty relating to an exterior society that proscribes her actions. London's "To Build a Fire" declines to make judgments about any sort of truth or morality that results from the

protagonist's freezing to death. Most importantly, the protagonist replaces "the external world [with] the imaginative construction of [his] inner world" (Perloff 158). Some may also suggest that Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings's 1938 novel *The Yearling* hardly fits the modernist canon due to its sentimentality and focus on local color, but a closer reading of the novel situates it as a modernist novel, though perhaps to a lesser degree than comparable works by canonized modernist writers such as Hurston, Hemingway, and Frost. Rawlings's novel exhibits a ubiquitous use of the unconscious, of myth as an organizing structure, of a focus on a fractured self, and of the protagonist's representation of his own inner world in preference to the external world (Perloff 158). Reading these non-canonical writers' uses of wilderness allows us to understand that the great modernists like Frost, Eliot, and Hemingway were not working in a void. Furthermore, focusing on these non-canonical and "borderline" writers allows us to see a broader view of American writers' usage of wilderness during this period.

One of the major problems in discussing modernist literature is defining what one means by the terms modernist or Modernism, because the term and its affiliated literary-artistic movement have been characterized so variously in recent years by critics, including Edmund Wilson, Malcolm Cowley, Cleanth Brooks, Richard Ellman, Irving Howe, M.H. Abrams, Harold Bloom, Georg Lukacs and Hugh Kenner. Working out and defending my own definition of Modernism in light of all of this critical background could easily span a full chapter or more of this project. The ambition of my project is not to define Modernism, however; so for expediency's sake I will rely upon Marjorie Perloff's characterization:

1. The replacement of representation of the external world by the imaginative construction of the poet's inner world via the mysterious symbol;
2. the superiority of art to nature;
3. the concept of the artist as hero;
4. the autonomy of art and its divorce from truth or morality;
5. the depersonalization and "objectivity" of art;
6. illogical structure, or what Joseph Frank called "spatial form";
7. the concrete as opposed to the abstract, the particular as opposed to the general, the perceptual as opposed to the conceptual;
8. verbal ambiguity and complexity: "good" writing is inherently arcane;
9. the fluidity of consciousness: Woolf's "Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" ("Modern Fiction" 287-88);
10. the increasing importance attached to the Freudian unconscious and to the dream work;
11. the use of myth as organizing structure, the calling up of the Jungian collective unconscious and of archetypes;
12. the emphasis on the divided self, on mask versus inner self (Yeats), conduct versus consciousness;
13. the malaise of the individual in the "lonely crowd," the alienated self in the urban world, the "Unreal City" of *The Waste Land* or *Ulysses*; and, finally,
14. the internationalism of Modernism, with its free flow of artistic currents between Moscow and Rome, London and Berlin, Dublin and New York, all roads leading to Paris, quite literally to the hub of the cultural wheel . . . (158)

Such a definition certainly cannot account for all variations in treatment of subject for all writers identified as modernist, nor does it account for every approach to and use of Modernism by (for example) new critical, new historicist, marxist, feminist or ecocritical perspectives. Such a short definition does, however, provide an accessible and workable concept of Modernism for the purposes of this study.

As I have written and researched this project, I have asked myself if what I was doing fit into the category of "ecocriticism." While categorizing the work does not affect its insights, categorization speaks to intent, audience, and purpose. Among the critics on

whom I have relied are Lawrence Buell, British critic Rod Giblett, and Paul Shepard, whose 1967 *Man in the Landscape: A Historic View of the Esthetics of Nature* is a nascent ecocritical work. These writers' analysis fits easily into the category of ecocriticism. Some of the literary works I discuss in this project, notably the poems of Robinson Jeffers, explicitly take an approach that discusses the relationship of humans to nature and ecology. However, I also rely on Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind*, and geographer Yi-fu Tuan's *Topophilia*. So, while a study of the use of wilderness in modernist American literature will certainly contribute to the work of ecocriticism, it will also certainly fail as *only* a work of ecocriticism, for this project does not take into account the objectification of animals and plants, nor does it consider the voice (or lack of a voice) of animals and plants. My project also does not consider seminal works of ecological literature such as Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac*. Rather than add to the growing scholarship on such works, I hope to illuminate some ways in which modernist American writers are affected by wilderness both as concept and as a concrete reality and to show how they use wilderness in their works. By adding to the more focused discussion of wilderness and literature and by connecting writers to wilderness and ecology who are not often discussed in wilderness or ecological terms, I hope to show that modernist literature, which is so often thought of as a literature of war, cities, and suburbs, also has a wilderness dimension which is integrally important to that movement.

Wilderness is assumed by most people to be a place, something concrete that can be felt and experienced viscerally. However, modernist writers ultimately perceive the

wilderness more as a concept than as an embodied experience of nature. Therefore, I have organized my discussion from the most concrete expressions of wilderness to the most philosophical. In order to isolate this concrete-abstract dualism, I begin my exploration of this continuum from concrete to abstract and psychological in chapter two, by creating a definition of wilderness that I apply to the literature that I discuss throughout the dissertation. The seeming simplicity of wilderness is deceptive, for the term has no clear scientific or social definition. The etymology of the word in several dictionaries gives clues to a possible meaning: waste, a province of wild beasts, and getting lost through wandering. Arguably, the wilderness exists in a place such as uncharted oceans, forests, or swamps. But wilderness can also be a transient phenomenon that transforms civilization in the form of weather. In the American experience, wilderness is embodied, inextricably bound with concepts of primitivism and with the Native American. In the structure of narratives and poems, wilderness reveals itself in the quest motif, which involves wilderness on an archetypal level and thus connects not only to Americans and American writers but to all people. This focus on the inner importance of the quest journey rather than on the objective importance of the landscape itself emphasizes the modernist metaphoric focus on wilderness. Like the modernist treatment of weather, the concrete is important inasmuch as it can embody an idea, serve as a contradiction to the social realm, or reflect the fractured inner self. Finally, and especially in the modern American mind, wilderness becomes an inner state of mind, a psychological manifestation of the wilderness the writer or speaker may see of experience outside of him- or herself.

In practical use among Americans and American writers, however, the term becomes problematized. For early settlers and Puritans, wilderness was a dangerous place of devils and sin, but also a place free of church corruption where they might establish a new, genuine church. For romantics, the wilderness was a place where God might be found in a more direct and personal way than in the church. For naturalists, the wilderness was a place in which one experienced the ambivalence of the universe, where people were clearly revealed as merely animals subject to the laws of an uncaring nature. Before the turn of the century, the frontier (a boundary line between civilization and wilderness) was officially closed and with it wilderness seemingly ceased to exist.

As wilderness ceased to exist, one might expect that it would have ceased to be a valid subject for any writer attempting to discuss or explain the mind of the modern American. One might expect modernists, who were so involved with self-referentiality and the modern city, to have little or nothing to do with wilderness. However, quite the opposite occurred: modernist writers like Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway, and Zora Neale Hurston, among others, used the wilderness to represent a zone where their characters could experience the epiphanies that would allow them to know themselves in ways they could not in the stifling social atmosphere of the civilized city or town. For modernists, as well as for some proto-modernist naturalists like Kate Chopin, Stephen Crane, and Jack London, the wilderness was the anti-social, that which is free from the stifling social mores of the town, city, civilization. For these writers and their characters, the wilderness offered a Faustian bargain: in return for risking one's life, one might have the freedom to know oneself aside from the labels and requirements of

society. For a generation of writers who were looking for meaning among the ruins of western society, the wilderness was the Rosetta Stone, even if the frontier and wilderness in the real world was gone. Most importantly, for modernist writers, the wilderness is useful less as a concrete place or experience than as a state of mind or reflection of the inner self.

In chapter three, I apply this definition to several works that present weather as a kind of fluctuating wilderness that sparks change; because weather seems undeniably concrete and almost without any elements of the abstract at all, I discuss how modernist writers use weather wilderness as a metaphorical and transformative setting. Wilderness is most often conceived as a static phenomenon, and almost always as a place. In chapter three, "Weather as Wilderness," I apply the central elements of my definition of wilderness to weather, and conclude that weather constitutes a sort of transient wilderness, for it transforms the relationship of people to their environment and to each other. Weather also can serve to reverse, revise, or render null the usual rules by which one must abide in society. For example, in extreme cases of people being caught in a blizzard, they have resorted to cannibalism, perhaps the ultimate taboo of the "civilized." Works such as Chopin's "The Storm," London's "To Build a Fire," Hemingway's "After the Storm," Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," several of Robert Frost's poems, and Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* use weather in some form, from fog to bitter cold, to rain, to hurricane, to create a space of wilderness where characters may gain a insight into their own true nature and identity which will manifest itself in an

epiphany about who they really are and a greater understanding of their place in the world.

In chapter four I discuss the primitivist response to wilderness. Primitivism represents a second movement away from the concrete, for although primitivists are concerned with real people and real places, they see these people and places through the filter of their assumptions, and so what they see may be more a function of their thoughts than of their sensory perceptions. This identification of wilderness as wilderness complements the other discussions of wilderness throughout the project by expanding and questioning the concept of wilderness and by foregrounding the metaphoric nature of wilderness in American thought.

Since their first contact with North America, Western Europeans have perceived the landscape as offering opportunities and challenges very different from those of their native lands and societies. While these people certainly had to grapple with the harsh and concrete reality of their lives on a foreign continent, their perception of the landscape influenced how they reacted to what they saw as a “howling wilderness,” as many early settlers, such as Mary Rowlandson, denominated their natural surroundings. Especially in the nineteenth century, Euro-American perceptions of wilderness are inextricably connected with notions of primitivism. Far from seeing the Native Americans they met as equals, most European explorers, invaders, or settlers viewed indigenous peoples as inferior. Puritans viewed them as heathen devils or, at most, as some sort of humans who were defiled by the Devil and in need of saving grace. Many Europeans in the new world saw them as less than human. Nineteenth-century American Romantic writers such as

Longfellow and Bartram (and earlier, Ben Franklin and Hector St. Jean de Crevecoeur) characterized Native Americans as "noble savages" whose simple life and close connection with nature and wilderness allowed them to live more virtuously and whose lack of corruption by society allowed them to be closer to God.

This perspective continues in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; for example, Hurston, Hemingway and Jeffers write specifically of Native Americans. Jeffers is most primitivist of this group, for he explicitly identifies Native Americans as holding some special connection to the power of wilderness that civilized Euro-Americans lack. Hurston's brief mention of Native Americans concurs with Jeffers, though Hurston does not make her discussion of the Native Americans in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* into the treatise on civilized corruption that Jeffers's poetry does. Hemingway's discussion of Native Americans in "Indian Camp" is ambivalent. On one hand, Hemingway's speaker identifies the Indians with filth and sloth, but on the other hand, he uses the Indian camp as a place in which the young Nick comes to a greater understanding about the significant questions of life and death. Not all primitivism in American literary tradition is directly related to Native Americans, of course. Willa Cather's character "Crazy Ivar" is a child of nature who shares a special communication with animals and lives in an underground house, more like a burrowing animal than a civilized human. The ambivalence towards wilderness of Cather's heroine in *O Pioneers!* is reflected in the way she cares for Crazy Ivar while simultaneously destroying the pristine prairie surrounding her farm by ploughing it into arable land. As with weather, primitivism embodies a transient incarnation of wilderness. The ways in which writers

conceive of primitive characters and the way in which they treat them is one way of gauging their response to wilderness. If the wilderness is the province of the primitive and the city or town is the province of the civilized, then the primitive is a movable iteration of wilderness.

My discussion in chapter five of the quest motif in wilderness moves even further from a concrete connection with wilderness. Although myth scholars insist that there must be an physical journey (often into the wilderness) for there to be a genuine quest, the journey and the landscape are important mostly as symbolic of the questing hero's inner development.

In this chapter, I argue that the quest motif is an essential part of the way that modernist writers use wilderness in their work. This motif is an ancient one so ingrained in human consciousness that it has become an archetype. The quest may be traced back to the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the *Odyssey*, to *Beowulf* and many other narratives. In the quest, the hero undertakes a journey to find some particular object or knowledge. The successful hero then returns to the village, town or civilization with a boon to bestow on that society. Wilderness is a vital part of the quest, for the hero must go into the wilderness to find that for which he or she searches. The wilderness is the setting that provides the challenge required for the quest.

As with weather as wilderness, wilderness in the quest serves as a place in which the hero can undergo epiphany and change. In fact, the central aspect of many quests requires that the hero comes home transformed and that change is often the most important part of the boon. In Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,

Janie's travel into the Everglades represents a generalized quest for self and happiness. When she returns to Eatonville, she very clearly bestows the boon of independence on the women of the town by telling her friend Phoebe how she learned to be her own person. In Hemingway's "Indian Camp," young Nick is on an unwitting quest to understand more about the essential mysteries of life. When he returns, he has new questions to ponder and a new view of his own mortality. We might even view this as a quest that fails because Nick is too young a hero to undertake the quest so he fails in achieving a true and revelatory insight. In "Big, Two-Hearted River," however, an adult Nick is on a conscious quest for self-understanding, and his experience at the river suggests he will ultimately be successful. Robert Frost uses the quest motif explicitly in "Directive," and the anticipated boon is being "whole again." Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings's protagonist Jody undertakes perhaps the most characteristic quest in *The Yearling*, where he leaves the family homestead, intending to travel to Boston to live with his cousin. What he finds instead is hunger and suffering in the wilderness of the swamp. More importantly, he discovers an understanding of the human condition, and he grows up. When he returns to the Baxter homestead, he conveys his epiphany to his father; the boon he brings is his willingness to work and care for his family. As I explain in the chapters on weather and primitivism, wilderness is vital to the modernist American writer as a place in which change is possible. The quest emphasizes this vital role for wilderness in American literature of the early twentieth century.

Finally, in chapter six, "My Own Desert Places: Inner and Outer Wilderness," I argue that, for modernist writers, the wilderness becomes conflated with the wilderness

inside characters and speakers of modernist works. A defining aspect of Modernism is self-referentialism. Marjorie Perloff identifies more specific aspects of modernist self-referentialism and “the emphasis on the divided self, on mask versus inner self (Yeats), conduct versus consciousness” (158). When the modernist writers discussed in this project write about wilderness, they often explore the wilderness within themselves as much as the wilderness they experience as a physical phenomenon. The “divided self” of the modernist writer or character can be seen both explicitly and implicitly some of the works I have discussed in earlier chapters. In “Big, Two-Hearted River,” we can see that Nick’s self is clearly divided as he struggles to keep from thinking too much. Chopin’s Calixta embodies both the stultified housewife and the passionate lover but, like Nick Adams, she struggles to keep the two selves separate. In some of Robert Frost’s poems, such as “An Old Man’s Winter Night,” the characters or speakers in the poems are ultimately shown confronting themselves rather than some wilderness outside of themselves. One example of this confrontation of the separate self is the scene in this poem where the old man looks out of the window but, instead of seeing something outside, sees only his own reflection looking back.

These writers do not simply replace the “representation of the external world by the imaginative construction of the poet’s inner world via the mysterious symbol,” as Perloff states (158). Rather, the wilderness becomes a mirror image, as in “An Old Man’s Winter Night” or a doppelganger of the real wilderness that exists within the speaker or character of a modernist poem or story. By viewing nature as a “mysterious symbol,” the writer, speaker, or character is able to understand, project, and grapple with

the wilderness inside, which is the greater wilderness for modernists; as Frost asserts: “I have it in me so much nearer home / To scare myself with my own desert places.” Here the symbol and the divided self come together: Frost’s speaker sees the places within him as separate from himself; therefore, they may scare him, and the “desert places” that he sees in the landscape serve as “mysterious symbols” of that divided self.

My discussion of how inner and outer wilderness converge thus brings full circle my discussion of wilderness in modernist American writers and answers the question I pose early in this project: why do some modernist writers make use of wilderness so explicitly in a time when the physical wilderness has seemingly become irrelevant? Modernist American writers use wilderness as a way of symbolizing or reflecting the fracturing of their own inner selves, the malaise of living in a meaningless world. In the same way that the outer and physical wilderness gave meaning to the lives of European, African and even Native Americans, wilderness gives modernist writers a way of relating to their world even if the actual physical wilderness is mostly subjugated or vanished by the time they are writing.

CHAPTER II

“WHERE NO HUMAN RACE IS”: A DEFINITION OF WILDERNESS

On Tuesday, August 29, 2000, retiree and Boca Ciega, Florida resident Thadeus Kubinski dove into the warm waters of Boca Ciega Bay. A bull shark that had been feeding near Kubinski's dock immediately seized the man in a bite that extended from his armpit to his hip. The force from the jaws and the damage from the shark's teeth caused the man to bleed to death within minutes.

Certainly, this event is a tragedy. The man's wife remained inconsolable for days afterward, the image of her husband's face during the attack etched into her memory. The man's son committed suicide a few weeks afterward. What is surprising is that the local media responded with such enthusiasm to the attack, given that sharks are more common in this area of the Gulf of Mexico than wolves are in the wild northwest. The *St. Petersburg Times* ran at least six articles on the attack in different editions in the following week. The newspaper seems to have followed the lead of its readership as much as having succumbed to sensationalism. “The apparent shark attack,” reporter Mike Brassfield wrote, “all but unheard of on Florida's Gulf Coast, left the community reeling. Lifetime residents of St. Pete Beach could scarcely believe the news” (1A). Why would an attack by a common predator, during the predator's breeding season, at a place where witnesses confirmed that there seemed to be some fish feeding, surprise anyone? The answer may be, in its simplest form, that people perceive wilderness differently. Wilderness? In highly developed St. Petersburg Beach, Florida?

“Nearly every day, Thadeus Kubinski swam in the warm, peaceful waters behind his home on Boca Ciega Bay. He found it relaxing and probably never gave it a second thought. Most of his neighbors swam there too, and none of them worried for their safety” (Brassfield 1A). Kubinski and his neighbors saw Boca Ciega Bay as a postcard, a paradise, replete with the kind of harmless wildlife one could only find in Eden. As Brassfield attempts to reflect here, these people found the area “warm, peaceful . . . relaxing and [they] probably never gave it [the closeness of the lethal wilderness] a second thought” (1A). For these people, Boca Ciega and its bay were no more wilderness than any of the nearby suburbs, and certainly no more dangerous. If they were living in any sort of wilderness, it was a park, a Romantic landscape, the third meaning given for wilderness in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “1. c. A piece of ground in a large garden or park, planted with trees, and laid out in an ornamental or fantastic style, often in the form of a maze or labyrinth” (“Wilderness,” *Oxford English Dictionary*). This sort of wilderness is a playground for people, made to cater to their interests and desires, not a wilderness that recognizes wildlife or danger. For others, who have a greater knowledge of the waters here, where Boca Ciega Bay extends “just around the corner” into the Gulf of Mexico, the wilderness that abuts every dock and pier is closer to another definition, “a wild or uncultivated region or tract of land, uninhabited, or inhabited only by wild animals” (“Wilderness,” *Oxford*). While St. Petersburg is certainly inhabited, the water that surrounds it is inhabited only by wild animals. George Burgess, director of the University of Florida’s International Shark File says that “Whenever we go into the water we’ve entered the wilderness . . . Sharks are wilderness

animals” (Klinkenberg 10A). Kubinski found the waters off his dock to be relaxing, “warm and peaceful” while Burgess knows that the same waters are a wilderness inhabited by dangerous animals, even though “an attack on a swimmer in the gulf is a rare phenomenon” (Klinkenberg 10A). These conflicting perceptions of wilderness suggest that many people, even those who live near wilderness, have their own conceptions of it; Roderick Nash writes about the “tendency of wilderness to be a state of mind” in which we see “not so much what wilderness is but what [we] *think* it is” (5).

It is not people’s aversion to Kubinski’s death that points out their lack of understanding of the closeness of wilderness, but their response to the way in which he died. Every day *The St. Petersburg Times* prints accounts of traffic deaths ranging from sedate to horrific and in response to this much more common way of dying, there is little further attention given to how to avoid dying in auto accidents or why such accidents occur. But when it’s a shark, something’s different: the wilderness is suddenly present in a way that is both exciting and terrifying. On Florida’s west coast, we are used to the beautiful sublime of the sunset, but the horrible sublimity of the hurricane or the shark attack is cause for alarm.

Even in situations where wilderness-related tragedy makes complete sense, as in Kubinski’s death, people react with a mixture of horror and delight at the power of wilderness when it is unexpectedly close to them. Following the May 1996 Valujet crash in the Everglades outside of Miami, the *St. Petersburg Times* ran a headline declaring “Swamp Swallows Crash Wreckage.” The story discusses the difficulty of finding wreckage in the muck and cloudy water that covers the crash site but says nothing about

“swallowing.” In what was perhaps a knee-jerk impulse, the writer of this headline transforms the Everglades from a landscape into a Charybdis, a monster with a maw large enough to swallow a passenger jet. This metaphor reflects the fear of those who view the wilderness not as a place with its own ecology, not as an area which is inanimate or at least not sentient, but as a place capable of either pleasure (for sightseers) or malevolence. Yet, millions of people in Florida and around the world choose to live in areas that border wilderness that is both beautiful and dangerous. Millions more come to these areas to appreciate nature’s “unspoiled beauty,” or because they wish to rejuvenate themselves like Ponce de Leon, who sought the Fountain of Youth. Ambivalence about wilderness is one of the biggest impediments to understanding it.

If people in a relatively uncomplicated set of circumstances such as a retirement community in Florida manage to misunderstand the concept of *wilderness* so easily, it is necessary to define the term before diving into what could be dangerous waters. Scholars such as Roderick Nash and Max Oelschlager have already spent considerable effort defining wilderness, and because I wish to focus on the application of the form specific to literary texts, my definition will not be as exhaustive as theirs. My project is to investigate the ways in which modernist American writers in roughly the first forty years of the twentieth century have used wilderness in their poems, stories and novels. And in order to discuss this use of wilderness by modernist American writers, I have established the spare but workable definition delineated in this chapter. This definition is meant more as a guide than a definitive answer to the deceptively simple question “what is wilderness?” To summarize my working definition of wilderness, it consists of a place

characterized by lack of control, the sublime, and a corresponding state of mind or psychological condition. It may also be defined by negation as something that resides beyond frontier and is a subset of nature but does not comprise all of nature. Such a brief definition will certainly fall short of capturing every nuance of wilderness but it will, I hope, help to explain and will also be explained *by* the works I will discuss in later chapters.

A History of Terminology

My definition emerges from many discussions of the term by earlier critics and theorists such as Roderick Nash, Yi-fu Tuan, Leo Marx, and Paul Shepard. "Wilderness cannot be defined objectively," writes Tuan, a geographer whose job it is to understand and define topographical phenomena; Tuan continues, "It is as much a state of mind as a description of nature" (112). Although it is almost impossible to define wilderness precisely, several dictionaries have attempted to do so. In his 1967 work *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language Dealing with the Origin of Words and Their Sense Development Thus Illustrating the History of Civilization and Culture* (1967), Ernest Klein traces *wild* and its variants to Old English, Middle English, Old Swedish, Old Norse, Old Frisian, Dutch, Old High German, Danish, and Middle High German with the basic meaning of "wild, savage, untamed, uncultivated." Such a broad etymological background suggests that the concept of *wild* contains the concept of wilderness for the many cultures from which the English words would develop. While "savage" and "untamed" might be applied first to people and then

to land, "uncultivated" is a term which is applied specifically to land and only by metaphor to people. Klein suggests that the transitive verb *wilder*, meaning "to lose one's way, to become bewildered" is "prob[ably] a back formation from the next word [wilderness] and orig[inal] meaning 'to lead to a wilderness.'" The *Oxford English Dictionary* concurs with Klein's definition but divides the definition of wild into specific applications. The definition of wild as applied "to a place or region [is uncultivated] or uninhabited; hence, waste, desert, desolate" ("Wild," *Oxford English Dictionary*). This usage, which dates back to about 893, is common through 1885.

For *wilderness* itself, Klein notes only that the word is a combination of the Old English *wilder* (wild beast) with the suffix -ess. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* defines *wild* slightly differently, calling it "living in a state of nature; uninhabited, waste; uncontrolled." The first, "uninhabited," may refer first to animals and people, while the last two, "waste; uncontrolled," are certainly rooted in landscape. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology (ODEE)* echoes Klein's "uncultivated" aspect of the wild when it is extended into the term *wilderness*, which is identified as an "uncultivated tract of land." The *ODEE*, however, suggests new possibilities for the etymology of *wilderness* by suggesting that it may be derived from Old English *wild(d)eornes* (Lye, Sweet) and from *wild(d)eor*: wild beast. The recent *Barnhart Concise Dictionary of Etymology: The Origins of American English Words* (1995) concurs mostly with *ODEE* but adds "undomesticated" and "desolate region" to its definition of *wild*. "Undomesticated" contains overtones of "unfeminized" in addition to its common use in referring to animals as "domesticated" (tame) or "undomesticated"

(feral or wild). This usage can be traced back to about 1200 in English, and the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists examples through 1847. However, the definition of wilderness used more often by Americans is the *Oxford English Dictionary's* first one: "wild or uncultivated land. Distinguished from desert in that the latter denotes an uninhabitable or uncultivable region and implies entire lack of vegetation" ("Wilderness," *Oxford English Dictionary*). The focus of this definition on land that is merely "uncultivated" allows room for a European American bias in defining wilderness. The idea of uncultivated land suggests that a particular area may be inhabited by hunter-gatherer peoples who do not regard the area as wilderness. This kind of definition led those like Mary Rowlandson to talk of a "howling wilderness" that was actually home to a great many people. *Barnhart's* addition of "wildeoren, wild, savage" to its etymology of *wilderness* suggests that the people and animals in the wilderness can only be savages. The *Oxford English Dictionary's* secondary definition, "a wild or uncultivated region or tract of land, uninhabited, or inhabited only by wild animals," allows for the possibility of seeing wilderness as something universal to all human beings ("Wilderness," *Oxford English Dictionary*). If we see wilderness as barren of human life and unarable, perhaps like the South and North Poles, then wilderness can be conceived similarly by people of any society.

Placeness

Modern people think of the wilderness as a *place* almost exclusively, but the "placeness" of wilderness is more a part of the modern paradigm of wilderness than it is

any central part of the concept. Tuan illustrates graphically the relationship of wilderness to city and countryside (104):

city	middle landscape (garden or countryside)	wilderness
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The city or village is the center of civilization and the antithesis (at least until the twentieth century) of wilderness. In the twentieth century the suburbs are created, the agrarian areas are settled, and then the sparsely settled frontier becomes the antithesis of the wilderness. Beyond this frontier is the wilderness, which is unsettled, uninhabited by those who are of the same group as the city-dwellers, farmers and frontierspeople. People may visit this frontier and return from it but not live there. The very inscrutability of wilderness defines it, for once it becomes familiar and known, it ceases to be a threat. Tuan states that “the countryside is widely accepted as the antithesis of the city . . . yet from another perspective it is clear that raw nature of wilderness and not the countryside, stands at the opposite pole of the man-made city” (107). If wilderness—unordered, untamed, unspoiled—is “at the opposite pole of the man-made city,” then it is also a place of danger in contrast to the safety of the city: “[Cotton] Mather thought of the wilderness as the empire of the Antichrist, filled with frightful hazards, demons, dragons and fiery flying serpents. [But] in another mood, he held that the North American wilderness was ordained by Providence to be the protective refuge of the reformed Church” (Tuan 110). By the end of the nineteenth century, however, wilderness stood for the sublime and called man to contemplation . . . the growing appreciation of wilderness,

like that of the countryside, was a response to the real and imagined failings of city life” (Tuan 111).

Wilderness vs. Frontier

Wilderness is not synonymous with frontier but rather with what is beyond the frontier. For Frederick Jackson Turner, frontier was “the meeting point between savagery and civilization” and was “for him and his predecessors, the outer limit of agricultural settlement . . . the boundary of civilization” (qtd. in Smith 293). We must be careful to acknowledge the difference between wilderness and frontier. Although the frontier shares some of the same characteristics as wilderness, frontier may be loosely defined as largely without towns or major elements of civilization. In his spatial conception of landscape, Tuan places frontier between farm country and wilderness but definitely acknowledges its own place (105):

city suburbs town farm/country frontierwilderness

But, as Tuan suggests, it’s not this simple: Where, for example, do cities end and suburbs begin? Where does farm country end and frontier begin? Where does frontier end and wilderness begin?

If wilderness is a place where no one lives (and that definition becomes very problematic for anyone who acknowledges native inhabitants as people) that people visit only in order to find food or adventure and from which they must return, live as animals

in, or perish, then it might be helpful to figure the frontier as isolated pockets of civilization occurring within a larger wilderness. We may remember here how the first two definitions of wilderness differed in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: the second definition called wilderness a place where no people but only wild animals lived. The first definition identified cultivation of the land to be a vital element of the identification of wilderness. I would like emphasize the Eurocentrism of this definition, which is so familiar to nineteenth- and twentieth-century Americans. To value land by how much or little it is cultivated is also to judge those who live in the uncultivated land and to brand them by association as wild and savage. This chauvinism led to the conclusion for many eighteenth and nineteenth century Americans that “the essential weakness of savage society had as a basic tenet the assumption that Indians were not farmers” (Pearce 70).

This identification of wilderness with lack of cultivation would have had particular resonance with those pioneers who had to bust sod in the plains in order to farm. If we agree with Frieda Knobloch that “colonization is an agricultural act,” then we must invert this assessment and also agree that American farmers and sodbusters were more than just small time farmers, they were colonizers (1). The ongoing project of turning the wilderness into a garden or a farm suggests that the frontier is a liminal space where both the wilderness and civilization encroached but where neither holds sway. As we will see in my discussion of Cather’s *O Pioneers!* the characters of the novel see the landscape of the prairie both in terms of wilderness and civilization, and it is only after the protagonist has succeeded in turning the area into farmland that she feels truly comfortable and in control. The agency of pioneer farmers as advancers of civilization,

however, had changed by the late nineteenth century, especially in the east. "The move towards wilderness [in the late nineteenth century] was not an extension of the agrarian ideal. The two ideals are in some respects antithetical, for it is the expansion of the countryside rather than that of the cities, that poses the immediate threat to wilderness" (Tuan 112). Tuan's focus of the countryside as that which destroys wilderness rather than on the city as the destroyer of wilderness emphasizes the liminal nature of the frontier. The countryside destroys the wilderness because it slowly encroaches on the wilderness and absorbs it into a more civilized landscape.

In Eliza Farnham's *Life in the Prairie Land*, the plains frontier is a space in which standard expectations and prohibitions are turned upside down. In this narrative, Farnham writes "the Illinois prairies offered 'social and physical freedom . . . in their most enlarged forms'" (qtd. in Kolodny, *The Land Before Her*, 110). In this frontier space where rules are similarly inverted, Farnham's women are able to partake in traditionally male traditions such as horseback riding where they are "mounted . . . without our riding dresses, that we may not be cumbered with them when we reach the wood. Away we go, free as the winds" (qtd. in Kolodny, *The Land*, 110). The free and easy relationships between people allow the women here not only to ride as they may not have been able to do elsewhere, but to do so unencumbered by "riding dresses" in such a way that allows them to be "free as the winds." Although the frontier shares some of the same elements of the wilderness from a social standpoint, the wilderness takes the lack of social structure on the frontier to an extreme level: in the wilderness there is almost no social structure, whereas on the frontier, social structure and its mores may be refracted or

inverted. The frontier, even for its proximity to wild-ness, still maintains a social structure. The frontier is where the edge of civilization meets the edge of the wilderness.

Not the Same as Nature

It is also important to differentiate between the concepts of *wilderness* and *nature*. Most simply, wilderness is a subset of nature. Nature, a global entity, exists in the athlete's foot fungus growing between one's toes, in the bacteria on one's skin, in the squirrels in the backyard, in the sharks off Thadeus Kubinski's dock, in the grizzly bears in the Yukon and in great whales far out at sea. Nature includes the storm-broken tree in my backyard as well as the vastness of the Everglades. Those who take time off and travel to other places to "commune with nature" are really looking for the unfamiliar in nature, and sometimes for wilderness. Those who take an afternoon in a county or city park do not expect the terrible sublime or a lack of control. When Thoreau "went to the woods," he was not searching for the same survival experience that adventurer Joe Knowles found in the turn-of-the-century Maine wilderness or that young Christopher McCandless found in Alaska more recently. Rather, a park is a place in which one can certainly enjoy nature, perhaps in the forms of a variety of trees, plants, and animals such as birds, rabbits, foxes, squirrels and the like, from the comfort of a strategically placed bench. This park setting certainly represents nature no less than central Alaska does, but there is an important difference. The city or county park, for one thing, is a safe place. There is little chance of starving in a park visited by many people and patrolled by park rangers or police. Social structures remain in place: the other visitors or the park's

officers will enforce the laws that society decides are important. The wildlife, except for the occasional rabid squirrel or fox (whose disease could be a little bit of the wilderness), is benign or at least non-threatening. The only aspect of the sublime in a park might be a fine sunset or a pleasing vista.

Wilderness is different from nature, though not necessarily far away, as Kubinski found. Wilderness allows for both the benign and the malevolent and for the beautiful sublime and the terrible sublime. Nothing is controlled in the wilderness; dangerous animals there are not relocated or shot as they would be in a city or county park. Rather, the wilderness is their domain and they create the "social" structure, as it were. While it is certainly impossible to identify any part of wilderness that is *not* nature, many parts of nature such as that found in parks or gardens have little or nothing to do with wilderness.

Out of control

An essential element of the American concept of wilderness is that it is a place in which humans lose control over their surroundings and their very lives. This loss of control may manifest itself in malevolent ways, such as the torturous journey of the characters of Crane's "The Open Boat" and London's "To Build a Fire." But the lack of human control in the wilderness also means that human society ceases to hold sway over the people who go there. Outback Restaurants, which rely on the marketing concept of a wilderness or frontier Australia, echo this lack of social control in their slogan "No rules, just right." The millions of European immigrants to North America saw a lack of rigid social control on the frontier that would allow them to begin their lives anew and to have

opportunities that they would not have had in their native lands. The more intrepid of these people moved into the wilderness to escape even the strictures of frontier society.

In the domain of literature, American characters often escape into the wild when they are subject to harsh social control. In *Huckleberry Finn*, Huck and Jim flee a drunken father and a state of slavery by heading onto the Mississippi River. The Mississippi serves as a sort of moving wilderness that borders society. On the river, people may take on new identities. The river transcends place, for it flows through both slave and free states, denying boundaries. To be sure, as long as Jim remains in the South, he is in danger of being captured and returned, but the river is always moving and thus Jim is never in one place at any one time. In return for the benefits the river (or any wilderness) bestows, it requires its travelers to risk their lives, and Jim and Huck almost die when a riverboat plows into their raft in a bad fog. Zora Neale Hurston's protagonist Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* also flees to the wilderness of the Everglades, where she is able to take on a new identity as a storyteller and sharpshooter, thus fulfilling herself. In return for the freedom from the social constraints of her town, the wilderness takes her husband in a hurricane and she becomes infected with rabies that will, we assume, end her own life. The wilderness negates social control but it also negates the control that individual humans have over their own lives and sometimes ends those lives. It is this lack of control that continues to draw both writers and real people to the wilderness even after telephones, railways, automobiles and airplanes have allowed people to go almost anywhere and communicate with almost anyone. Our control over our own destinies seems even more in our hands today with Global Positioning Satellites,

cell phones, and more efficient air travel, but even now people seek out wilderness that may eventually kill them.

A Wilderness of Inversions

In the American wilderness, beggars may become kinglike, people may freely associate and the stranglehold of civilization, manners, and social mores that control and order the city or town may be loosened or inverted. These elements of wilderness differ from the frontier's only in the degree to which the influence of civilization is broken. A major inversion is in the control one has over oneself in the wilderness. In the wilderness, people may meet death in the form of starvation, exposure or attacks from wild animals. Although people starve to death in the city, they usually starve not because they cannot find food but because the social system in place does not allow them to have food. In the city there is relatively easy access to food and shelter and few, if any, dangerous animals with which to contend. In the wilderness, this situation is inverted, but so is the opportunity for growth and change. In return for risking one's life, one may also find the freedom to grow.

The normal hierarchical structure that places humans in control of the environment is suspended in the wilderness, where people must often carry guns and other tools to protect, shelter and feed themselves. Paul Shepard suggests that people have been aware of the ability of the wilderness to transform social hierarchy since the middle ages when "it became fashionable to slip into the wild man's garb as a repudiation of the hierarchic order of medieval society" (171). In the city and farmland, humans are

in control of and make use of animals, but in the wilderness animals are in control and may eat or kill the humans who venture into it.

If standard hierarchical human social structures are often inverted or become meaningless in the wilderness, this lack of social structure creates possibilities for growth and change. To take, for a moment, *The Last of the Mohicans* as an example, the “man without a cross,” who would be at the very least stigmatized in civilized society, becomes a necessary guide and protector in the wilderness. Those such as Major Heyward who are the protectors in the towns and cities become ineffectual in the wilderness. The close connections among those who would not normally be able to meet due to the social restrictions of civilized life opens up new possibilities for the sharing and allocating of power and the expression of individuality. The romance between Cora and Uncas, which would not be tolerated in a town, is never consummated in the frontier, but neither is it forbidden, and we may only guess how it may have continued had Uncas not been killed. In the wilderness, mixed-race marriages were not uncommon: trappers wed Native American women and European American women who had been captured by Native Americans sometimes took Native American husbands. In the wilderness the very landscape is different, suggesting that the thoughts and requirements accompanying it are also different.

The Sublime

Another important aspect of wilderness is the presence of the sublime. In his early treatise *On the Sublime* (c. 50 C.E.) Longinus wrote that the sublime has two

sources in nature: great thoughts and noble feelings. Many people connect this concept of the sublime with the more benign aspects of wilderness such as beautiful vistas, striking sunsets, pleasant looking and smelling flowers, and graceful animals. This definition, however, does not apply easily to a wilderness that is also dangerous and powerful. Edmund Burke's 1757 *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* changed the definition of sublime to that which is created by terror, obscurity, privation, vastness, magnitude, the cries of animals, pain, and ugliness: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant with terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime" (Burke 39). When Burke compares the sublime to beauty, "there appears a remarkable contrast. For sublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparatively small; beauty should be smooth, and polished; the great, rugged and negligent." Burke continues, "they are indeed ideas of a very different nature, one being founded on pain, the other on pleasure" (124).

As the Romantics understood, the addition of these more dangerous aspects to the definition of sublime allows for the development of the Gothic and grotesque in characterization and setting, but we may note that it also allows for a re-vision of the wilderness. Whereas the wilderness before could be seen as beautiful landscape or inhospitable landscape, Burke's concept of the terrible sublime and Longinus's concept of the beautiful sublime allow for a more unified definition of the wilderness. After Burke, the wilderness allows for the terror of avalanches, ravenous mountain lions,

wildfires, storms, the awesome heights of mountains, and the inscrutable depths of the swamp or the ocean while Longinus's allows for the beauty of sunsets, waterfalls, birds, and birdsong. As Romanticism, along with its interest in the sublime, began to develop, the wilderness "lost much of its repulsiveness," Roderick Nash writes. "It was not that the wilderness was any less solitary, mysterious, and chaotic but rather in the new intellectual context these qualities were coveted" (44).

Because this conception of nature stemmed from an intellectual movement, it was subject to criticism that it did not reflect an understanding of the wilderness by those who experienced it most often and most immediately but by those who experienced it from afar and whose calluses were more likely to come from a pen than from a pack.

"However vulgar, affected, foppish, and sentimental, the sublime marked a change in the relationship of man to nature, the renewal of human wonder at the natural world, a revolution which has not yet run its course" (Shepard 171-72). As Tuan indicates, the American wilderness is especially well-suited to the terrible nature of Burkean sublimity: "By the end of the nineteenth century, a confusion of virtues were attributed to wilderness in America. It stood for the sublime and called man to contemplation; in its solitude one drifted to higher thoughts away from the temptations of Mammon; it has come to be associated with the frontier and pioneer past, and so with qualities that were thought to be characteristically American; and it was an environment that promoted toughness and virility" (111).

The primary advocate of toughness and virility in the first decade of the twentieth century was President Theodore Roosevelt, and in Roosevelt we see an unexpected

transition to the appreciation of wilderness into the modernist period. In 1899, the year of Ernest Hemingway's birth, Roosevelt "called upon his countrymen to lead a 'life of strenuous endeavor.' This included keeping in contact with wilderness: pioneering was an important antidote to dull mediocrity" (Nash 150). This "dull mediocrity" may have been a precursor to the disillusionment that came with the modernist movement. Indeed, "the rapid growth of the preservationist movement, which reached a climax after 1910 in the Hetch Hetchy controversy, suggests that a sizable number of Americans joined with their President in detecting a national malaise and shared his faith in a wilderness cure" (151). The impact of such a call to the virtues of the wilderness could not have been lost on writers such as Jack London, who published *The Call of the Wild* in 1903. Although London is considered a naturalist, he may also be considered a proto-modernist for his writing about disillusionment with civilized life and civilization. Abraham Rothberg noted some obvious similarities that tie London to modernist writers Ernest Hemingway and Sinclair Lewis:

London is the red blooded writer and war-correspondent who "went everywhere and did everything," adopting the cloak that Hemingway would later throw over his own literary shoulders. London is the alcoholic who destroyed his own talent and who was dead at forty, already foretelling Scott Fitzgerald's "Babylon Revisited" and *The Crack Up* (1).

By the time Hemingway had gone to war, and by the time Nick Adams had returned from war in Hemingway's 1925 collection *In Our Time*, the modernist movement was in full swing and Hemingway and other modernists were able to see wilderness—as did a good deal of the rest of the public—as a cure for the Modern malaise. Even though such a cure

would seem to be much more of a Romantic cure, the interest in wilderness and in primitivism coincided in America with the modernist movement's disillusionment with established society and so the wilderness cure was absorbed into the modernist imagination.

Wilderness is a State of Mind

Wilderness "is as much a state of mind as a description of nature" writes Tuan as he struggles with the inscrutability of the term (112). An immediate danger with this sort of statement is the tendency call almost anything wilderness. There is some validity to this tendency, of course. From the perspective of a skyscraper-bound urbanite who rarely leaves the city, a weekend hike in upstate New York could conceivably turn into wilderness. Recently, in Florida, two boys were visiting Boyd Hill Nature Trail, a small park in the middle of urban St. Petersburg. Somehow they became lost and spent the night in the park. A search was mounted with rangers, police, and volunteers scouring the small area. The boys were found safe and only a little cold, hungry, and mosquito-bitten. For them, however, the small acreage of the urban park was enough to qualify as a scary and confusing wilderness.

For much more intrepid and experienced explorers, such an area is more like a back yard or city street. Twenty-four-year-old Christopher McCandless, for instance, found even the lower forty-eight states to hold too little wilderness for him and so set out for the wilds of Alaska with only a ten-pound bag of rice, a semi-automatic .22 caliber rifle, a pair of rubber boots and little else in April 1992 (Krakauer 1-2). Eighty years

earlier, on August 10, 1913, Joe Knowles entered the Maine woods naked and “took no equipment of any kind and promised to remain completely isolated, living off the land, ‘as Adam lived’” (Nash 141). McCandless probably died from a combination of starvation and eating either poisonous potato seeds or wild sweet peas, but Knowles persevered to become a sort of wilderness celebrity to the point of appearing at the Boston train depot wearing the skin of a bear that he had “lured . . . into a pit, [and] killed . . . with a club” (141). Although these men obviously found a wilderness of the most extreme and wild variety, it was likely just as challenging to them as the Boyd Hill Nature Trail was to the boys lost in it.

An important difference here, however, is the control that each had of his environment. McCandless died after suffering from weeks of poisoning and starvation. Knowles might easily have been mauled by his bear and ended up inside a bearskin in a way different from which he had planned. But the boys in the Boyd Hill Nature Trail were found the next morning. Their experience of wilderness was momentary and even then it was probably not an experience in which they felt completely hopeless. They knew that the park was finite. They would have seen jets from Tampa International Airport flying over repeatedly and they would have heard the distant sounds of automobiles and sirens. They were lost but hardly in the same peril as McCandless or Knowles. McCandless, Knowles, and the boys were all facing a physical wilderness they knew could hurt them physically, but physical danger pales next to the horrors of psychological wilderness.

One type of wilderness that is particularly applicable to modernist writers is the wilderness of a troubled psyche, the wilderness of the psychologically disturbed mind. Although it is facile to ignore the spatial element of wilderness, many of the other attributes of wilderness delineated above also apply to psychological or emotional distress. The mind of one enduring terrible psychological trouble is a mind that is often out of control and that may experience the depth of despair akin to the terrible sublime. This sort of mind is a "place," if you will, in which there is no safety and in which the individual concerned is no more able to assure his or her own safety than he or she is in meeting a spatial wilderness such as an ocean or glacier. Certain modernist texts express a connection between a place that is a wilderness and a mind that is its own wilderness. Eliot's "The Waste Land" often takes place in cities and even in rooms, but the title refers not so much to a place as to a state of mind that is sterile, dead and lifeless (an older, Biblical definition of wilderness). In Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River," Nick Adams journeys to the wilderness in a manner that parallels the shell-shocked wilderness he inwardly endures.

Defining Wilderness is a Political Act

Any statement about wilderness is ultimately a political statement because it defines wilderness from a particular perspective that privileges particular values and world-views. To say that wilderness is a psychological state denies that there is a valid

difference between the physical and spatial wilderness and allows for no change from the wilderness of the wild woods or desert to the wilderness of the city. Although such novels as Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and Richard Wright's *Native Son* might suggest a valid argument for city as wilderness, it can be so only by way of metaphor. And figuring the city as wilderness could have grave ecological repercussions for the natural wilderness. Likewise, defining wilderness as a place where epiphany occurs or a place in which a quest motif is set runs the risk of objectifying the animals, plants and people native to any landscape. Even the term "landscape" objectifies a natural domain into a frame image meant purely for the use of the viewer and with little or no value of its own. Such views have paved the way for the destruction of natural habitats such as Hetch Hetchy valley in California's Yosemite National Park in 1913. The reason for the destruction of Hetch Hetchy was to create a reservoir that would serve the water needs of San Francisco. In response to complaints that such a project would seriously alter the wilderness aspect of the place, "a prominent engineer reported on the City's behalf that roads and walks could be built which would open the region for public recreation in the manner of European mountain lake resorts" (Nash 170).

Perhaps the most political statement about wilderness is that it is empty, uninhabited, or the domain of animals and savages. These statements represent the standard definitions of wilderness by Anglo-European visitors to North and South America through much of the nineteenth century. Early ideas of the North American continent as empty had drastic and mortal consequences for the peoples and civilizations already in residence when Spanish, French, English and other European people arrived to

conquer and settle the continent. If the continent was “empty” then it was available for habitation and anyone or anything already there was of no consequence. Certainly, however, early visitors to the continent such as Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca and John Smith were keenly and immediately aware of the presence of other people and their civilizations on the continent. While there were a few souls like Cabeza de Vaca (who sailed on Panfilo de Narvaez's disastrous Florida expedition in 1527) who saw the people they met as equals to Europeans, many more, like Smith, were able to dismiss the Native American occupants of North America as mere pagan savages who were akin to (or kin to) animals. And if these people saw wilderness as a place filled only with unkempt vegetation and wild animals, then it would only follow for them that the Native Americans were no more than animals and thus subject to the same treatment as animals. Despite the great public debate over the Cherokee Removal in the 1820s, and the Supreme Court decision siding with the Cherokees right to remain in the east, they and other tribes were eventually relocated by force in a way that few other groups of Americans have been, except for the only other group of Americans once classed as sub-human, African slaves. Arguably, the treatment of these peoples was an indirect function of European definitions of wilderness as the domain of heathen savages, wild animals, the devil, or as an empty space. Similar definitions may certainly have led to the destruction of vast areas of natural habitat because animals and wild spaces have no political standing.

Only ten years before the turn of the century, “the Census Bureau declared there was no longer any land frontier” (McCullough 252). Given this official perspective, one

might reasonably expect that the relationship of individual to wilderness that lay beyond the frontier would be distant or nonexistent and that the literature of the time might reflect this obsolescence of wilderness. It is surprising, therefore, that some modernist writers find the wilderness to be such an important part of their work and world view. In a way, their valuing of wilderness as a place in which meaning can be made or found in a world in which meaning is shifting, difficult to find, or simply inscrutable represents a strange return to the Romantic valuing of wilderness as a place in which one can make sense of the civilized world. Because the majority of modern American writers are of non-Native American backgrounds (Anglo-European and African), it is necessary to emphasize that the preceding definition of wilderness represents a people who view the continent and wilderness itself from an outside perspective. My approach purposefully excludes the Native American perspective on wilderness, not as a way of privileging the Anglo-European or African perspectives, but in order to expose the ways in which newcomers who have frequently objectified the continent both see wilderness and respond to it in their literature. By understanding the Anglo-European and African perspective on wilderness *as a perspective*, we de-center it, de-privilege it, and come to a greater understanding of how it shapes some of the modernist literature that has been so influential the twentieth century.

CHAPTER III

“SNOW FALLING AND NIGHT FALLING FAST”: WEATHER AS WILDERNESS

Wilderness is often defined in its relation to landscape as a wasted place, a place of wild nature where humans are not in control, but almost always as a *place*. Aside from inner or psychological wilderness, however, wilderness may occur in the form of weather, regardless of the location in which such weather occurs. Weather as wilderness shares some important aspects of my definition: weather creates a situation where humans are less in control of their lives and their environments than in “civilized” places or situations. Weather as wilderness has the power to invert hierarchies and break down social barriers. Weather as wilderness embodies both the beautiful and the terrible aspects of the sublime. Furthermore, beyond my definition, weather has the ability to bring wilderness to people who would normally forego the challenge of venturing into the ocean, swamp or backcountry wilderness. There are two relevant iterations of weather that I will discuss in this chapter. The first is climate, which usually adversely affects only outsiders, and the other variety of weather wilderness is the weather event, which is often violent and affects residents and outsiders alike. These events transform landscape, the relationships between people, and even social rules and mores, allowing people themselves to change.

In this chapter, I will define both climate and the weather event as particular types of weather. Most of the chapter will focus on the weather event; I will discuss the use of the hurricanes by Ernest Hemingway in his story “After the Storm” and by Zora Neale

Hurston in her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. I will then show how modernist poets Robinson Jeffers and T. S. Eliot invoke fog in their poems as a way of transforming the physical and social atmosphere and allowing their characters the possibility of change and insight. Rain is a more common weather event than either fog or hurricanes, but is also used by modernist writers as a type of wilderness on the move. Kate Chopin, a proto-modernist writer, uses the wilderness of rain and storms to invert social hierarchies to allow her characters to transcend social mores. Finally, I discuss the way that coldness and winter storms serve as wilderness that helps characters to come to a greater understanding of their place in the universe in my discussions of London's "To Build a Fire" and Robert Frost's poem "Storm Fear."

Climate is weather that is typical of a certain place, such as the constant intense cold of the Arctic or Antarctic or the oppressive daytime heat and nighttime chill of the desert. In these cases, the weather is inextricably connected with the place in which it occurs and may be either temperate or extreme. Climate and place are connected so intricately that it is not surprising that "the term 'climate,' as used in the Enlightenment, encompassed not only a region's characteristic weather conditions but also its total physical environment—topography, latitude and longitude, the influence of the oceans, mountains and rivers, the quality of the air, [and] the 'improvements' people had made on the terrain by clearing forests or rerouting rivers" (Laskin 74). The climate of a place becomes familiar to its inhabitants. As the Comte de Volney wrote, "Habit forms a sort of atmosphere around us to whose peculiarities our senses are dead, till we go forth and breath a different air" (qtd. in Laskin 79). For those who travel from humid Florida to

Nevada, especially via airplane, the dry nature of the latter climate is shocking. One's nose soon dries out. One finds blood on a handkerchief. One must be constantly licking lips, constantly drinking to keep from dehydrating. The visitor can only complain about the unusual dryness. To Nevada residents, however, the dryness is as common as the humidity in Florida, and they have long since become used to carrying lip balm and their noses have long since stopped bleeding.

Jack London's works provide good examples of both climate and the weather event. The coldness of the weather in *The Call of the Wild* is really just a function of the normal environment, because extreme weather is standard for the Alaskan climate. John Thornton and his friends are accustomed to the extreme cold and so they are prepared for it. When Thornton is taken ill, he winters over rather than attempting to make an arduous trip with his business partners, a knowledgeable and prudent response to the climate. For those new to both the place and climate, however, the climate is the same as the extreme weather it would be in the place from which they came. We can contrast the response to the climate of Hal, Charles and Mercedes in *Call of the Wild* to that of John Thornton. Thornton knows that it is wise to stay put in a time of thawing rivers. The three tenderfeet, however, have packed too many unnecessary items, have not dressed warmly enough, and are traveling at the wrong time of the year. Their deaths come about not from any sort of extreme weather, but from their inability to abide by the rules of the standard climate in the place in which they are traveling.

Of course, the climate in any particular place can nevertheless produce extreme versions of itself that may produce a wilderness weather event. The weather event is a

type of weather such as a storm, fog, or atypical version of climate that actively changes the living conditions of the people in that area. Temperature, and in particular coldness, often create weather events. London compares the extreme cold of “To Build a Fire” to the usual cold for the area and climate. The unnamed protagonist who is traveling figures that it is unusually cold when he begins his trip, but this is not enough to stop him since he is a “newcomer to the land.” “Fifty degrees below zero meant eighty-odd degrees of frost. Such fact impressed him as being cold and uncomfortable, and that was all” (London, “To Build a Fire” 463). As the reader learns, this is a fatal misunderstanding on the man’s part. While fifty below zero is very cold for the Yukon, however, London tells us that this wilderness cold is even more severe. When the man “spat speculatively . . . there was a sharp, explosive crackle that startled him.” He realizes that “undoubtedly it was colder than fifty below” (463). His dog, however, a “proper wolf-dog” understands through instinct the tremendous cold and the inherent danger in traveling in it.

It knew it was no time for traveling. Its instinct told a truer tale than was told to the man by the man’s judgment. In reality, it was not merely colder than fifty below zero; it was colder than sixty below, than seventy below. It was seventy five below zero . . . it meant that one hundred and seven degrees of frost obtained. (464)

So, while we might say that the natural climate of the Yukon is that of great cold, seventy-five below zero is an extreme version of that climate that causes the animals and seasoned inhabitants (such as “the old timer at Sulphur creek” who urges the man not to travel alone) to hide and severely alter their usual activities. The description of cold here suggests that the weather reflects not merely the conditions that one expects in this

climate, but such an extreme (described as “tremendous cold”) that makes the dog experience “a vague but menacing apprehension” at being out in such weather. Even in a place used to the very cold, extreme cold represents a transformative weather event in which both animals and people act differently. Following its instincts, the dog searches for warmth and shelter. The man he travels with experiences an epiphany about his place in the world as he freezes to death.

Many weather events, however, are much more than extreme versions of the prevailing climate. While storms are really only wind, lightning and rain, they are self-contained entities that move from one place to another, changing the conditions of the places they affect. The hurricane is one extreme weather event that is represented in the modernist period by Zora Neale Hurston, Ernest Hemingway, and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings. In our own recent memory, Hurricane Andrew “killed eighteen, left over 250,000 homeless and caused massive devastation in south Dade County on August 24, 1992” (Gannon 145). Unable to comment meaningfully on the sublime scale of the storm, television meteorologists were often able only to repeat radar and satellite footage of the storm as it moved across the Florida peninsula. The storm was so large that it covered the bottom half of the state and so powerful that it caused catastrophic destruction on an inhuman scale. People of all classes, races, and political backgrounds gathered in shelters for fear of the storm’s destruction. Three months after it had passed, I drove south through Miami and Homestead. Huge piles of rubbish two or three stories high from damaged houses lined the Florida Turnpike. After the greater danger had passed, however, people began again to turn on each other. On one house was spray-

painted the warning “you loot, we eat!” Although this warning hints at the looting and price gouging that occurred after Andrew, it also hints at the at least momentary change in relationships between people that followed such great destruction. Because electricity and civil services had been knocked out in the storm, people who would not have dared to enter each other’s houses (or the houses of the more affluent) and steal their belongings suddenly found that the rules had changed. The storm itself created a temporary wilderness and left in its aftermath a temporary frontier in which justice and protection were left up to the individual and where bandits would have a decent chance of stealing and getting away with it. The response of this one homeowner was to threaten one of the greatest of human taboos—cannibalism. All of this happened in one of the biggest cosmopolitan (though perhaps not the most peaceful) cities in the United States.

The destructive power of two earlier hurricanes would have a strong impact on two American writers. The Labor Day hurricane of 1935 (hurricanes were not named before about 1960) packed 200 m.p.h. winds as it came ashore in the middle Florida Keys near Islamorada and Upper Matecumbe. The accompanying 17-foot tidal surge toppled from the tracks the cars of a train sent from Miami to rescue the World War I veterans who were working on a highway and living in tents there. Most of them perished. Many victims were unidentifiable because the blowing sand had effectually sandblasted their faces beyond recognition. Beyond the destruction of the storm, survivors noted its transformative quality: “The wind was blowing with such force that one of the veterans who survived described seeing sparks as grains of sand came into contact with one another,” writes Stephanie Watson of The Weather Channel. The veteran “said he

thought he had died and gone to hell when he saw all that fire," said John Hope, Tropical Weather Expert for The Weather Channel. Much earlier, Ernest Hemingway also remarked on the ability the storm had to change the landscape from a grassy, wooded key to a blighted desert landscape: "We located 69 bodies where no one had been able to get in. Indian Key was absolutely swept clean, not a blade of grass," he wrote to editor Max Perkins (qtd. in Watson). Hemingway had experienced the effects of the storm's fringes as he rode it out in Key West. As Carlos Baker recounts, "his first concern was the *Pilar* . . . [which] he spent most of Sunday making . . . as safe as possible" (355). Beside his concern for his boat, Hemingway's preparations were of a basic nature: putting lawn furniture and children's toys inside, nailing up shutters. After the hurricane had passed, "Ernest was eager to go to the scene of the devastation" at Lower Matecumbe key But his desire to see the devastation likely had as much to do with humanitarian ends as with his desire to experience extremes: "The survivors, if any, would need food and water" (Baker 356). When he wrote Max Perkins that he "saw more dead that day than he had seen since the summer of 1918," he connects the experience of the hurricane to that of the First World War, another scene of devastation he had purposely visited. This connection suggests that Hemingway saw something sublime, intriguing and transformative about the devastation possible in both war and storms.

Hemingway's story "After the Storm" was based not on this hurricane, but on Bahamian "Bra Saunder's tale of a sunken Spanish liner," the *Val Banera* (Baker 291). (It was Saunders, a Bahamian and veteran seaman living in Key West, to whom Hemingway had turned in 1935 to take him to Matecumbe to view the aftermath of the

hurricane.) Hemingway published his version of the story in the May, 1932 *Cosmopolitan*, four years after hearing it and a good three years from the Labor Day Hurricane of 1935 about which he wrote Perkins. The fact that he wrote a story about a hurricane years before experiencing the aftermath of one emphasizes the impact of hurricanes on Hemingway's imagination and suggests that he understood the idea of the hurricane as a transformative force; "After the Storm" was published as the first story in the 1933 collection *Winner Take Nothing*.

As we will see in Chopin's "The Storm," Hemingway's title refers to both a literal and a figurative storm. The story opens not with the lashings of rain and wind but with a bar fight which "wasn't about anything, something about making punch" (Hemingway, "After" 3). During the fight the other man is choking the speaker and banging his head on the floor so that the speaker must cut him with a pocketknife in order to get loose. The speaker runs out of the place with others chasing him and only then does he mention the storm that he must have weathered with the others in the bar. After he learns (inaccurately) that he had killed the man, he describes the landscape as "dark and there was water standing in the street and no lights and windows broke and boats all up in the town and trees blown down and everything all blown" (3). As he heads out to his boat in a borrowed skiff, though, the devastation takes on the imagery of purity and clarity. He observes, "It was just as white as a lye barrel and coming from Eastern Harbor to Sou'west Key you couldn't recognize the shore" suggesting the transformation of the seascape. It had been wiped clean and white and rearranged so that it was fundamentally a different place than before the storm. Once the speaker putatively commits murder, his

world has changed and his environment is unrecognizable. This sense of being transformed eerily anticipates Bra Saunders's difficulty in navigating to Matecumbe Key three years later in 1935. In Hemingway's story the storm changes not only the landscape but the speaker's opportunities; he is the "first one out" and finds "under water, a liner; just lying there all under water as big as the whole world" (4). This ship, which "must have had five million dollars worth in her," represents a unique opportunity for the speaker to salvage it.

The hurricane of 1928 caused the loss of some 1800 lives, mostly by drowning, when the storm pushed the waters of the Okeechobee river over their banks and shattered the dikes that held the lake back from the surrounding agricultural area. "The Hurricane caused the shallow waters of Lake Okeechobee to reach heights of 15 feet" (Murphy par. 1). This hurricane, which transformed an agricultural area of plenty into a flood scene of what must have seemed biblical proportions, was the storm that Zora Neale Hurston chose to recreate in her 1937 novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hurston uses the storm as a final and concrete representation of transformation for her protagonist Janie Woods. Throughout the novel, Janie has been moving steadily from a position of reliance on men to independence; when she arrives in the Everglades, she has found in Teacake both a mate and a teacher who shows her the way to her own self worth and identity. Paradoxically, this powerful, loving relationship is the last tie that binds her to her reliance on men. The wilderness of the Everglades (or "the muck" as Teacake calls it) allows Janie to learn to shoot a rifle, to participate in storytelling, and to express herself as *a part of* a community rather than *apart from* a community as had been the case

in Eatonville, where she was the trophy wife of Mr. Mayor Joe Starks. But what sort of wilderness allows further change when characters are already in the wilderness?

Weather.

In this crucial section of *Their Eyes*, Hurston uses the 1928 Okeechobee Hurricane to create an additional “space” in which Janie may continue to grow into self-realization. After Janie has grown as much as she can in the wilderness of the Everglades, Hurston creates a more horribly sublime, transient wilderness through the introduction of the hurricane. She begins to separate the physical space of the Everglades into an intensified wilderness as the storm approaches and “the Indians and rabbits and snakes and coons” head east to escape the path of the storm and the lake that will flood them out of the area. It is especially significant to the establishment of a wilderness that both “Indians” and wild animals move out of the area because they are often seen as part of what defines wilderness. As I’ve discussed earlier, European and African Americans often view Native Americans as being part of the wilderness even though the Native Americans who live there view their own surroundings as normal, as home. A less disputed aspect of wilderness is the presence of wild animals, which have the instinct and ability to survive where humans may rely only on their knowledge for survival. Wild animals enforce the idea that humans are not in control of the wilderness, for they have evolved so as to control (or at least function effectively in) their surroundings, and they may kill or otherwise dominate humans in the wilderness. On the farm, of course, this power relationship is reversed, and humans control and kill animals. By having Native Americans and animals living in the Everglades, Hurston evokes a basic wilderness.

When she has them leave, she creates an even more severe form of wilderness, where even those native to the area—people or animals—are so out of their element and out of control that they leave. She thus creates the most extreme wilderness of her novel which prepares her protagonist for the most extreme growth.

When the hurricane strikes, it affects all humans and animals equally, emphasizing further the close connections already in place between people of different races and classes and between animals and people. “A common danger made common friends,” Hurston writes; “Nothing sought conquest over the other” (243). She gives several examples of these connections. In one example, “they passed a dead man in a sitting position on a hummock, entirely surrounded by wild animals and snakes” (243).

In another,

[a] man clung to a cypress tree on a tiny island. A tin roof of a building hung from the branches by electric wires and the wind swung it back and forth like a mighty ax. The man dared not move a step to his right lest his crushing blade split him open. He dared not step left for a large rattlesnake was stretched full length with his head in the wind. There was a strip of water between the island and the fill, and the man clung to the tree and cried for help. (243-44)

The snake here is in a predicament similar to the man’s. The man fears the perils near him and feels powerless. The rattlesnake, usually lethal, has his “head in the wind” as he rides out the storm, and Tea Cake tells the man that “De snake won’t bite yuh . . . he skeered tuh go intuh uh coil. Skeered he’ll be blowed away” (244). In a third example, which is perhaps the most important, a cow swims “slowly towards the fill [of the highway] in an oblique line. A massive dog was sitting on her shoulders and shivering and growling” (245). Symbolized in these two domestic animals are docility and

ferocity, servitude and madness. We find out later that the dog is not only ferocious but rabid. As Janie is about to drown in the flood, she latches onto the cow's tail, completing a strange trinity of servitude, ferocious madness, and human desperation. The dog, however, "stood up and growled like a lion . . . [and] lashed up his fury for the charge" (245). In this nightmarish wilderness, nothing is anymore as it seems or should be. The faithful dog turns into a lion, the rattlesnake is afraid and the cow is a swimming mammal.

The final metaphoric transgression of boundaries occurs when Tea Cake "split the water like an otter, opening his knife as he dived" to save Janie from the dog. He swims not like a man but like an otter, and it is only later, when they have escaped the storm's aftermath and are safe in a hotel room in Palm Beach that he insists on his identity as a man. "He'd tore me tuh pieces, if it wuzn't fuh you, honey," Janie tells him and Tea Cake replies that "yuh don't have tuh say, if it wuzn't fuh me, baby, cause Ah'm *heah*, and then Ah want yuh tuh know it's uh man heah" (248). His change back into a man from a beast is ultimately ironic because the bite he received from the dog has infected him with rabies and he soon turns into a human beast—angry, murderous and frothing at the mouth. It is precisely this brush with animal-nature, this most grievous transgressing of boundaries in Tea Cake's catching rabies, that eventually allows Janie to become a full and independent individual, and Tea Cake's rabies is a direct result of the hurricane's connecting people and animals more intimately than during normal weather.

In the greatest example of irony in the novel, Janie kills Tea Cake, her beloved. Of course, she does so only in the most dire of circumstances, as he is mad from rabies

and is trying to kill her. His death is a result of the wilderness experience of the Everglades in two ways. Most obviously, Janie would not have had to kill him if he had not been murderously insane from the effects of the rabies that he contracted from the dog during the hurricane. Just as importantly, or perhaps more so, is the fact that Janie kills him by shooting him. When Janie is married to her first two husbands, Logan Killicks and Jody Starks, she uses only the weapon of her wit and lives more often in humility and subjugation to their wills. Though she is unhappy, there is never any mention of any sort of murderous or violent tendencies. To become lethal, she must go to the wilderness and learn “tuh handle shootin’ tools” as Tea Cake puts it shortly after they arrive in the Everglades: “She got to the place she could shoot a hawk out of pine tree and not tear him up. Shoot his head off. She got to be a better shot than Tea Cake” (196).

Once she learns to shoot, she becomes someone with the power of life and death and thus it becomes—at least partly—her choice to subject herself to the wills of others. When Tea Cake, crazed from rabies, points his pistol with the three empty chambers and pulls the trigger, Janie “instinctively. . . flew behind her on the rifle and brought it around” (272). Her connection with the rifle and her lethal ability is not a logical thing but one that has become internalized. When Tea Cake pulls the trigger of his pistol so that it will fire on a live cartridge, Janie fires and wounds him. Hurston emphasizes Janie’s deadly ability with the rifle by writing that “if Tea Cake could have counted costs he would not have been there with the pistol in his hands. No knowledge of fear nor rifles nor anything else was there” (273). Although she intends to show that Tea Cake is

clearly out of his mind, she focuses on Janie's ability with a rifle as a particular cost to be counted.

Their Eyes is not simply a love story but the story of Janie finding her own identity and self-worth, so it is necessary that she leave Tea Cake in some way in order to continue to find herself. There would be no reason for her to grow any further living with Tea Cake for she would always be his wife, and "wife" was the identity that had stifled her since she was sixteen. Hurston's method for removing him from Janie's life is a drastic one, and one that shows her independence because she can clearly fend for herself even if it means killing someone who is stronger. This drastic method, though, calls for a most extreme type of wilderness, so Hurston augments the wilderness of the Everglades with the intensely and terribly sublime weather-event of the hurricane.

Of course, hurricanes are not the only elements of weather that transform the landscape into a wilderness. Such weather can be far more subtle. Unlike a hurricane, fog, for instance, creates very little damage on its own. In Robinson Jeffers's "Boats in a Fog," the fog's opacity forces six fishing boats to creep along slowly near the shore so that they do not run aground:

A sudden fog-drift muffled the ocean,
A throbbing of engines moved in it,
At length, a stone's throw out, between the rocks and the vapor,
One by one moved shadows
Out of the mystery, shadows, fishing-boats, trailing each other
Following the cliff for guidance,
Holding a difficult path between the peril of the sea-fog
And the foam on the shore granite. (ll. 6-13)

Jeffers acknowledges that fog is transformative by his use of words such as “muffled,” “peril,” and “subdued.” The fog is equated with “the mystery,” and as an “earnest element of nature.” Jeffers’ argument in “Boats in a Fog” is that the stuff of civilized society, “sports and gallantries, the stage, the arts, the antics of dancers, / The exuberant voices of music, / Have charm for children but lack nobility” (ll. 1-4). This vague thesis correlates with his philosophy of “Inhumanism,” in which he values all that is not human society and places the greatest value on the inhuman world of animals. Being a poet rather than an essayist, Jeffers does not explain further why the civilized arts “lack nobility” but instead asserts that “it is bitter earnestness / That makes beauty” (ll. 1-4). This earnestness seems to extend beyond any sort of fervent art, and Jeffers condemns himself out of his own mouth for the poem he is writing, earnest as he seems to be. What is most remarkable about this poem, however, is the way in which he shows “earnestness.” As with other modernist-era writers, a species of wilderness marks the boundary of civilization and all of its identifications and prohibitions. The “sudden fog-drift” that Jeffers describes as a supportive example for his thesis is a transformative weather event that creates a temporary wilderness wherein the fishermen in the fog-hobbled boats may practice “bitter earnestness” and thus rise to a level higher than art and human society.

It is important that the fog significantly transforms the surroundings so that the humans lose their customary control over their lives. This control then removes the people from the position of conquerors of nature and thus subordinates the societal norms to the more fundamental values of survival. The fog shows its control of the situation by

“muffl[ing] the ocean” and “subduing” the engines of the fishing boats. The fog works in an almost magical way by turning the boats from “shadows” into boats and back again. They are described as coming “out of the mystery,” thus making the fog something inscrutable and alluding to its role in the inscrutable part of religion. The fog further transforms the boats from ocean-going, self-contained fishing boats into cripples that “follow the cliff for guidance” like people who are blind. No longer bold hunters of fish, the boats are humble and “One by one, trailing their leader, six crept by.” The boats “creep” as if in fear or weakness.

This mood is emphasized two lines later by further anthropomorphic descriptions of the boats as “patient and cautious.” These are clearly not descriptions of confident human beings who are rulers of all they survey, but of animals who are in peril and must pay adequate respect to the elements. The boats will go “round the peninsula / Back to the buoys in Monterey harbor” where they will be safe in a civilized place (ll. 18-19). Rather than criticize the boats (we never see any people on the boats in this poem) for being human-made and humanly-directed, Jeffers says that the earnestness with which these people must conduct themselves in the fog has made them equal to the animals and the cosmos: “A flight of pelicans / Is nothing lovelier to look at ; / The flight of the planets is nothing nobler” (ll. 18-20). Like a flight of pelicans, the boats move “one by one, trailing their leader.” We may also assume that pelicans move with “earnestness” because they must pay attention to the physical demands of flight and to their destination. The planets also track through the sky “one by one” but it is more difficult to acknowledge any earnestness in them. What is significant, however, is not the perfect

parallel of the comparisons but the fog's ability to transform the boats from human-made objects going about the business of catching fish to make money into objects (or animals?) which are as valued and as "earnest" as the animals themselves. As with the other forms of transient wilderness that I have discussed, the fog allows the boats and the people in them to move outside the sphere of normal societal values.

The fog in Eliot's 1915 "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is an industrial fog, called both "yellow fog" (l. 15) and "yellow smoke" (l. 16). This urban fog differs significantly from that in Jeffers' poems, for it has little to do with the California ocean fog of Monterey that comes from the "mystery" of nature. Yet, Eliot mentions his dirty fog early, shortly after his famous "patient etherised upon a table" simile (l. 3), and after the first mention of the women who "come and go / Talking of Michelangelo" (ll. 13-14). As with Jeffers, Eliot is using the fog both to create setting and to create a situation in which the standard social mores may be overturned, though, of course, we know that this change will not help hapless Prufrock. The description of the fog is largely restricted to one stanza:

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep. (ll. 15-22)

As with Jeffers' fog, this fog is ubiquitous. It rests "upon the window panes," "in the corners of the evening," "upon the pools that stand in drains," "by the terrace," "about

the house,” and in lines 24 and 25, “on the street.” As with any other sort of wilderness, it pervades its place. This fog sets up a type of grimy hegemony “on the street” in general, and specifically “about the house” wherein the “women come and go.” The fog insulates this house from outside reality and sets it apart as a place where Prufrock will try to communicate with women, as if he cannot communicate with them at any other place or in any other situation in his life. It is very important that Prufrock sees this fog, for it reveals to us the importance of the house to his insecurities. It certainly may be that there is fog all over the city, and that fog in this river- or water-front city is common. However, Prufrock sees it as distinguishing the house from other houses, as “curling about the house” to which he will “go and make [his] visit.”

It is almost required to remark on the cat metaphor that dominates this stanza. Eliot fans who come to his poems via *Cats* and the *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* often find the description here a bit of whimsy. *Old Tom Eliot and his cats!* a sympathetic reader might remark. In this poem, though, the cat metaphor is important to the use of the fog as weather-wilderness that creates a social-mores-free zone. The weather does not create a situation where the party turns into a Mardi Gras type of orgy, but is perhaps the closest thing that the repressed, self-absorbed Prufrock can expect: a place in which something—communication—*might* happen. The cat has been described as a bit of the wild living among us. In contrast to dogs, cats commonly hunt in domestic areas. Dogs are loyal companions, accompanying their owners about town, taking walks on the end of a leash, and if they do anything remotely wild, it consists of their wetting a hydrant, or soiling a lawn. Cats kill pigeons, jays, rats and squirrels in the middle of the

city and sometimes bring the dead carcasses or half-dead bodies into the house. Pet owners shriek at them, “not in the house!” and thus emphasize that the house is definitely not a place where the wild and savage should abide. The cat may go outside and act out his savagery but in the house the animal must handle itself as no more savage than a plush toy. Eliot’s cat metaphor thus rings the house with a domesticated wildness, a wild domestication. The cat-fog marks the house as its territory by rubbing its back and muzzle on the window panes. When it “curls about the house,” it does so in superfeline proportions and becomes more of a domesticated monster than a quiet lap-cat. Prufrock understands that this house holds uncommon possibilities. In this house one may “murder and create” (l. 28), have a “hundred indecisions . . . visions and revisions” (ll.32-33) and even (perhaps) “disturb the universe” (l. 46). The atmosphere of the house is emphasized by the extremes of “murder and create” and by Prufrock’s repeated question “do I dare?” which suggests that it may be possible to transgress whatever social prohibitions keep him from communicating with others. In the end, unlike Hurston’s Janie who undergoes major changes and a deep epiphany, nothing happens in “Love Song” except that Prufrock remains isolated in his own personality, continually “etherised,” but the fog has brought in or a least symbolized a possibility of connection and change.

Just as fog is a subtle type of precipitation, rain is precipitation of the most common kind, and rain may be the most common way in which we experience weather as wilderness. Consider for a moment the way in which many people act during a standard rain shower. They hug the walls under the eaves of buildings, they hold notebooks and

briefcases over their heads. Women wear plastic bags over their heads, and people dash from place to place and through the doors that they open for each other. Even though rain is not a dangerous thing as, say, hail is, many people shun it as if it were all acid rain. They act as if they were in a place that is hostile to them, in which they have little control. In places where rain is more common—London and Seattle, for instance—people grow used to it and pay it as little heed as do people who live in wilderness areas where rain is common. When I lived in London, I learned to follow the custom of Londoners, who wore a good overcoat and a hat and rather ignored the rain. Some carried umbrellas, too, but those without refused to allowed the often gentle rain to transform their environment into anything that was hostile to them.

In Ernest Hemingway's "Cat in the Rain," the rain serves to force a married couple to deal with their conflicting desires. The wife clearly desires a child, a change from a Bohemian and almost androgynous life. The cat she sees cowering under a table as it attempts to stay dry symbolizes both the way she feels and her desire for something about the size and shape of a cat (a baby). Conversely, in Kate Chopin's story "The Storm," a violent rainstorm serves to both reflect the passion of two lovers and to transform the physical and social setting into a place where the prohibitions of fidelity and marriage are washed away as long as the rain falls. One of the most transformative aspects of storms and other weather events is that they create a situation where the standard social and political structure is not in control. The usual distance between people is eliminated, social hierarchy is suspended and the relationships between people are relaxed and casual.

Both Chopin's "At the `Cadian Ball" and its sequel "The Storm" show the conscious transgression of social boundaries to bring together lovers of different social classes, and both of these transgressions result, either directly or indirectly, from the influence of weather as wilderness. The title of "At the `Cadian Ball" itself suggests a party in which people dress up, dance, drink and interact in ways different from everyday life. While not all prohibitions of interaction are broken down at the ball, "any one who is white may go to a `Cadian ball, but he must pay for his lemonade, his coffee and chicken gumbo. And he must behave himself like a `Cadian" (Chopin, "At the `Cadian Ball" 460). Except for servants, attendance is limited to "any one who is white" but there is some subtle mixing of races at the ball. Calixta, who is described early in the story as a "little Spanish vixen" whose "flaxen hair kinked worse than a mulatto's" manages to become the belle of the ball (457). Her ascension to belle also transcends class boundaries. Her "white dress was not nearly so handsome or well made as Fronie's . . . nor were her slippers so stylish as those of Ozeina" and she is without a fan, since she has broken hers and her "aunts and uncles were not willing to give her another" (457). Perhaps only in the situation of the ball, she is able to exceed the social limitations of race and class and be judged only on her merits: "But the men agreed she was at her best tonight. Such animation! and abandon! such flashes of wit!" (460). In spite of her class-marked language, she manages to capture the attention and fancy of the rich young planter Alcée Laballière (he who goes to the ball?), something her physical and social place in society would have made difficult.

Even in this story, in which weather ostensibly plays but a little part, the weather is transformative, responsible for setting in motion the action of the story. Alcée had just “put nine hundred acres in rice . . . a good deal of money in the ground, but the returns promised to be glorious” (457-58). Restricted to his privileged life on his family plantation, his social interaction is also constrained. He is thus limited to the women available to him, and particularly to his mother’s goddaughter, Clarisse, who is described as “dainty as a lily; hardy as a sunflower; tall, graceful, like one of the reeds that grew in the marsh. Cold and kind and cruel by turn, and everything that was aggravating to Alcée” (458). Rather than avoid Clarisse as one might expect, however, he chases her passionately: “[he] must have been crazy the day he came in from the rice-field, and, toil-stained that he was, clasped Clarisse by the arms and panted a volley of hot, blistering love-words into her face” (458). His amorous actions apparently come from some sort of desperation born from having her there (for we know that she “was worth going a good deal farther [than the city] to see” [458]). Nevertheless, Alcée shows himself to be no shallow man who pursues a woman only for her physical beauty. He finds her aggravating despite her being “dainty,” “hardy,” “slim,” and “graceful”—everything a young Southern lady should be in the late nineteenth century. She responds coldly (with a “chill” in her eyes) to his advances, however, seeming more concerned with her “toilet that he had so brutally disarranged” (458).

In order for there to be any change in the cool situation between this cold woman and the hot-natured man who finds her “aggravating,” there must be some change in their surroundings that allows them to think differently about each other. Because there seems

little likelihood that they will travel from the plantation, Chopin brings wilderness to them in the form of a cyclone which “cut into the rice like fine steel” (458). Elsewhere, I have discussed how the rules are changed when characters are in the wilderness, how they are out of control, how societal rules and expectations change. The same thing happens in the wake of this cyclone. As with other incarnations of wilderness, the cyclone is described in terms of sublimity, as “an awful thing, coming so swiftly, without a moment’s warning in which to light a candle or set a piece of blessed palm burning” (458). The destruction, awfulness and swiftness of the storm leaves the Laballières in a powerless situation in which their only recourse would be resorting to “holy candles” and “blessed palm” to ward off disaster. This same disaster, however, creates a change in Clarisse. When she sees the depression that seizes Alcée after the disaster, “Clarisse’s heart melted with tenderness.” So changed is Alcée by the storm’s force, however, that he responds to her not with the same warmth as she might have expected from his “hot . . . love-words” before the storm, but with “mute indifference” (458). The storm has created a change in Alcée’s and Clarisse’s inner climates. She who was previously cold warms up and he who was hot before becomes chill and indifferent. It is Alcée’s depressed mood that leads him into going to the ball—with saddlebags full of clothes—a few days later. Alcée’s servant quotes Alcée’s reason for leaving as “w’en God A’mighty an’a `oman jines fo’ces agin me, dat’s one too many fur me” (459).

With social conventions at least mitigated by the atmosphere of the ball, Alcée is free to take up with the stereotypically hot-blooded (one might assume from her “Spanish blood” her sharp tongue and her temper) Calixta. They “talked low and laughed softly,

as lovers do.” The spell of the party is broken, however, when Clarisse arrives and summons Alcée with a “voice that he would have followed anywhere”; he goes obediently (462). Calixta walks along with Bobinôt, offering him the ambivalent marriage proposal (or acceptance) of “you been sayin’ all along you want to marry me, Bobinôt. Well, if you want, I don’ care, me” (462). When the spell is broken (the “Negro musicians . . . fire their pistols into the air . . . to announce ‘le bal est fini’”) the old societal norms resume, and Alcée and Calixta must return to their rightful places, marrying those from their station, no matter how “aggravating” they may find them.

In “The Storm,” Calixta and Alcée are thrown together by a violent rainstorm and consummate a long-smoldering desire for one another. According to Fred Hobson’s note to “The Storm,” “On July 18, 1898, six months after she had completed her novel *The Awakening*, Chopin wrote ‘The Storm.’ Its subtitle indicates that it was intended to be a sequel to ‘At the `Cadian Ball,’ a short story published in 1892. Chopin never sought a publisher for this unconventional story. It first saw print in *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin* (1969), edited by Per Seyersted” (Andrews, et al. 305). “The Storm” takes place six years after the events of “At the `Cadian Ball.” At the time of “The Storm,” the protagonists have gone their separate ways and started families. Calixta has become “an over-scrupulous housewife” who is preoccupied by her sewing and a manic concern for a spotless house.

As the storm approaches, she is “sewing furiously on a sewing machine” (Chopin, “The Storm” 306). Her husband Bobinôt and son Bibi have walked to the store but she feels “no uneasiness for their safety” as one might assume she would. She is so single-

minded that she appears to be in a daze and Chopin describes it thus when, after Alcée asks permission to wait on her gallery for the storm to pass, “his voice and her own startled her as if from a trance” (306). This description provides the first indication of the storm’s transformative quality; her life before and after it clearly reveal different states of mind. Calixta also changes her mind about the safety of Bibi and Bobinôt after she awakes from her “trance”: “An there’s Bobinôt and Bibi out in that storm—if only he didn’ left Friedheimer’s!” she exclaims to Alcée ” (306). It is unclear, however, if she is genuinely concerned for their safety or if she is merely reminding herself and Alcée that she is married and has a child, for only two sentences before she worries “if this keeps up, *Dieu sait* if the levees goin to stan’ it!” Alcée replies “what have you got to do with the levees?” (307).

While she doesn’t answer his question, she does attempt to place a levee of her own between herself and Alcée by mentioning her alleged concern for Bibi and Bobinôt. She attempts to reinforce this metaphoric levee again after she has staggered backwards into Alcée’s arms: “Bonté! She cried, releasing herself from his encircling arm and retreating from the window. ‘The house’ll go next! If I only knew w’ere Bibi was!’” (307). This time she does not mention her concern for Bobinôt, her husband, but only for her small son. This ellipsis suggests that her own levee is beginning to give way and they kiss in the next paragraph. Her state of mind changes still further when she gives in to both Alcée and her own passion. Instead of great concern for either her family or her house, she “did not heed the crashing torrents, and the roar of the elements made her laugh as she lay in his arms. She was a revelation in that dim, mysterious chamber”

(307). Where before she was concerned she now laughs; where before she was focused on the storm, she now pays it no heed.

Even after the storm, she remains changed, for the storm is permanently transformative even though it is a transient phenomenon. Bobinôt's "explanations and apologies which he had been composing all along the way, dies on his lips" as Calixta greets him and "seemed to express nothing but satisfaction at their safe return" (308). The storm changes things so much that after it has passed, "everyone was happy," as Chopin writes in the story's last line (308). Calixta, who was before depicted as an "over-scrupulous housewife," and Bobinôt and Bibi, who arrive full of "pathetic resignation," end up laughing together at the dinner table. Alcée writes a letter to his wife offering that she may stay at Biloxi if she wishes, and his wife Clarisse enjoys the "first free breath since her marriage" as it seems "to restore the pleasant liberty of her maiden days" (309). But a storm is not a concept or an idea; it has a physical dimension, and the physical aspect of this storm is transformative.

While weather in Chopin's stories create opportunities for self-expression and revelation, in some of Robert Frost's poems the weather creates a terrifying wilderness in a civilized and settled part of the country. "Storm Fear," from the 1913 collection *A Boy's Will*, is a good example of that weather-wilderness coming to a civilized area and making people feel powerless in a place in which they would normally be in control. The poem opens:

When the wind works against us in the dark,
And pelts with snow
The lower-chamber window on the east,

And whispers with a sort of stifled bark,
The beast,
“Come out! Come out!”— (ll. 1-6)

The storm in this poem is connected early on with the wild and with wild animals, for its wind is described as a “beast” that “works against us in the dark” and “whispers with sort of a stifled bark.” The word “beast” seems ambiguous on purpose to allow the reader to imagine it as any of the archetypal beasts the humans have faced: wolves, bears, Grendel, Sasquatch, Bogey-man, whatever. Like Grendel, this beast possesses an almost human intelligence, for it “pelts with snow / The lower-chamber window on the east” and calls “Come out! Come out!” The beast is personified as an arch-foe every bit as real as a hungry pack of wolves waiting outside stifling their own “barks.” But Frost does not explicitly carry this metaphor throughout the poem. The last personification of the storm is that “the cold creeps as the fire dies at length” (l. 12). Here, like a cat or other cautious predator, the cold seems to kill the fire that warms the speaker and his family.

As with other weather events, the storm is transformative, changing a farmyard into a wilderness to be feared. The speaker worries about “How drifts are piled, / Dooryard and road ungraded, / Till even the comforting barn grows far away” (ll. 13-15). The dooryard and road were certainly ungraded before the snow began and before the storm came but with the arrival of the snow, the condition of roads and property take on new meanings. The line about the barn is problematic in two ways. First, the barn can certainly not “grow far away” in any physical way, so the transformation of the barn’s position must be due to the way in which the snow alters the scenery to make the barn appear as if it is further away, and thus the distance must be psychological. Of course,

the barn becomes more difficult to reach in a blizzard than on a clear day due to the difficulties of the weather. While this barn is presumably in New England, prairie farmers often had to tie ropes between house and barn in the winter so that they could be assured of finding their way to the barn and back in a bad storm. The other problem in this line is the barn's description as "comforting." A logical explanation of the use of this adjective is that the barn likely held livestock, and perhaps a carriage, sleigh and horses, and extra food. But I suggest that the barn is also comforting because it is another building—something both large and human-made that stands against the wilderness of the storm. As the barn becomes harder and harder to see, the speaker becomes more and more isolated and at the mercy of the storm that cries for the family to "come out!"

A lesser poet might carry the personification of the storm through the poem as a matter of course, preferring to concentrate on the metaphysical conceit to the exclusion of other concerns, but Frost is, among other things, a modernist poet. So he turns inward at the midpoint of the poem, focusing on the impact of the situation on the speaker and his family. After the wind has called for the people to "come out!" the speaker responds that "It costs no inward struggle not to go." While this line works perfectly as an iambic pentameter line, the diction is odd, amounting almost to litotes, and suggests a certain pale ambivalence of the speaker, perhaps some vague echo of the call of the woods in "Stopping by Woods." But here there is no inward struggle and the decision "not to go" is an easy one, arrived at by the harshness of the storm and the speaker's own predicament. While he counts "our strength" as "two and a child," the voice of the other—presumably the wife and mother—never emerges nor is even alluded to. When in

the next line the speaker mentions “those of us not asleep,” the reader must wonder if he really means that the wife and speaker are awake or if the speaker really refers only to himself as both the person who is awake and who avoids the “inner struggle.” A different inner struggle emerges in the speaker by the end of the poem, however, as he admits that his “heart owns a doubt / Whether ’tis in us to arise with day / And save ourselves unaided” (ll. 16-18). In what begins as a poem about a family facing a daunting snowstorm, the speaker manages to turn the struggle with the weather inward. “Storm Fear” does not concern the fear the speaker experiences as a response to the storm, but the dread that is initiated by the storm. It is the anxiety created in the speaker when he realizes people are not as independent as they like to think they are, that they may not “save [them]selves unaided.” Frost does not say that the family is doomed but that they will need help in order to save themselves. This is the fearful epiphany that the storm has forced on the speaker. His road and dooryard, his barn, his cozy (but obviously drafty) house, his warming fire, are not enough to allow him to survive without the aid of others. At the end of the poem, he is as transformed as the landscape around him.

CHAPTER IV

PRIMITIVISM AND WILDERNESS: FROM INHUMANISM TO AMBIVALENCE

If we accept Janis Stout's assertion that all American literature is essentially Romantic, then it is also primitivistic (à la Rousseau), and concerns the human relation to nature. Romanticism is itself a colonialist and primitivist movement, for it recognizes that the viewer or writer is separate and different from the landscape and nature that is written about. Even when writers take pains to connect themselves with nature and landscape, their very ability to write about it indicts them in that separation. But this break from nature and landscape is likely to be so familiar to the contemporary reader that he or she may not be able to see the separation of nature as anything less than a ubiquitous paradigm that stands in for truth. How might today's American be expected to understand that she is inseparably connected to nature and environment, when she is driving down a broad interstate superhighway in an air-conditioned, well-built automobile at seventy miles an hour, talking on a cellular telephone and listening to her favorite music? It seems to defy logic to suggest that modern people, whether in 2000 or in 1920, are subject to nature and their environment in the same way in which early Native Americans were. Nevertheless, the modern feeling of separation from environment is only a conditioned response.

Consider how we conceptualize another aspect of our environment and existence—time. Except for a few theoretical physicists, few of us find the need to go

out of our way to prove that we exist in the present. We are so connected with our existence in the moment that we do not even consider other theoretical dimensions. We exist now—I at the moment I am typing this and you at the moment you are reading this—and we do not need to go out of our way to make the case because we exist so much in the present that we do not think of it. But given the right theoretical framework, the right conditioning, we might learn to feel separate from time in the same way in which we naively feel that we are separate from our environment. Similarly, Native Americans might find it useless to discuss an “I” and a “Nature” because they are one and the same. European American writers, however, even those who value the natural landscape, are forever separate from it, for they see nature and not-nature. Thoreau goes to the woods for it is to him a separate place from the city. There is, for him, Nature and Not-nature. So the Romantics are separate also from the people who are supposedly closer to nature (such as the “noble savages”) and characters such as Wordsworth’s leech gatherer and Thoreau’s woodsman.

This is precisely the position of the European American, for he or his ancestor comes to the continent of North America as an outsider, seeing everything and everyone as an other, as different. His or her desire for wilderness enlightenment is an ancient one, reflected in numerous myths of heroes venturing into the wilderness and returning to their society with some sort of boon. This desire to journey into the wilderness is often synonymous with the quest motif, which I will discuss in chapter four. This motif, however, cannot occur in European American works of wilderness without also assuming a structure that intimates conquest and colonialism (or a failure to conquer.) In other

words, the concept of nature and wilderness as a place that is *other* than what is normal and usual is deeply ingrained in the psyche of European Americans and European American writers. So while a character (say, Nick Adams, or London's frozen greenhorn, or Hurston's Janie Starks) may journey into the wilderness for individual and specific reasons, those characters cannot conceive of the wild landscape—the province of nature—as anything but foreign. Indeed, it is this very difference that makes the wilderness a place where European American writers and characters go to find epiphany and fulfillment.

The feeling that the wilderness holds special promise because it is inscrutable follows the “promised land” way of thinking that many American immigrants (of whatever era) shared in to moving to America. The very fact that there are wide and wild spaces allows these people to think of their lives outside of constraints imposed by the Old World (even though they often create the identical society in the new land). This way of thinking carries over into the ways that Americans who live in cities or towns see their relationship to wild places. “Getting away from it all” suggests that “it” resides in the city, with society and civilization, and that once one is able to “get away from” that civilization, some sort of change, refreshment, enlightenment, can occur. Certainly, this perspective is explicitly primitivist, a yearning for an Eden. It is this very line of thought that has allowed many European Americans to misunderstand and oppress Native Americans. Native Americans *must be out of place* to the Romantic and primitivist mind, for a true wilderness, a true Eden, cannot already be inhabited by culture, society, laws, trade and another *civilization*. The Romantic mind may thus react to Native Americans

in two ways: 1. As Noble Savages who are closer to God and nature, or 2. As interlopers in Eden who, by their very trespassing, are heathen. The first reaction is possible after they cease to be a threat. The second reaction allows for slaughter.

So, why focus on romanticism, primitivism, myth and wilderness with respect to turn-of-the-century and early twentieth-century writers? Primarily because these writers reflect a clash between the Romanticism of the nineteenth century and the anti-Romantic Naturalism and Modernism of the twentieth century. I'm not suggesting that we can differentiate clearly between these movements (or tendencies) but rather that the modernists both emphasize and oppose the romantic when they focus their novels, stories and poems on the wilderness as a way of showing their disillusionment with fractured modern society. If wilderness and wild-ness are the antithesis of and antidote to the civilized and decadent, it is only because of our separation from and conquest of the wild and natural. The yearning for wilderness as a place where we may be "whole beyond confusion" (in Frost's phrase) is only possible because it is alien to us.

Primitivist thinking has as one of its greatest flaws a blindness to any "confusion," insanity, depression, or unhappiness in "primitive" societies. If people who live more closely with nature are likely to also be closer to God, it must follow that they lead happier lives, and this belief is necessary for the primitivist, for if putatively primitive or simple peoples *do not* live significantly happier lives than city-dwelling folk, then the yearning for their lifestyle as antidote to the ills of everyday civilization is hollow. We should remember that Thoreau "went to the woods to live simply" but he also states that "I lived there two years and two months. At present I am a sojourner in civilized life

again” (3). Thoreau repeats the same wild/civilized dichotomy even though he refuses to be bound by it because he merely “sojourns” in civilized life.

The European American creates a vision of wilderness as charmed regardless of what might really be there. For American writers, wilderness functions as a place unfettered by societal constraints where epiphany or change may take place. Many of these writers, however, still endow the wilderness with powers and qualities approaching the Edenic. In this chapter, I discuss four writers whose response to primitivism in wilderness is representative of the continuum of response found in pre-modernist and modernist writers in general. Poet Robinson Jeffers, who espouses what he calls “inhumanism,” is clearly the most vehement adherent of this modernist primitivism. Jack London’s equating of humans and animals (with animals often being more respected) is less aggressive than Jeffers’ approach but strongly primitivist nonetheless. Hemingway’s vision of primitivism becomes blurred in “Indian Camp,” in which the Indians are certainly closer to nature than the European Americans but are no more noble and no more happy than the visiting whites. Finally, Willa Cather’s *O Pioneers!* reflects a great ambivalence towards primitivism. From chapter to chapter, page to page, and even paragraph to paragraph, Cather goes from appreciating nature, and those close to it, to valuing the restructuring of that respected nature. The structure of this chapter from strongly primitivist to ambivalently primitivist is intended to map the range of responses to wilderness by modernist writers in the early part of the century and not to suggest any developmental trend during that period.

American writers of the modernist period frequently adopted a primitivist stance when dealing with wilderness. Perhaps the most starkly primitivist American poet of this period is John Robinson Jeffers. Jeffers's theory of "Inhumanism" boldly asserts that civilization and society are corrupt and that people are, by and large, corrupt as well. Only the animals are without fault, exalted above the humans who are forever alienated from the connection to the earth, a connection which allows for genuine empathy. While Jeffers's long narrative poems make grander statements about classical allusions and incest, his shorter poems, such as "Hurt Hawks," "the Purse Seine," more directly express ways in which Jeffers tends to value animals and wilderness over people and civilization.

In "Hurt Hawks," (1928) the narrator reflects on a wounded hawk that he first feeds and then shoots in an act of euthanasia, Jeffers states that he'd "sooner, except the penalties, kill a man than a hawk" (l. 18). Here, Jeffers moves beyond a Romantic appreciation for nature and wildlife as a continuation of pantheistic presence and even moves beyond the Naturalism of Stephen Crane, which saw humans and animals as equal participants in a world with no clear purpose. If Jeffers here is similar to any of the naturalists it would be Jack London, who praised instinct above learning in "To Build a Fire" and *Call of the Wild*. But even London did not go so far as to value animals above people. In this line, the speaker acknowledges that only civilization, which enacts "the penalties," keeps him from killing men rather than hawks. The speaker points out that civilized people "do not know [the wild God], or you have forgotten him; / Intemperate and savage, the hawk remembers him; / Beautiful and wild, the hawks, and men that are dying, remember him" (ll. 15-17). By asserting that those who are most savage are

closest to God, the speaker is paraphrasing a basic primitivist belief, and he extends this belief by granting a knowledge of God not only to “savages” but also and ultimately to animals.

“New Mexican Mountain” also figures civilization as something to be shunned, this time as a “transient sickness” that afflicts young Native Americans at Taos. In this poem, the speaker watches “the Indians dancing to help the young corn at Taos pueblo” (l. 1). Jeffers allies himself with primitivists in general by observing “Indians” and by granting that they are “help[ing] the young corn” with their dancing. He understands the cosmic reasons for dancing instead of saying that he is merely “watching the Indians dancing” or “watching a pagan dance.” Further, the mention of Taos, at which fellow primitivist D. H. Lawrence lived for a time, connects Jeffers with Lawrence and his tradition. But the poem is not a meditation on the purity of the Indian dancers but on how civilization has corrupted the Indian youth. “The old men [who] squat in a ring / And make the song” (ll. 1-2) represent those Taos Indians who are untouched by the “sickness” of civilization. They form a cosmic and archetypal shape, “a ring” and are creators as they “make the song.”

Those who dance, however, the young ones, are impostors, shamed by civilization. In the poem, the generative ability belongs to the old men, who, according to *The Golden Bough*, should be the non-generative ones (Frazer 309). But at this dance it is the young who seem inadequate, “the young women with fat bare arms, and a few shamefaced young men, shuffle the dance” (l. 2). The “fat bare arms” suggest that the women are unacquainted with work and unhealthy. They and the young men, who have

been taught by civilization to be ashamed of such rituals, who are “shamefaced,” do not “make” the dance as the old men make the song, but “shuffle the dance” as old men might. Although the young men seem to fit the image of Native American warrior, “lean muscled . . . naked to the narrow loins, their breasts and backs daubed with white clay, / Two eagle feathers plume their black heads” (ll. 3-4), they “dance with reluctance” and “grow civilized.” There is a difference between the images they create and the identities they own. “Civilization” creates duplicity.

The representation of Native Americans thus far carries only an implication of primitivist leanings, but the rest of the poem explicitly states Jeffers’s preference for the primitive as that of higher value. “Only the drum is confident,” the speaker says, for the drum is “the beating heart, the simplest of rhythms,” “only a dreamer, a brainless heart.” By connecting the drum with the beat of the heart, Jeffers connects it with most basic rhythm of every human (and non-human) being. And by identifying the drum/heart as having an archetypal rhythm, he reinforces the idea that the dance and the song, both of which depend on the beat of the drum, are more valuable than the civilization which tries to eclipse them. By calling the drum a “dreamer, a brainless heart,” Jeffers emphasizes the emotion of primitives over the cold logic of the civilized people who have lost their ability to feel deeply connected with the earth (they cannot understand how a dance is generative nor how their dancing may help the corn.).¹ These civilized people appear in

¹ We must acknowledge the stereotype at work here. “Civilization” is no more coldly logical than any other society. In civilized cities, people beat each other up, riots break out, people make love. And in Native American societies, people discuss carefully—some would say more carefully than in Anglo-American society—what is to be done about problems affecting the tribe. Jeffers, then, is identifying the emotional with that which is non-civilized and the inability to be emotional (think perhaps of T. S. Eliot’s “The Hollow Men” or “The Fire Sermon” section of “The Waste Land”) with civilization.

the poem in the form of tourists “watching the dance, white Americans, hungry too, with reverence” (l. 7). Their hunger for what they watch shows the failure of civilization to appeal to their most primal needs; they are “Pilgrims from civilization, anxiously seeking beauty, religion, poetry, pilgrims from the vacuum” (l. 8). The use of “pilgrim” is ironic here, for they are pilgrims from the civilization created by the Pilgrims, whose ancestors (and indeed the Pilgrims themselves) exploited Native Americans to eventually create the “vacuum” from which they are seeking to escape. Jeffers implies that “beauty, religion, poetry” all reside away from civilization, in the primitive societies; the tourists are “anxious to be human again,” which says clearly that civilization dehumanizes people.

In the end of the poem, however, the Indians are “emptied” by the Americans seeking their own humanity. The poem concludes with the reminder, which only the drum, the mountain, and the speaker seem to realize, “that civilization is a transient sickness” (l. 12). Both the Taos mountain and the hawk in “Hurt Hawks” are primitivist symbols of wilderness. The hawk is so inalienably wild that it cannot be civilized even to save its own life. The Taos mountain itself is a place which is anti-civilization, a place to which the white tourists must come to see the Native Americans dance. The Native Americans, however, as human beings, are subject to the same alienation from the Earth as are the white tourists who are “anxious to be human again,” a suggestion that humanity and civilization are not inextricably linked. As with some of the other modernist literature of this period, the pilgrimage, both inner and outer, to the wilderness is found over and over again to be necessary by the characters in stories and poems in order to find peace with themselves, and to discover an identity outside of the constrictions of

civilization. This recurring theme in American literature becomes even more vital for modernist writers who feel cut off from other human beings, from God, the environment, and even from themselves.

Jack London wrote his best works twenty or thirty years before Jeffers wrote “Hurt Hawks” and “Taos Mountain,” and London is often grouped among naturalist writers rather than modernists. However, London’s work bears discussion here because of its often primitivist stance and because it closely precedes works by Hemingway and Jeffers and is contemporary with some of Robert Frost and Willa Cather’s work.

Although theorists have usefully classified London as a naturalist, his work contributed to the ideas about wilderness in circulation at the turn of the century that had a great impact on the work of modernist writers.

While it may be easiest to discuss *Call of the Wild* in relationship to primitivism and wilderness, I first wish to discuss the way in which London shows a preference for animal instinct over human intellectualism in the 1908 short story “To Build a Fire.” The title itself indicates a concern for an elemental humanness, the major thing that sets us apart from animals: the ability to make tools and control certain elemental aspects of our environment.² This title, written in the infinitive tense, does not assume that the builder of the fire will succeed. The building of the fire for warmth is a problem to be overcome by a human animal, which may or may not be civilized enough (or may be too civilized) to accomplish it. By calling the protagonist of this story a human animal, I am

² It is certainly true that some animals make rudimentary tools. The chimpanzee fashions sticks with which to extract termites from mounds and shrikes impale their food on the thorny acacia while they eat. The ability to control and create fire, however, rises significantly above the impressive abilities of chimps and shrikes.

consciously reflecting on London's naturalist bent to view humans and animals as one large group of earthbound animals, none of whom is more intrinsically valuable than the other. London's clear preference for the abilities of the canine in this story reflects a primitivist stance: the dog is better prepared to deal with the environment because he relies on instinct, because he is closer to wildness than the man. The story also implies that the man would have survived if he were less civilized, for it is his civilized nature that leads him to making fatal mistakes.

In "To Build a Fire," a man who is a "newcomer to the land, a *chechaquo*" (462) and his dog, "a big native husky, the proper wolf-dog, gray-coated and without any visible or temperamental difference from its brother, the wild wolf," set out to make a trek of some thirty miles in bitter cold (464). But even "bitter cold" does not describe the life-threatening temperature of seventy-five below zero Fahrenheit. The man has been told by an "old timer at Sulfur Creek" that it would be best to stay put rather than traveling at such a time; he also knows that he is flouting local wisdom by traveling alone (470). Eventually wetting his feet by stepping through some ice, after two attempts at building a fire, he freezes to death. The dog goes unsympathetically elsewhere for "other food-providers and fire-providers" (478). While this plot affirms the dog's superior ability to survive in its environment, London makes more explicit statements that show the customary superiority of animal instinct to civilized human reasoning.

London further explains the separation between humans and nature, logic and instinct, in *The Call of the Wild*. The first chapter, in which Buck is stolen from his comfortable, civilized home in California, is entitled "Into the Primitive," an indication of

the movement of the novella from civilized in the beginning to fully wild and primitive by the end. This final transition to the primitive centers on Buck's relationship to the wildness of the north and to John Thornton, a prospector who rescues an emaciated Buck from a trio of *chechaquos*, newcomers to the north who have overloaded their sled and overburdened their sled dogs to the point of killing some of them. Buck and the rest of the dogs become "perambulating skeletons" (sic) (69). The three people croon over their apparent success in coming as far as they had despite the warnings from longtime residents about traveling when hidden ice was such a treacherous threat. When Thornton realizes that it "was idle . . . to get between a fool and his folly," the three attempt to rouse the dogs for the continuation of their trip (71). Despite lashing from a whip and then a beating with a club, Buck refuses to rise, sensing that "disaster was close at hand, out there ahead on the ice where his master was trying to drive him" (72). Angered by the beating Buck is getting, Thornton "sprang on the man who wielded the club" and threatens, "If you strike that dog again, I'll kill you" (72). After Thornton cuts Buck from his traces, the three move on and their "dogs and humans disappear" into the ice; "A yawning hole was all that was to be seen" (74). So, John Thornton with his "rough, kindly hands" nurses Buck back to health and the two become friends. Indeed, Buck's love for Thornton symbolizes the pull between wilderness / primitivism and civilization:

In spite of the great love he bore John Thornton, which seemed to bespeak the soft civilizing influence, the strain of the primitive, which the Northland had aroused in him, remained alive and active. Faithfulness and devotion, things born of fire and roof, were his; yet he retained his wildness and wiliness. He was a thing of the wild, come in from the wild to sit by John Thornton's fire, rather than a dog of the soft Southland stamped with the marks of generations of civilization. (76)

The connection between the wilderness and the primitive that is implied in “To Build a Fire,” “New Mexican Mountain,” and “Hurt Hawks” is stated explicitly here. “The strain of the primitive, which the Northland had aroused in him” clearly establishes the northern wilderness as a dwelling place of primitive feelings, and from the beginning of the novella, Buck becomes more and more primitive, relies more and more on his instincts, and he is more willing to fight, kill, and steal, the further north he goes.

In chapter seven London articulates this connection between wilderness and primitivism even more explicitly. In this last chapter of the novella, a group of Yeehat Indians has killed Thornton, his partner Hans, and the other dogs belonging to Hans and Thornton. Buck returns to find the carnage and when he sees that Thornton must have been killed, “a gust of overpowering rage swept over him . . . it was the last time in his life he allowed passion to usurp cunning and reason and it was because of his great love for John Thornton that he lost his head” (97). Buck attacks “the Yeehats . . . [who are] dancing about the wreckage of the spruce-bough lodge” (97). His destruction of them and their inability to resist his attacks shows that Buck, a dog and animal, is a better survivor than they are. This is an important distinction, for those who follow a Rousseauvian primitivism are wont to regard natives in the wilderness as closer to nature and thus to be emulated, or at least to yearn for the natives’ ostensible innocence. London, however, shows the Yeehats to be no better than the whites they kill. When Buck attacks them, they exhibit an unsterotypical confusion, “tangled together so that they shot one another with the arrows; and one young hunter, hurling a spear at Buck in mid air, drove it through the chest of another hunter . . .” (98). They do not show the

proWess of a hunting party or of a raiding party, but are only men as out of control as the man in “To Build a Fire” in the face of a danger from the wilderness. When they “fled in terror to the woods, proclaiming as they fled the advent of the Evil Spirit,” they show a lack of connection with the nature around them. What is animal and most connected with nature and wildness, they identify instead with the world of spirits, rather than with their own world. London asserts Buck’s superiority over the more “civilized people” after Buck has triumphed: “[men] were not match at all, were it not for their arrows and spears and clubs” (98).

Ernest Hemingway seems less certain of his feelings toward primitivism than London or Jeffers. Indeed, “Malcolm Cowley had called Ernest [Hemingway] much more than a naturalistic descendant of Theodore Dreiser and Jack London” (qtd. in Baker 621). Whether Hemingway’s approach to nature makes him more of an artist or less of a primitivist, his approach to Native Americans and to the wild as a place which is closer to God than civilization emerges both in his early and later fiction. “Indian Camp,” the second story of Hemingway’s first book-length work, *In Our Time*, is a good place to consider his view of Native Americans. One might expect him to view them either as “noble savages” who are closer to the earth than Europeans, or merely as less civilized people. However, this story, as with much of his work, complicates this potential dichotomy. In “Indian Camp,” Nick Adams, then about twelve, and his doctor father row across a lake in order to assist an Indian woman who is having childbirth complications. Nick’s father does a Cesarean section with a jackknife and uses gut leaders for sutures. During the operation, the pregnant woman’s husband commits suicide in the bunk above

by cutting his own throat. Nick, his father, and his uncle then row back across the lake. At first glance, this story seems to portray the Indian man and woman as merely poor human beings who are unable to cope ordinary (though important) life events. The Indian man, who is almost a non-character, is distinguished early on by his inaction: “In the upper bunk was her husband. He had cut his foot very badly with an ax three days before. He was smoking a pipe” (16). Near the end of the story, he appears to be so distressed by his wife’s difficult birth and the necessary Cesarean section that he cuts his own throat. His suicide seems to be a drastic and cowardly action, for he is unable to deal not with his own pain but with another’s.

Given Hemingway’s standard focus on bravery and perseverance, this man comes out as a failure. He is both inept with tools (for he cuts himself) and is a coward (since he cannot endure his wife’s suffering even though it turns out well). G. Thomas Tanselle argues that the Indian father feels “guilty for causing so much pain in the one he loves” and gives as support the line from the story which says that the Indian father had “cut his foot very badly with an ax three days before.” Tanselle argues that this wounding is “surely a Freudian accident, a manifestation of an unconscious castration wish resulting from his guilt feelings” (144). Tanselle forgets, however, that at the time the story takes place, the woman had only been “trying to have her baby for two days” (“Indian Camp” 16), so that the Indian father cannot have symbolically “castrated” himself over any guilt for his wife’s complicated pregnancy. Further, because the Indian man here is one of a group of “bark peelers,” it seems logical that such wounds would be common among men working with axes. Tanselle’s assertion that the man’s “frustration is increased because

he can do nothing for his wife, while Doctor Adams and Uncle George . . . can successfully take charge of this family crisis” provides a clearer and more pointed reading of the Indian man’s situation (144). This reading also supports one of the main motifs of *In Our Time*, that of having no control over situations that have deadly or potentially deadly conclusions. Curiously, Tanselle’s reading is sometimes even more primitivist than Hemingway’s story, for he identifies the Indian man as a “representative of a less developed culture; he feels more frustration than a white man over the unnatural birth and the necessity for outside intervention” (144).

In “Indian Camp” itself, the hints that the Indians are “less developed” are veiled at best. The description of the cabin as smelling bad and the woman’s biting Uncle George might be seen as indications of savage living conditions and behavior, but these descriptions are really no more savage than a poor rural household of European or African Americans. The living conditions in the first part of Faulkner’s “The Bear” are similarly uncivilized but there is no suggestion here of the people there being “representative of a less developed culture” as Tanselle says about “Indian Camp.” Young Ike McCaslin eats “the coarse, rapid food—the shapeless sour bread, the wild strange meat, venison and bear and turkey and coon which he had never tasted before—which men ate, cooked by men who were hunters first and cooks afterward; he slept in harsh sheetless blankets as hunters slept” (Faulkner 190). The men here choose to live in primitive conditions, but they are not seen as underdeveloped. Certainly, they decide to live in the cabin while hunting, but their ethnicity, even that of Sam Fathers, who is part Chickasaw, does not define their level of social development. Tanselle’s reading of

Hemingway's Indians as "underdeveloped" says more about Tanselle's approach to Native Americans and primitivism than does Hemingway's story in which the Indian man plays a minor but important part. For example, we know fairly little about the woman whose pregnancy sets the story in motion; we know that she has suffered with a breech pregnancy for two days, that she screams because she is in pain and that she "bit Uncle George on the arm"(17) while he was holding her down during the operation. Afterwards, she is so exhausted that she does not "know what had become of her baby or anything" (18). These unflattering portrayals of Native Americans are far from the adoration heaped upon Noble Savages by Romantic writers. They are not the merely human Yeehats of London's *Call of the Wild* nor the drained Pueblos of Jeffers' "New Mexican Mountain." Hemingway even points out that the hut in "Indian Camp" "smelled bad." But, again, Hemingway is frequently not that simple.

Although the Indians in this story are not Noble Savages, they experience the most primitive aspects of all human experience, and it is necessary in this story for Nick to visit them and experience them. Nick and his father must cross a lake, an explicit boundary from the civilized other side of the lake where Nick lives. In order to experience the mysteries of birth and death, Nick must visit people closer to these mysteries, and thus closer to nature itself. It is not their ethnicity that makes them closer to nature but their situation. For Nick, what is most important is his experience of birth and death, not the birth and death of Indians. Although "Indian Camp" would be a different story to the reader and critic if it were set in a poor mining camp with European Americans in the place of Indians, the story's essential facts, the birth and suicide, would

be the same for Nick, who had not yet experienced these things. This is not romantic primitivism but a primitivist view that acknowledges a separation between the civilized and sterile and the primitive and Ur-human, whatever the race or ethnicity of the civilized and the primitive.

If Jeffers represents one end of a continuum in his attitudes toward and uses of primitivism, and London and Hemingway represent the middle ground, Willa Cather occupies its other end. Unlike these other writers, Cather does not embrace wilderness as a transformative place; rather, she sees the wilderness as a landscape to be altered, domesticated. If the wilderness can be transformative at all, it is only in the experience of the pioneer breaking sod and his own back in order to tame it. This approach contrasts with the ways in which Hemingway and others see the wilderness as a place to (again in Frost's words) "be whole again beyond confusion." In *O Pioneers!*, published in 1913, after London's "To Build a Fire" and Jewett's "A White Heron" but well before Hemingway's *In Our Time* and Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the most obvious primitive character is Crazy Ivar. Ivar lives not in a true wilderness but on a frontier, "in the rough country across the county line, where no one lived but some Russians . . . in the most inaccessible place he could find" (Cather 34). His house is actually part of the natural landscape, a hovel carved into a bank of clay with a sod roof which one "could have walked over . . . without dreaming that you were near a human habitation" (36). So much a part of nature is Crazy Ivar that Cather's speaker equates his impact on that landscape only with that of other animals, which he loves and protects: "Ivar had lived for three years in the clay bank, without defiling the face of nature any

more than the coyote that had lived there before him had done” (36). Ivar is truly a primitive for he asserts a connection between spiritual enlightenment and the wilderness: “[he] best expressed his preference for his wild homestead by saying that his Bible seemed truer to him there” (38). For Ivar, the wilder the place the closer he is to the spiritual.

Given the approach of Cather’s protagonist, Alexandra, to the land, one would think that Cather would work to establish Crazy Ivar as a crackpot. But Ivar seems to be a focal point for Cather’s ambivalent primitivism. On one hand, she *does* work to show him as unconventional. As Alexandra, Lou and Oscar are traveling to Ivar’s to get a hammock, they pass a lagoon where “wild ducks rose with a whirr of wings” (35). Lou wishes aloud that he had his gun and suggests that he could have hidden it in the wagon, since he knows of Ivar’s (illogical) prohibition of guns on his property. Alexandra warns Lou that “they say he can smell dead birds” (35), almost as if she is talking about a wild man rather than a hammock-maker. Lou denigrates Ivar further by saying “Whoever heard of him talking sense anyhow! I’d rather have ducks for supper than Crazy Ivar’s tongue.” Rather than taking any of Ivar’s habits too seriously, however, “they all laughed again and Oscar urged the horses up the crumbling side of a clay bank” (35). In this section, Ivar is effectively established as a crackpot, for his odd abilities (to “smell dead birds”), for his strange prohibition of guns, and for being ridiculous enough in general to elicit the laughter of those who talk about him. Ivar’s craziness should be enough to dismiss him and his beliefs about nature and wilderness as being at least impractical and at most insanity.

However, Cather's speaker acknowledges that "if one stood in the doorway of his cave, and looked off at the rough land, the smiling sky, the curly grass white in the hot sunlight; if one listened to the rapturous song of the lark, the drumming of the quail, the burr of the locust against that vast silence, one understood what Ivar meant" when he said that his "Bible seemed truer to him there" (38). In a lyrical sentence, Cather changes Crazy Ivar into a character who is understood by the reader, even if the majority of the characters in the novel and especially the protagonist, will lead lives antithetical to the one Ivar leads in his cave. Only a page later, however, Ivar "smile[s] foolishly" when he caresses the horses and talks about the birds in the pond. Towards the end of the novel, when Alexandra is head of her household, she demands that the old and decrepit Ivar come to live with her and care for her horses. It is she who takes great pains to protect Ivar when he exclaims "there has been talk . . . about sending me away to an asylum" (91). Alexandra is obviously protective of him for she tells him "You know I would never consent to such a thing" (91); she seems here to support his independence and his philosophy.

Cather's description of him immediately after, however, makes him seem like a tamed animal rather than a man whose views should be respected. "Ivar," she writes, "lifted his shaggy head and looked at her out of his little eyes" (91). The description in this line works to make Ivar out to be less a human whose wisdom is worthy of respect (he's renowned for his ability to heal animals) and more of a brute that Alexandra has taken in and saved from a miserable existence. The "shaggy head" suggests not necessarily hair but fur and the way that he "looks at her out of little eyes" infers a small

intelligence looking out from deep inside a larger body. The “little eyes” suggest a certain animal lack of understanding, as if he were the same badger to which people compare him. It is difficult to know quite what meaning Cather expects us to take from the character of Crazy Ivar. On the one hand, Ivar seems to exemplify the benefits of living close to nature. He is compassionate, productive, clean and a healer; on the other hand, he is a small-minded, animal-like crackpot. Cather remains purposefully ambivalent about the virtues or drawbacks of the primitivist approach to wilderness in her depiction of Crazy Ivar.

Cather continues this ambivalence in her depiction of Carl Linstrum, the love-interest of protagonist Alexandra Bergson. Alexandra clearly finds the true work of the world to be that of making the plains into arable farmland, but Carl Lindstrom clearly benefits from his Jack Londonesque sojourn to Alaska to take part in “the last great adventure” of the Klondike gold rush. Linstrum is an aspiring engraver and the son of a pioneer farmer whose land abuts the Bergsons'. Linstrum's father, however, proves not to have the endurance to persevere against the harshness of the prairie. The father gets “his old job back in the cigar factory” in St. Louis and Carl finds a position where he can “learn engraving with a German engraver there” (50). He retreats from the job of taming the wilderness into Old World craftsmanship (cigar making and engraving), into cities with Old World enclaves, and that represent the great American cities of the future. Carl runs away not only from the wilderness, but from any primitivist suggestion that the wilderness might offer some sort of cure for unhappiness, malaise, or poverty. Even though Carl is leaving the frontier and not an actual wilderness, it is the wilderness aspect

of the frontier that breaks his father—the work is too hard, the environment too harsh. And while Linstrum *père* simply retreats to what he knew before, Carl looks, like a country mouse, toward St. Louis, Chicago and eventually New York, where he ends up, as places of opportunity that offer happiness and prosperity. But this apparently anti-wilderness and anti-primitivist move is just a feint, for after sixteen years, Linstrum comes back on his way to Alaska. “I’m going there to get rich,” he says. “Engraving’s a very interesting profession, but a man never makes any money at it. So I’m going to try the gold fields” (109).

In fact, as Alexandra notices, the city has taken a toll on him. “His back, with its high, sharp shoulders, looked like the back of an overworked German professor off on his holiday. His face was intelligent, sensitive, unhappy” (115). The promise of the city has proved hollow, and Carl has become or has just escaped becoming what Eliot would later call a hollow man. While Lou and Oscar Bergson, Alexandra’s brothers, initially scoff at Carl’s citified “yellow shoes,” and of the dangers of the city, they are also skeptical of the “Terrible cold winters, there” in Alaska. Lou and Oscar prize neither the bustle of the city nor the privations of the wilderness. Their comfort is in the provinciality of their own successful farm. Carl, however, is in need of a stake to prove himself worthy of the now-rich Alexandra, so that people won’t see him as only marrying Alexandra for her money: “I cannot even ask you to give me a promise until I have something to offer you,” he tells her (181-82). “I must have something to show for myself. To take what you would give me [her wealth] I should have to be either a very large man or a very small one, and I am only in the middle class” (182). Carl’s plan to go

off to Alaska is not only so that he may get rich but for a more important purpose—so that he may transcend his place in the social stratum of their community.

I have discussed earlier how the wilderness is a place where relationships are inverted. The Alaskan wilderness exerts a positive and obvious change on Carl, although Cather writes that he had “changed very little. His cheeks were browner and fuller. He looked less like a tired scholar than when he went away a year ago, but no one, even now, would have taken him for a man of business. His soft, lustrous black eyes, his whimsical smile, would be less against him in the Klondike than on the Divide” (300-01). While Cather states that he has “changed very little,” the changes in Carl seem to be the ones that matter. He has found some sort of geographical cure in Alaska that has allowed him to be the adventurer and dreamer that he always seemed to be, the person whose dreaminess would be held “against him . . . on the Divide” but not in the Klondike. His post-Klondike description exudes health and happiness, whereas his post-New York description suggests waste, unhappiness, a lack of true purpose.

Perhaps most importantly, when Carl returns to Alexandra, he does so from selfless duty and compassion. He hears that Alexandra’s neighbor and friend has been murdered by her husband, and he decides that he can reach her as quickly as a letter can, traveling continuously for four weeks. When he goes to the city it takes him sixteen years to return to her, but after less than a year in the wilderness, Carl’s mind is sufficiently cleared so that he leaves all of his affairs hanging in Alaska (“I have an honest partner” he says unconvincingly) and comes to Alexandra as he has wanted to all along. The principal lesson the character of Carl conveys is that the agricultural frontier

doesn't work as a cure, the city doesn't work as a cure, but the wilderness can work as an almost magic elixir that shows people (or at least men) who they are and allows them to act on their long-held desires.

Alexandra Bergson's relationship to the land is Cather's most ambivalent statement about the primitivist view of the frontier, for Alexandra sees the unsettled land of the frontier—its wild aspect—as an opportunity for a better life, an opportunity to raise the station of her family. While this view may support a reading of her character as one who embraces the primitivist ideal of virgin land as a new Eden, Alexandra sees the land not as something that has value in itself but as a space of kinetic value, a place that has the potential to become redemptive, but only with human intervention. “Down there they have a little certainty,” she says, “but up with us there is a big chance” (Cather 64). It must be cultivated, tamed and domesticated in order for it to be the useful place that Alexandra regards it. Cather titles “Part One” of *O Pioneers!* “The Wild Land.” This wildness is the unforgiving wildness so dangerous to pioneers, not the Edenic landscape of the Romantics or the place of insight and introspection that Thoreau finds in *Walden* but the realm of dangerous emptiness that can kill people. This dangerous aspect is described early in this chapter: “The great fact was the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its sombre wastes . . . men were too weak to make any mark here . . . the land wanted to be let alone, to preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar, savage kind of beauty, its interrupted mournfulness” (15). As in Frost's “Directive,” the land assumes volition, identity, and

even malevolence; it becomes a monster of great proportions being slowly overrun by Lilliputians.

On the other hand, the land has an interest in its own “preservation,” a word that resonates in the political climate of 1913, when *O Pioneers!* was published and Congress and Woodrow Wilson made their anti-preservationist decision to damn the Hetch Hetchy valley. The national and congressional debates about Hetch Hetchy, which raged in different forms from around 1900 to 1913, pitted utilitarianism against preservation. Secretary of the Interior James R. Garfield wrote in 1908 that “domestic use is the highest use to which water and available storage basis . . . can be put” (qtd. in Nash 161). President Theodore Roosevelt reflected Cather’s ambivalence more clearly in 1901 when he said that “Forest protection is not an end in itself; it is a means to increase and sustain the resources of our country and the industries which depend on them.” In the same speech, however, he reveals the importance of the forests as “preserves for the wild forest creatures” (qtd. in Nash 162-63). So it is not surprising that Cather reflects this attitude towards the wilderness in *O Pioneers!* and specifically in the passage cited above.

If Cather inherits her ambivalent view of wilderness from Roosevelt and the rest of the country (or at least merely shares that view), then Alexandra inherits her view of the wilderness from her mother: “Alexandra often said that if her mother were cast upon a desert island, she would thank God for her deliverance, make a garden and find something to preserve” (Cather 29). In order to thank God for deliverance after being cast upon a “desert island,” Mrs. Bergson (*mère*) would need to see the island as a refuge from some greater “desert” situation, namely, the sea. The “desert island” becomes both

desert wilderness and oasis, certainly an oxymoron. Mrs. Bergson's reaction to the island, however, is not to value it for whatever it holds that is primeval and pure but to "make a garden," to tame and domesticate it. The rest of Alexandra's sentence, however, implies a certain amount of ambivalence, or at least a punning ambivalence. After "making a garden," she would "find something to preserve." While the first and most immediate meaning for "preserve" is synonymous with "can," the vagueness of "find something" leads the reader back to the argument of wild land as something to be utilized or wild land as something to be preserved. This ambivalence is strengthened when in the same paragraph, Mrs. Bergson, the tamer of islands and creator of gardens (like God?), is described "looking for fox grapes and goose plums, like a wild creature in search of prey" (29).

Alexandra acts out her mother's little fantasy in her work on their farm. With all its harsh weather, the landscape itself is the sea from which they find sanctuary, and the Bergson farm and "Neighboring Fields" (Cather's title for Part II) are the desert island of her mother's reverie. By chapter five of part one, the land has killed her father by exacting hard work from him, and her mother has become frail, leaving Alexandra, the eldest and the one entrusted with farming wisdom by her father, as the one who must run the farm. In this last chapter of "The Wild Land," Alexandra takes a more logical approach than her father to dealing with the land: "Alexandra and Emil spent five days down among the river farms, driving up and down the valley. Alexandra talked to the men about their crops and to the women about their poultry. She spent a whole day with one young farmer who had been away at school, and who was experimenting with a new

kind of clover hay. She learned a great deal” (64). By learning about techniques and approaches to farming, both new and traditional, Alexandra uses intellect rather than the sweat of her brow to deal with the land.

This new perspective—being apart from the land rather than a part of it as her father had been in his toil—allows Alexandra to see it anew as she returns home. Her re-visioning of the land is akin to the difference between seeing from ground level and seeing from the air. She sees it not as a minor adversary or even as a participant in a struggle but rather as a conqueror, someone who held a Biblical view of her ability to hold dominion over it:

When the road began to climb the first long swells of the Divide, Alexandra hummed an old Swedish hymn, and Emil wondered why his sister looked so happy. Her face was so radiant that he felt shy about asking her. For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning. It seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious. Her eyes drank in the breadth of it, until her tears blinded her. Then the Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit which breathes across it, must have bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before. The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman. (65)

At first, this passage seems like a clearly primitivist expression of longing for the wilderness, even a Romantic yearning. Alexandra is brought to tears by the beauty of the place, which creates “love and yearning” within her. She imagines that it has some sort of benevolent spirit, “the Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit,” which bends down to her in kindness. She describes the landscape that killed her father and is forcing others away by its harshness as “rich and strong and glorious.”

But this view is tempered by a countercurrent in Alexandra's thought. What has changed in the situation of the novel that allows Alexandra to see the land as beautiful when her father and the other local farmers see it as harsh? Alexandra has had an epiphany in the wilderness, but it is not the same one experienced by Hurston's Janie Woods, Hemingway's Nick Adams, Rawlings' Jody, or London's greenhorn. Those characters achieve new understanding of their lives during their encounters with the wilderness's power and their new perspective of their own subsidiary place in the world. By learning new ways in which to farm, Alexandra has come to a very different epiphany, for she sees the world in a completely new way: she realizes that she can order, dominate, and domesticate her wilderness. Although she calls the Genius of the Divide a "great, free spirit," it is really much more like a genie in a bottle, for it "must have bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before." It bends down not as a benevolent god offering land to a chosen people but as a spirit that has been captured and conquered. It bends "to a human will," to Alexandra's own desire to see the land as farmland that will work for her and her family. Whereas in *The Yearling*, for example, where Jody learns what it is to starve in the wilderness and thus learns humility, Alexandra bends the Genius of the Divide down to her, to make it do her will.

And yet it is too simple to say merely that Alexandra wants to dominate the land. On the last two pages of "The Wild Land" section, after she has decided to mortgage the farm to buy more property (which she can then develop), she admires the stars—perhaps the last wilderness: "She always loved to watch them, to think of their vastness and distance, and of their ordered march. It fortified her to reflect upon the great operations

of nature, and when she thought of the law that lay behind them, she felt a sense of personal security. That night she had a new consciousness of the country, felt almost a new relation to it" (70-71). Her admiration of the stars is central to a theory of the Burkean sublime, "vastness and distance," but no sooner has she admired this sublimity than she also admires "their ordered march" and "the great operations of nature," as if the stars' march and nature's operations were part of a humanly conceived army or machine. She hints at a Neoclassical philosophy of *deus ex machina* when she continues to say that she finds security in "the law that lay behind them." Valuing the sublimity of the stars, in the same breath, she imagines nature as something ordered, something that can be understood; and if something can be understood, it can be manipulated and conquered. Alexandra, moves again towards a primitivist view of wilderness when she calls "the chirping of the insects down the long grass . . . the greatest music. She felt as if her heart were hiding down there , somewhere, with the quail and the plover and all the little wild things that crooned or buzzed in the sun" (71). She is at once part of the land itself and ready to usurp that land from the "little wild things" with which she identifies.

The next chapter, (the first chapter of the "Neighboring Fields" section), takes place some fifteen years later, and Alexandra and her brothers are prosperous. They have built a fine house, and Cather catalogues the house and its belongings. There is nothing special in this behavior; although many women worked the fields on the frontier, the patriarchal view of a woman's place on the frontier is typically in the house or in the milking barn. Once the description moves away from the house, however, Cather depicts the land as domesticated.

When you go out of the house into the flower garden, there you feel again the order and fine arrangement manifest all over the great farm; in the fencing and hedging, in the windbreaks and sheds, in the symmetrical pasture ponds, planted with scrub willows to give shade to the cattle in fly-time. There is even a white row of beehives in the orchard, under the walnut trees. You feel that, properly, Alexandra's house is the big out-of-doors, and that it is in the soil that she expresses herself best. (84)

The description reflects a pastoral ordering of the land, similar to that in the East or the Old World. For Alexandra the latter would be Sweden, but this ordering is quite typical of the nineteenth-century English pastoral countryside as well. Such a description would be the culmination of any story about a farmer who successfully turns unbroken land into a good farm. Cather, however, goes one better and allows Alexandra not only to order the land as a man might do, but to domesticate it; the farm is described not in terms of a country or business but in terms of a house. Cather writes that "Alexandra's house is the big out-of-doors," making Alexandra not merely a woman who does the same as men, but a housekeeper of the outdoors, a woman who does outside a version of what she does inside.

Modernist and pre-modernist (or naturalist) writers like London, Jeffers, Hemingway, and Cather approach primitivism in various ways as they negotiate with a continuing response to the romanticism that seems ingrained in the American experience. It is difficult to draw any uniform generalizations about how modernist writers of this time treat primitivism, but it is clear that a variable construction of primitivism characterizes their approach to the wilderness in a time in which wilderness and primitivism have become outmoded or moot. While London's turn-of-the-century

parables use a naturalist/primitivist trope to discuss class struggle and the human place in the natural world, thirty years later, Jeffers focuses on humanity's inherent unfitness to live in that natural world. Writing ten years apart, Cather and Hemingway echo each other's ambivalence about nature and reveal different perspectives on the primitive. Despite the purposeful face that some critics create for the modernist movement, the way in which its writers confront primitivism shows a group of writers responding with uncertainty to a Romantic past that continues to haunt their work.

CHAPTER V

THE QUEST MOTIF AND WILDERNESS: CHANGE, GROWTH AND EPIPHANY

“Today, in a world where the external wild has been all but exterminated, it is more crucial than ever to recognize that wildness resides deep inside each of us, forming a connection between person and place, civilization and nature,” writes Michael McGinnis (23). Although the population of the earth is soaring and a greater percentage of the population now lives in U.S. cities than in the early part of the century, the need for a “connection between person and place, civilization and nature” is an old one. This connection to place and nature has been reflected in sacred, mythic, fictional, and historical literatures through the motif of the quest, which often involves not only a particular landscape but a trip to or through the wilderness.

In order to show the way in which the quest motif works in relationship to wilderness in modernist American literature, I will first define the quest motif and sketch its connection to modernist American literature. Ernest Hemingway’s volume of stories *In Our Time* and, in particular, three of the stories therein, “Indian Camp,” “Big Two-Hearted River I” and “Big Two-Hearted River II,” reflect the way in which modernist writers sometimes correlate a concrete, outer journey into the wilderness with an inner journey of greater self-understanding and epiphany. Robert Frost makes explicit use of the quest motif in his poem “Directive,” and I attempt in this chapter to show how “Directive” shares some of the same structure and same purpose of venturing into

wilderness as “Big Two-Hearted River.” My discussion of the quest motif culminates in a discussion of the ways in which Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings’ *The Yearling* and Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* invoke the quest motif to order their narratives and to create wilderness situations in which the protagonists of those novels may come to an epiphany and return to their towns or families to bestow a boon on those around them.

The quest motif, as old as humanity itself, requires a basic spatial pattern without which it becomes something else besides the quest (Stout 90), and that basic spatial form creates an initial connection with place and often with nature. This connection, and the blurring of the lines between what McGinnis calls “person and place, civilization and nature,” occur “in the more fully internalized romantic quest, [where] setting becomes a projection of the mind of the quester, and the outward and forward motion of the questing journey becomes metaphoric for the inward search of self-discovery” (89). The basic structure of the quest narrative centers around a hero, often a young man, who must leave his village in search of an answer or an object. After undergoing great duress and often after being in mortal danger, he receives some knowledge and returns to his village, which benefits from the boon he has gained in his trial. Joseph Campbell sums up the quest (in what he terms the “monomyth”) as consisting of “a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return” (35). One often thinks of heroes like Prometheus, Jesus, Buddha, or Aeneas, who sport their own “exceptional gifts” as Campbell says. Clearly these are not the sorts of characters who people early twentieth-century American literature. But Campbell identifies an entry

point for even antiheroes since the hero “and/or the world in which he finds himself suffers from a symbolical deficiency. In fairy tales this may be as slight as the lack of a certain golden ring, whereas in apocalyptic vision the physical and spiritual life of the whole earth can be represented as fallen, or on the point of falling, into ruin” (37).

Janis Stout agrees with Campbell that “the perilous journey was a labor not of attainment but of reattainment, not discovery but rediscovery. The godly powers sought and dangerously won are revealed to have been within the heart of the hero all the time. . . from this point of view the hero is symbolical of that divine creative and redemptive image that is hidden within us all, only waiting to be known and rendered into life” (39). Campbell explicitly states that the significance of the monomyth or quest narrative extends beyond the story itself into the lives of others, and this narrative structure certainly finds its way, in variously altered forms, into American literature. This “internalized quest form, reflect[s] as it does the romantic emphasis on the conquering imagination and the artist’s discovery of self, with which the journeys of American literature . . . have their strongest affinities,” says Stout. “The American quest tends to appear as a symbolic journey of the creative artist toward full understanding of himself and his art” (90). American modernist writers connect the structure of the quest or monomyth to an immediate and real wild landscape in order to find meaning, sense and purpose in an otherwise confusing or meaningless world. We might revise Campbell’s description to say that the “hero” leaves the world not in terms of terrestrial earth but the “world” in Congreve’s coinage as *society*, and more broadly, *civilization*. The hero then journeys into the wilderness in which he or she finds some personal truth or comes to a

point of inner understanding. The hero may or may not complete the journey to bestow a boon on his society.

Not *all* American writing of this period and that immediately preceding it requires a hero or protagonist to visit a wild wood or swamp or desert in order to gain a greater understanding of himself or herself. We might think of the many stories and poems set completely in the city that make little or only forced use of wilderness. In some works, cities are figured as their own sort of wilderness, such as the realist novels *A Modern Instance* by William Dean Howells, *Maggie*, *A Girl of the Streets* by Stephen Crane, and *Sister Carrie* by Theodore Dreiser. The city is also conceived as wilderness in modernist works, such as Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," or Wright's *Native Son*. But this sort of urban wilderness is significantly different from a true wilderness in that the power that controls the lives of the inhabitants and the questing character comes not from the broader and more mysterious nature but from the social structure inherent in that urban area. Using the term *wilderness* to describe a city is a metaphor (a fairly useful one but still a metaphor) for a place or situation in which people once found themselves where they were out of control and at the mercy of forces much greater than themselves.

While some works that feature the wilderness—such as Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" or Crane's "The Open Boat"—situate the reader and speaker / protagonist immediately in or near the wilderness, many other American poems, stories and novels follow the quest motif in that they show the protagonist covering actual ground in order to arrive at the wild place that will allow him or her to find some new understanding of him- or herself. Several critics mark a connection between the physical

outer journey and the inner journey of the hero. “The quest tends to be a mental journey; its ‘real’ spatial dimension tends to recede or lose substance and its symbolic import to become dominant” says Janis Stout. But Stout also states that it is a mistake to call any sort of inward journey a quest, for “using the designation quest for a purely mental yearning and effort is a muddling of terms . . . the minimal spatial pattern should be the essential requisite, the sine qua non for labeling any fiction a quest” (91). Paul Cezanne said that “nature is on the inside,” (qtd. in McGinnis 23) suggesting a deep connection between the outer subject he portrayed in his paintings and an inner understanding (or, further, an inner existence) of nature within individuals. The correlation of the outer journey into the wilderness to an inner journey towards greater self-understanding emerges plainly in Ernest Hemingway’s “Indian Camp” and “Big Two Hearted River,” whose two parts form the last two stories of his 1925 collection *In Our Time*.

The structure of the whole collection is, in its own way, a journey to the final story in which Nick Adams (the recurring character in the collection) goes on a physical journey in which he deals with a soul tormented by the atrocities, destruction, and death he has seen in the war in Europe. Robert Slabey writes that “the basic thematic movement of the chapters of *In Our Time* . . . is two-fold: the loss of values (I-VIII) and the search for a code (IX-XIV)” (68). In stating that the first part of the collection reflects a “loss of values,” Slabey simplifies the nature of young Nick’s overall quest. In “Indian Camp,” for example, Nick is not aware that he is on a quest for anything, but he clearly covers physical ground in his journey across the lake and then into the woods down the long and unlit logging trail to the hut where the pregnant Indian woman lies.

Nick's quest takes him from the place he is used to, "the lake shore [where] there was another rowboat drawn up" through terrain that is increasingly unfamiliar. The "other boat moved farther ahead in the mist all the time," and they walk along "a logging road that ran back into the hills" ("Indian Camp" 15). The Indian camp itself is at first a place controlled by animals instead of humans: "a dog came out barking . . . more dogs rushed out at them" (16). It is inside the shanty, however, that it becomes clear that the purpose of this journey is for Nick to come to a new understanding of something, to become someone different. His father says to him

"This lady is going to have a baby, Nick."

"I know," said Nick.

"You don't know," said his father. "Listen to me. What she is going through is called being in labor. The baby wants to be born and she wants it to be born. All her muscles are trying to get the baby born. That is what is happening when she screams." (16)

It's clear here that Nick has hitherto understood "having a baby" in very general terms but not in immediate, medical, visceral terms, and certainly not in terms of breech or Cesarean birth. Nick hears the woman's screams only as something painful while the father, through lack of feeling or professionalism or both doesn't "hear them because they are not important" (16). When Nick's father delivers the baby by "Doing a Cesarean with a jack-knife," he asks Nick "how do you like being an interne?" as if to suggest that Nick had now changed by being a part of the birth. Nick, however, is not yet able to accept his new knowledge and status, for he "was looking away so as not to see what his

father was doing” (17). Dr. Adams realizes then that his son was not yet ready for such a transformation; when he observes that he’s “going to put some stitches in,” he says, “You can watch this or not, Nick, just as you like” (17). The narrator tells us in the next line that “Nick did not watch. His curiosity had been gone for a long time” (17). When Dr. Adams finds the baby’s father dead by suicide, he immediately sends Nick out of the shanty, feeling that it is too soon for Nick to experience such a thing but Nick “had a good view of the upper bunk when his father, the lamp in one hand, tipped the Indian’s head back” (18).

As they leave the shanty and head for the boat, Dr. Adams admits that it was a mistake to bring his son: “I’m terribly sorry I brought you along, Nickie . . . It was an awful mess to put you through” (18). By calling him by his diminutive name Nickie, his father demotes Nick from “interne” to child again. Dr. Adams’ apology for bringing Nick along begs the question of why he brought him along in the first place. The boy was certainly no help, and Uncle George had come along to provide what help he could. The only feasible answer is that Dr. Adams brought his son along to guide him into a new level of maturity and experience (Dr. Adams is shown with his arm around Nick in the boat and then with a lamp—a symbol of guidance—in the darkest part of the trip.) So, even though Nick does not take his quest by himself and of his own accord, he does journey into a wilderness to find some new understanding. This coming to new understanding is reflected in the difficulty of the birth of the Indian baby. The mother wants the baby to be born and the baby wants to be born, Dr. Adams tells Nick, just as Nick wants to know about the mysteries of life (the curiosity he once had drops away, but

he did come with curiosity) and just as his father wants to help him to understand. However, Nick's understanding does not get born in the way in which his father expected it would. Nick is unable to watch the surgery of the woman, the sewing up of her incision, or the newborn baby. While his father sees the whole encounter as "an awful mess," it is the beginning of Nick asking the questions that will bring him to knowledge: "Do ladies always have such a hard time having babies?"; "Why did he kill himself, Daddy?"; "Do many men kill themselves, Daddy?"; "Do many women?"; "Is dying hard, Daddy?" (19). These questions, and especially the last one, are questions that Nick must come to terms with throughout the collection. They create his own inner quest which manifests itself in various exterior journeys.

The structure of the physical journey in "Indian Camp" is similar to that in the last story of the collection, "Big Two-Hearted River." There is a bank which is safe and comfortable, a body of water that contains life (a bass in "Indian Camp" and trout in "Big Two-Hearted River") and a dark further bank that represents the darkness not only of the soul but of the essential questions of life and death. The trip to the far bank in "Indian Camp" is necessary to allow Nick to enter into the mysteries of life and death. It is something he must do in order to be able to ask the vital questions, for before he experiences birth and death there, he replies firmly to his father's statement that the woman is going to have a baby with "I know," while when he returns all he has are questions. At the end of "Big, Two-Hearted River," Part II," Nick has experienced life and death and, while he does not yet have the answers to all of his questions, he knows that "there were plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamp" and that he need

not go there immediately (Hemingway, "Big Two-Hearted River, Part II" 156). Like the middle path of Siddhartha Gautama and Frost's "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep," the privileged place for living is in the place between the society and the dark wilderness of the soul. The lake of "Indian Camp" reads like an Edenic place, but perhaps even more than that, a place at the center of the world, the "World Navel" in Campbell's words: "The effect of the successful adventure of the hero is the unlocking and release again of the flow of life into the body of the world" (40). When the bass jumps, he makes "a circle in the water," like that of Pawnee shamans who draw a circle with their toes in order to create a sacred space and represent the horizon within which the world exists. The water is strangely "warm in the sharp chill of the morning" (19) as Nick trails his hand in it, almost as if it were something different than water, perhaps blood, but at least not something cold and deadly.

It would be logical to interpret the final line of the story, "he felt quite sure he would never die," as reflecting Nick's inability to understand life and death. This view ignores the context of the statement. The full line reads "In the early morning on the lake sitting in the stern of the boat with his father rowing, he felt quite certain he would never die." He is awake in early morning as the lake is waking and is with his father. In this context of his father's protection and the lake's wakefulness, Nick is engaged with the life symbolized by the warmth of the water, the rising of the sun and the jumping of the bass. *Within this particular context*, Nick feels that he will never die; the narrator does not tell us what Nick may feel in a different context. While Nick's feelings are naive,

they are not so far from the older Nick's thoughts in "Big, Two-Hearted River, Part II" in which he acknowledges that he does not yet have to face the swamp and death.

As Slabey notes of "Big Two-Hearted River," "The ideational pattern of *In Our Time*, completed in ["Indian Camp"], is centered around a metaphysical quest, finding a way to exist. The fundamental issue is a moral one—'How to be'—living and dying well" (71). The living and dying part is first introduced to Nick in the shanty at the Indian camp and to the reader in "On the Quay at Smyrna." Slabey focuses on the importance of Nick's "finding a code" in the last section of *In Our Time* and asserts that "another related pattern in *In Our Time* is . . . a pattern of movement, flight and desertion, a pattern clearly introduced in 'On the Quay at Smyrna'" (71). The questing hero, however, must be ready to accept both the challenge and the boon that the end of the quest offers, and that hero will not complete the quest until he is worthy and prepared. So Nick must continue his journey, his quest, through the collection and through his life until he is ready—when he "with his many wounds, returns to the Michigan woods for the same reason Thoreau retired to Walden Pond—to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life" (Slabey 70).

Nick's wilderness in "Big Two-Hearted River" is a different wild than that of, say, London's Yukon. Nick is returning to a place he had gone before. The landscape is well known to him in both Part II and in Part I, where "he knew where he was from the position of the river" (Hemingway, "Big Two-Hearted River, Part I" 135). The river does not constitute the wilderness of the unknown landscape but the wilderness where he confronts his own problems, which are not unknown but which are dark.. Although he

“felt all the old feeling” (134) upon returning to the area near Seney, things are not truly the same for him, as suggested by his description of his tent and campsite: “Already there was something mysterious and homelike” (139). This oxymoronic phrase suggests both the "homelike" familiarity of the place and the strangeness of returning to a familiar place after a long absence in which someone has undergone profound changes, which "mysterious" suggests.

"Mysterious" also hints at the purpose of Nick's visit to the area. He has set out his campsite with great care, almost to the extent of preparing the area for sacrament, even though “he was very tired” (Hemingway, “Big Two-Hearted River, Part I” 139). The making of coffee and the preparation of his beans and spaghetti are representative of his status as a prepared quester: “I’ve got a right to eat this kind of stuff, if I’m willing to carry it”, Nick says (139). He asserts his *right* in one of the few sentences he speaks out loud. The care that Nick takes both with the camp and with the fishing itself suggests that the mystical quality he refers to is also that of “mystery” as a religious truth that one can know only by revelation and cannot fully understand. It is this sort of mystery that Nick engages in when he fishes in the river in Part II. So in “Big Two Hearted River” Nick encounters both the minor (because it is known to Nick) wilderness and the major (because it is a place that Nick fears and is symbolic of his dark psychic wounds) wilderness of the river and the swamp.

Robert Frost, an older contemporary of Hemingway's, is often categorized—too simplistically—as a “nature poet,” and I want to emphasize here that although there are many fine poems by Frost that deal with nature in some fashion, they do not all deal with

wilderness, which differs from nature in ways I discussed earlier. Frost's "Directive" makes conscious use of the quest motif in a less than civilized setting. Stout writes about this poem, that "In American literature, the return home signifies defeat, frustration, the giving up of freedom. At best it is a disappointment. One thinks of Cooper's wry *Home as Found* or Robert Frost's deeply ambiguous poem "Directive" (89). If, however, we look at this poem in light of "Big Two-Hearted River," it is not ambiguous at all. The final lines of the poem, "Here are your waters and your watering place / Drink and be whole again beyond confusion," echo Nick's situation at the end of "Big, Two-Hearted River, Part II" where he has found soothing waters and a soothing place in which he is able to at least keep confusion at bay if not "be whole again beyond confusion."

Although "Directive" and "Big, Two-Hearted River" have many obvious differences, they share some specific elements in their treatment of the quest. Just as Nick seeks to escape the problems of the present which have caused psychic and emotional wounds, Frost's narrator begins "Back out of all this now too much for us, / Back in a time made simple by the loss / Of detail" Hemingway purposefully left out any reference to Nick's traumatic experiences in the First World War. "If you leave out important things or events that you know about, the story is strengthened," Hemingway wrote in "The Art of the Short Story." He continues:

A story in this book called Big Two-Hearted River is about a boy coming home beat to the wide from a war. Beat to the wide was an earlier and possibly more severe form of beat, since those who had it were unable to comment on this condition and could not suffer that it be mentioned in their presence. So the war, all mention of the war, anything about the war, is omitted. (qtd. in Oldsey 118-19)

Frost asserts a similar feeling of being “beat” when he says blankly (perhaps here is some of what Stout found ambiguous) that “all of this now [is] too much for us” without clarifying what it is to which “all of this” refers nor why it is “too much for us.” But “Directive” is one utterance in a long conversation on the malaise that “the world” creates for individuals that began with romantic writers, if not earlier.

Almost a hundred and fifty years earlier, Wordsworth had opened a poem “The world is too much with us; late and soon, / Getting and spending we, lay waste our powers” (ll. 1-2). Like Frost, Wordsworth emphasizes the immediate present as being the cause of grief—“late and soon”—and finds solace in myth (Proteus and Triton) and in a body of water (“standing on this pleasant lea . . . Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea”) (ll. 13-14). Some critics have also remarked upon “Directive” as Frost’s long-pending response to Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” a later contribution to the modern discussion of the world being burdensome to the individual. This poem also begins in a somewhat ambiguous identification of trouble by opening with the lines “April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain.” The “memory and desire” that are mentioned are general, as if the mixture of the two were problematic enough. It is not my intention here to draw all the parallels between “Directive,” its predecessors, and “The Waste Land,” nor to discuss all of the parallels of the quest motif between them. Like “Directive,” however, “The Waste Land” uses myth to arrive at a sort of redemption and that redemption occurs in a sort of wilderness redeemed by water.

Like Hemingway, Frost narrates us through a “town that is no more a town.” In “Big, Two-Hearted River, Part I,” Nick disembarks the train at a place that used to be Seney, Michigan but is now only a burned place with the remnants of a few buildings. Frost’s “town that is no more a town” is a no-man’s land of cratered ground where one needn’t mind “the serial ordeal / Of being watched from forty cellar holes / As if by eye pairs out of forty firkins” (ll. 20-22). The houses have obviously been wiped from the landscape by neglect or by some calamity, such as fire or landslide. While both Frost and Hemingway could have easily moved their narratives immediately to the places in which one may “be whole again beyond confusion” or merely narrate a path through woods, both writers take pains to establish that civilization here has been destroyed, that this is not the province of people, that forces here are stronger than the people who might try to live in this place. The ruined farm becomes the Chapel Perilous of the Grail quest.

An important point of difference between “Big, Two-Hearted River” and “Directive” is that Nick Adams knows exactly where he is and where he is going at all times, while Frost emphasizes the virtues of getting lost. Lines eight and nine of “Directive” seem to reflect the outsider’s fear of the stereotypical country character who seems to find a thrill in the obfuscation of directions, but the emphasis of the guide throughout the poem does not bear this out. The guide “Who only has at heart your getting lost,” which seems to suggest some sort of tricksterism early on, suggests later in the poem that “if you’re lost enough [you may] find yourself” (l. 36). The guide therefore becomes more of a mythic guide like Tiresias or Virgil who leads you places you would not ordinarily go. Getting lost is the beginning of finding the Grail and the

only way in which the traveler in “Directive” can ever find “the children’s house of make believe” (l. 41) and the “old cedar at the waterside” (l. 56). Frost suggests that we can’t “be whole again” as long as we remain unlost or somewhere organized, civilized and known. Frost seeks the wilderness of being lost, of the unfamiliar.

The traveling in this poem is twofold: back into a place where things are fundamentally different from the civilized and social world and back into a time where things are different. James Dougherty asserts that this poem examines “the American myth of wilderness” which includes “the idea that the Golden Age still exists, that the world of innocence . . . is still geographically accessible somewhere in the continental interior, on the plains of Arizona or up in Michigan or in rural New England so that the effect of going ‘back’ in time can be gained by going ‘back’ in space” (209). Frost critiques this myth by saying that the earlier time is not really simpler or more pure but only “made simple by the loss / Of detail, burned, dissolved, and broken off / Like graveyard marble sculpture in the weather” (ll. 2-4). The past only seems golden because we forget the details that made it *someone else’s* present and just as troublesome to them as our present is to us. Wordsworth’s “The World is Too Much With Us” and Thoreau’s need to escape to the woods remind us that people in the past also had troubles.

In order to move backward in time in the poem, we move through landscape which is, layer by layer, de-civilized. The road seems not like a road but “as if it should have been a quarry.” The ledges of the mountain are “chiseled” on an enormous scale, dwarfing the minor incursion by the “wear of iron wagon wheels.” In just twenty years, the wild trees have “shaded out / A few old pecker-fretted apple trees” and the cellar of

the farmhouse (apparently open to the elements) is “belilaced.” The only house remaining is the playhouse of children, which is only a house of imagination, after all. By the end of the poem, we are removed from all civilization and arrive at “the instep arch / Of an old cedar at the waterside” where the narrator has “kept hidden” “a broken drinking goblet like the Grail” that he “stole . . . from the children’s playhouse” (ll. 55-60). Having taken the quester back in both time and place, the narrator leads him or her one further step into imagination, by taking the goblet from the children’s make-believe house and making it into the Grail of myth. Finally, house and waters constitute a magical place where one may “be whole again beyond confusion” (l. 62). In order to attain a modern salvation, to escape confusion, Frost takes us back into the wilderness of time, place, imagination, and myth. The Eastern Buddhist directive of “Be here, now” is apparently the antithesis of the Frostian and American wilderness cure.

In much of the American literature in the twenty or so years after the turn of the century, there is a certain amount of restraint regarding the ability of the wilderness to refresh and to cure “confusion.” Even in “Directive,” the opening lines, which criticize the apparent simplicity of the past, haunt the redemption of the waters at the end of the poem, making it difficult to say that time, place, and myth can completely heal the soul tortured by the modernist wounds that are “now too much for us.” Unlike the true Grail myth, Frost’s waters renew only the quester; there is no boon to be retrieved for the realm or countryside. In fact, it is surprising that Frost’s narrator ventures so far into the wilderness of time, place and myth in this poem, for in many poems, the narrator comes to the point of entering the wilderness without being able to leave the world of people,

society and civilized life. For example, in “Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening,” the narrator stops “between the woods and frozen lake” (l. 7) and acknowledges the draw of the “lovely, dark, and deep” (l. 13) woods but yields instead to societal needs—“promises to keep”—instead of journeying into the woods. Indeed, one may reinterpret “Stopping by Woods,” so often seen as a suicide poem, as a poem in which the narrator eschews the refreshment he needs in favor of acceding to the demands of society. The narrator finds himself between the lake, which is cold and hard, and the woods, which are “lovely, dark, and deep” on the “darkest evening of the year” (l. 8). The darkness, especially set in such an unequivocal way as “darkest evening of the year,” leads a reader to consider the emotional or psychological meaning such as might be connected with a “dark night of the soul.” The yearning for the woods in this poem has often been read as a yearning for oblivion, for death, but the “frozen lake” might be a much better avenue for death. It represents non-being much more successfully, for its coldness embodies an absence of energy and its depths, if not completely frozen, would spell quick death for anyone falling through the ice. Like the man who owns the woods whose “house is in the village” (l. 2), Frost’s narrator can view the woods but not live in them.

Even more painful is that the narrator in this poem, who apparently needs some sort of spiritual renewal, allows himself to be drawn by his “promises” to others (perhaps part of the “all this now too much for us” of “Directive”) rather than by his need for the renewal the woods might offer him. The possibility of “getting lost” that is so important to finding the Grail in “Directive” and an important part of the quest, is out of the question in “Stopping by Woods,” in which there is no search at all, only a stopping on a

prearranged route of travel and a yearning for something deeper. The hunter in “The Rabbit-Hunter” is also alone (except for his dog) and faces “alone / The alder swamps / Ghastly snow white” (ll. 4-6) without yearning or entering them. Many of Frost’s narrators acknowledge the quest implied in the wilderness they face, but they usually turn down the opportunity to take up the quest. Similarly, while Nick Adams’s success in fishing on the Big Two-Hearted River raises his spirits and keeps him from thinking too much, it is doubtful that a day of fishing can erase years or months of trauma and psychic scarring. Like Frost’s sleigh-bound traveler, Nick recognizes the promise of both darkness and salvation in the swamp but declines to enter the swamp. Frost, Hemingway, and the other modern writers may be suggesting that, if only the chosen few can find the Grail and its healing powers, then most of us must be “the wrong ones [who] can’t find it / So can’t get saved, as Saint Mark says [we] mustn’t.”

Sometimes, however, the quest is necessary for the growth of the quester, who does not completely understand it. Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings’s *The Yearling* is essentially a coming-of-age tale in which the animal mind, represented by the yearling deer, is more aware of the need to leave and mature than is young Jody, the novel’s protagonist. His first escape to the wilderness is not so much a quest for something as an escape to an Edenic version of wilderness where he is safe from both danger and work. The narrative description of the Glen to which he escapes from work and responsibility is lush with details of vegetation and the sky, and leans towards a transformed domesticity where the “scrub has closed in, walling in the road” and the “April sky was . . . blue as his homespun shirt, dyed with Grandma Hutto’s indigo” (Rawlings 3). The Glen is the

“secret and lovely place” (4) that every child has, a combination of Grandma’s house and the fort in the woods. Each tree and bush he notices as he approaches the Glen is “unique and familiar” and even more notable is the “magnolia tree where he had carved a wild-cat’s face” (3). The Glen inverts the standard hierarchies and alters the very nature of work when Jody constructs the flutter-mill as a toy which he enjoys even though he clearly understands its connection with working mills: “The flutter-mill was at work. It turned with the easy rhythm of the great water-mill at Lynne that ground corn into meal . . . He threw himself on the weedy sand close to the water and abandoned himself to the magic of motion. Up, over, down, up, over, down—the flutter-mill was enchanting” (6). “The water-mill at Lynne” only reminds Jody of the similarity in rhythm; he knows it is a working mill but there is no real connection to work. Toil and responsibility are banished in this sacred space, which is wilderness in its most friendly state. But the friendliness of this wilderness is misleading, for like Odysseus on Circe’s island or his men on the island of the Lotus Eaters, its very beauty and leisure keep him from completing the necessary journey.

Only tragedy can shake him from his dream. In order for Jody to grow into an adult and to learn to take responsibility, to come an epiphany similar to those in “Big Two-Hearted River” and “Directive,” he must experience the wilderness in its most dangerous form. After the death of his deer, he initiates a badly-conceived quest by dashing off into the woods along the same route he followed with Penny when they were hunting the marauding bear, Ol’ Slewfoot. His intention is clearly connected with growing up, for he plans to go to Boston where he will go to sea with his cousin Oliver

Hutto. Without having knowledge of responsibility and without knowing what it is to be an adult, however, Jody's intention is ultimately to escape responsibility rather than confront it. As with most of the quests I have discussed, Jody takes his quest alone. As he passes the night between Salt Springs and Lake George, he confronts for the first time the great danger of the wilderness, hunger, which will transform him into a man by the end of the novel: "His stomach began to ache as though there was too much in it, instead of nothing . . . He ate some stalks of grass. He ripped the joints with his teeth, as animals ripped flesh" (415). Here, he becomes both herbivore ("He ate some stalks of grass") and predator ("ripped the joints with his teeth as animals ripped flesh"), embodying for a moment the very duality he has been and still is unable to accept, for he vomits up the grass as soon as he thinks of his dead deer, Flag. That bestiality is also a reflection of Jody's gaining the innate understanding of the necessity of leaving the safety of the home that Flag had known since he had become a yearling.

In the morning his hunger increases exponentially. Here the danger of hunger—hunger in the midst of the plenty of the wilderness—is first figured in terms of wounding. The thought of food is "like small hot knives across his stomach," in the next paragraph he has a "gnawing in his belly" (416) and by the next page "the gnawing in his stomach was an acute pain" (417). After he is unable to find the way back to Nellie Ginright's house for a meal, he experiences the epiphany that allows him to understand the duality of the wilderness, why he had to kill Flag, and what hunger really is. It is in this epiphany that he begins to grow into an adult:

This, then, was hunger. This was what his mother had meant when she had said, “We’ll all go hongry.” He had laughed, for he had thought he had known hunger, and it was faintly pleasant. He knew now that it had been only appetite. This was another thing. The thing was terrifying. It had a great maw to envelop him and claws that raked across his vitals. (418)

He is able to come to this understanding only after he has gone into the woods alone and been unable to turn back to the safety of Nellie Ginright’s place. Hours later, when he is picked up by a mail steamer, even his outward transformation is complete. The sailors on the boat apparently mistake him for a drunken man for “A mans’ voice said, ‘He ain’t drunk. It’s a boy’” (419). While Jody is certainly still a boy in age, he has matured sufficiently in his few days in the wild to be taken for a man at first glance. Later, as he nears Baxters’ Island, he understands that “Something was ended,” suggesting that he recognizes that his quest has changed him (422). When he walks into the house, Penny mistakes him first for Ma Baxter and then “as . . . some stranger of whom he expected that he state his business” (424). Penny states the difference explicitly by telling him “You’ve done come back different. You’ve taken a punishment. You ain’t a yearlin’ no longer” (426). Penny puts into words the means by which people in this novel may come to new understanding. They must go to the wilderness and “take a punishment” in order to “come back different.” It is not simply age that allows Jody to grow up but a necessary quest into the wilderness both of the central Florida swamps and of his own mind that allows him to grasp a fundamental human truth, articulated by Penny: “Ever’ man wants life to be a fine thing, and a easy. ‘Tis fine, boy, powerful fine, but ‘taint easy” (426). This, as Penny says, is what Jody learns about “the world o’ men” (426).

Unlike the narrators in “Big, Two-Hearted River” or “Directive,” Jody returns from his quest with a boon for the rest of his family: he understands the responsibility that he’s been ducking all through the novel and resolves to care for his family. However, this boon is only ancillary to the deeply personal and individual change that he undergoes as a result of his wilderness quest. The dual importance of the boon to the society and to the individual underscores the struggle that marks much of American modernist literature. He agrees to Penny’s offer to “live here and farm the clearin’ . . . [and get] a well dug” (427). He also takes responsibility for the care of his father. Until now his father had only cared for him but now Jody “put his shoulder under him and Penny leaned heavily on it. He hobbled to his bed. Jody drew the quilt over him” (427). He accepts the tedium of farm life that he had abrogated in the first pages of the novel. In his old bedroom he plans in his mind the next day’s work, noting stoically that “His father would no longer take the heavy part of the burden. It did not matter. He could manage alone” (427). So here, even as Jody returns to society and the tedium of the farming life, he is still focused on “manag[ing] alone” even though he is with people.

In Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie’s quest takes her to the Everglades where, like Jody’s visit to the Glen and then to the swamp wilderness, she develops in stages. In *Their Eyes*, the “muck” is an Edenic place and, like Jody Baxter’s Glen, is a benevolent and transitional wilderness. The agricultural area of the Everglades where Janie and Tea Cake go to pick “string-beans and tomatuhs” fits into what Leo Marx calls a “middle [landscape] somewhere ‘between,’ yet in a transcendent relation to, the opposing forces of civilization and nature” (23). It is “round Clewiston

and Belle Glade,” the latter of which sounds almost perfectly like the name of the pastoral ideal, a beautiful glade (Hurston 193). The “Indians in their long, narrow, dug-outs calmly winning their living in the trackless ways of the ‘Glades’” (195) echoes Marx’s Romantic statement that “[i]n the pastoral economy nature supplies most of the herdsman’s needs and, even better, nature does virtually all of the work” (23). Similarly, Jody’s fluttermill at the Glen is purely a plaything and bears no relation to real working mills, Nick’s camp at the Big Two-Hearted River contains all his necessities, and the children’s playhouse in “Directive” provides for the needs the visitors may have. There is a quality to the land that allows for such a calm approach to life and sustenance where so many others must fight to make a living. Hurston’s descriptions of the Everglades also evoke images of the garden, of a “ground so rich that everything went wild” (193). Here, too, the nature of work is different than in the civilized world. This middle landscape serves as a transitional point in Janie’s quest, for it allows her to experience freedom in a benevolent but wild setting, which begins her transformation.

The first part of this transformation is her change in social status from one of whom it was “generally assumed that she thought herself too good to work like the rest of the women” (199) to one who worked in the fields alongside of Tea Cake “all day long romping and playing they carried on behind the boss’s back [which] made her popular right away” (199). Her stature was also changed on her own porch. Like the men on the porch of Jody Starks’ store, “the men here held big arguments . . . only here, she could listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted to. She got so she could tell big stories herself from listening to the rest” (200). She changes from one who listens to one

who tells stories, a change that Missy Kubitschek says allows her to discover her own soul (19). This change is clearly impossible in the socially restrictive atmosphere of Eatonville where it was important that she knew her place, but one that could only happen after she had journeyed to a place where she could assert an individuality separate from the position dictated to her by Eatonville's social structure.

Almost as if she were conforming to the ideal that questing knights must have "prowesse at armes," she develops a deadly and typically "masculine" skill on "the muck," that of marks(wo)man: "She got to the place where she could shoot a hawk out of a pine tree and not tear him up. Shoot his head off. She got to be a better shot than Tea Cake" (196). Her ability to use a rifle is illustrative of the change in Janie's relationship to men and thus of a fundamental change in herself, for she uses her greater skill with a rifle to exercise both compassion towards the rabid Tea Cake and to kill him when she attacks him. Instead of hiding his revolver when she finds it loaded underneath his pillow, "she whirled the cylinder to that if he even did draw the gun on her it would snap three times before it would fire" (270). Even though she does not believe at this point that he would shoot her ("Tea Cake wouldn't hurt her") she "take[s] the rifle from the back of the head of the bed . . . broke it and put the shell in her apron pocket and put it in a corner of the kitchen almost behind the stove where it was hard to see" (270).

Although she thinks about "either run[ning] away or try[ing] to take [the pistol] away," she assumes a position not of subservience but of control. She realizes the possibility that she may need to kill him in her own defense and takes appropriate steps. With Logan Killicks and Jody Starks, her biggest actions were passive: either leaving or allowing

things to run their course. She understands her own ability to be lethal when she is on the point of shooting Tea Cake: “If Tea Cake could have counted costs he would not have been there with the pistol in his hands. No knowledge of fear nor rifles nor anything else was there” (273). Janie’s expertise makes the rifle a cost to be counted by anyone with a level head. From her actions as the wife of Logan Killicks and Jody Starks, it seems highly unlikely that she would be able to kill any man, no less her husband. It is only through her journey to the Everglades where she is allowed to handle men’s weapons that she undergoes a fundamental change in her relations to others.

There is one final significant change in Janie that is often overlooked, what Pat Carr and Lou-Ann Crouther call “the ultimate irony of the novel—the fact that at the end of the book Janie Crawford is dying of rabies” (51). After Janie has shot Tea Cake, he falls into her arms and “closed his teeth into the flesh of her forearm” (Hurston 273). Carr and Crouther call this “the climactic moment of the novel,” (53) for, as they quote from the text, “Real gods require blood” (Hurston 216). I do not wish to debate the place of sacrifice in this novel, but it is sufficient here to say that Janie has been literally injected with the wildness of the Everglades and changed in both physical and psychological ways, for if she realizes that she will contract rabies from Tea Cake’s bite—and there’s every reason to think that she would—then she chooses to let the disease run its course rather than to take the medicine that she had already ordered for Tea Cake. After living a good life, even for a short time, she has no fear of death and goes home, satisfied, to die.

As in *The Yearling*, Janie is also immediately recognized as changed upon her return from her Everglades quest. The townspeople recognize and criticize her lack of

any pretension or adherence to social standards: “Can’t she find no dress to put on?” one observer carps. Her youthful appearance contrasts with her greater age: “What dat ole forty year ole `oman doin’ wid her hair swing down her back like some young gal?” another asks (10). “The men noticed her firm buttocks like she had grapefruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like a plume; then her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt” (11). Though she is forty years old, she is described as a girl entering the fullness of womanhood. Phoebe gives voice to this rebirth and new beginning when she tells Janie, “You looks like youse yo’ own daughter,” (14) suggesting that Janie has given birth to herself since she has been away. It is this same society, to which she now pays little heed, that formerly kept her from maturing; but by entering into a quest into the wilderness, she has come back with a boon for the women of her town and for herself. Since her change, Janie is suddenly immune to the opinions of Eatonville’s social structure, and her transformation into a self-realized individual inspires Phoebe so much that she declares she will make her husband take her fishing, for a late-night fishing trip was the catalyst for Janie’s Everglades quest.

It is ironic that modernist writers will send their characters to the wilderness to experience their epiphanies, for these same writers are among a group that often eschews the flighty nature-worship of the Romantics as being meaningless in a world of modern warfare, mass destruction, and overall lack of meaning and purpose. This communion with nature, however, is a communion that results in the change in an individual rather than a connection with all life, as we see in some poems of Wordsworth or Whitman.

Where the Romantics value the individual, the modernists are trapped within individuality and thus take the quest and the wilderness and the sublimity they find in the wilderness as a catalyst for personal connection and understanding.

CHAPTER VI

“MY OWN DESERT PLACES”: INNER AND OUTER WILDERNESS

Much of my discussion of wilderness thus far has concerned actual wildernesses—places like the Yukon, the Everglades, or movable wilderness such as weather events. But even in these discussions of wilderness, which I have confined mostly to place-based wilderness, it has been difficult to keep wilderness from becoming metaphoric or psychological. In my discussion of the quest motif, for example, I quoted Janis Stout assertion that “in the more fully internalized romantic quest, setting becomes a projection of the mind of the quester, and the outward and forward motion of the questing journey becomes metaphoric for the inward journey of self-discovery” (89). In my first chapter’s definition of wilderness, the term easily becomes problematized so that it ceases early on to be simply a characterization of a place and becomes a way of perceiving that place. Yi-fu Tuan states in *Topophilia* that “Wilderness cannot be defined objectively. It is as much a state of mind as a description of nature” (112). The etymology of the word wilderness repeatedly connects with states of mind. Wilderness is possibly derived from the transitive verb *wilder*, meaning “to become bewildered” (Klein).

When we consider the relationship of (pre-modern) Native Americans to wilderness it becomes clear that the definition of wilderness is partly created by the perception of those defining it. Whereas Europeans and European Americans as late as the turn of the twentieth century connected Native Americans and wilderness, the same

tracts of land that Europeans called wilderness were occupied by the Native Americans who called the place home. When Lewis and Clark went west, they were in the wilderness because they *felt* that they were: to them it was an unknown land that was explored and unknown. Their wilderness and the land of the indigenous people they met was the same land; it was the perception of the Corps of Discovery that made it wilderness. To them, it was uncivilized and undeveloped and therefore wild, despite the civilizations already there.

Some of the characteristics of wilderness that allow for characters to change require inversions of social hierarchies—things that are conceptual rather than part of the landscape itself. The sublime is also an important part of the wilderness, but the sublime works by the way in which it affects a viewer or a reader. One accustomed to majestic sunsets or to the expanses of the sea, for example, will not be filled with the same sense of awe as someone who rarely sees those things. The land on which we live most of our lives often seems to have little to do with sublimity, but upon one’s first trip in an airplane, the panorama, including the places we have already been and found unremarkable, becomes breathtaking. There are objective definitions for plain, swamp, and valley, but wilderness as much of a concept as a place for modernist writers and, by being part concept, wilderness is easily translated into a part of the psyche.

In this chapter I will first discuss how Modernism is defined in part by a focus on the fractured inner life. This inner focus is reflected in the way Hemingway uses the wilderness settings of “Big Two-Hearted River” to reflect Nick Adams’ inner consciousness. First, we see that Hemingway fictionalizes the setting of the story, thus

allowing that setting to correlate more easily to an inner wilderness. Then I discuss further correlations between inner and outer wilderness in the story, showing how Nick “creates the world in the act of perceiving it” (Harmon and Holman 326). Nick finds, in a characteristically modernist way, that he cannot communicate with others about his inner struggle. Hemingway therefore reflects Nick’s inner struggle by showing his thoughts to the reader. The setting of the story suggests this inner struggle in its duality as an Edenic, beautifully sublime wilderness and a wilderness of the terrible sublime. Finally, I discuss the use of outer wilderness to represent inner wilderness in Robert Frost’s poems “An Old Man’s Winter Night,” “Tree at my Window,” and “Desert Places.” In these poems, Frost shows a movement from a suggestive acknowledgment of the inner wilderness in earlier poems to almost bragging acceptance of the inner torture he can endure in his later poems.

Modernist writers are characterized by focusing on their inner lives rather than on the social aspect of their lives. This inner focus often results in writers internalizing the wilderness and using that wilderness as a representation of their inner thoughts and state of mind. When we place Harmon and Holman’s definition of the modern in the context of our discussion of wilderness, it becomes clear that wilderness has a complex but important place in modernist literature as a psychological connection between inner mind and outer world:

[The modern] employs a distinctive kind of imagination that insists on having its general frame of reference within itself. It thus practices the solipsism of which Allen Tate accused the modern mind: It believes that we create the world in the act of perceiving it. Modern implies a historical discontinuity, a sense of alienation, loss, and despair. It rejects not only history but also the society of

whose fabrication history is a record. It rejects traditional values and assumptions, and it rejects equally the rhetoric by which they were sanctioned and communicated. It elevates the individual and the inward over the social and the outward, and it prefers the unconscious to the self-conscious. The psychologies of Freud and Jung have been seminal in the modern movement in literature. (Harmon and Holman 326)

The most relevant point of this definition to wilderness is the assertion that modernists feel that they “create the world in the act of perceiving it.” As we will see in discussions of Hemingway and Frost, the lines between actual physical wilderness and the same wilderness created by the psyche of the perceiver (the speaker or writer) are often blurred so much that it becomes unclear where the landscape ends and the mental wilderness begins.

In “Landscapes Real and Imagined: ‘Big, Two-Hearted River,’” Frederick Svoboda shows that the landscapes Hemingway uses in his works often do not agree with the actual places in which Hemingway says they take place. This lack of factual representation suggests an inner wilderness correlating with a fictionalized outer wilderness. While there really was a town in northern Michigan called Seney, the descriptions of it as burned out and abandoned are inconsistent with Nick Adams’s visiting it in 1919 in “Big Two-Hearted River.” Svoboda notes, “In fact, the heyday of Seney came in the 1880’s and 90’s, before Hemingway was born in 1899, although well within the living memory of residents of his upper Michigan. The ‘thirteen saloons’ that Nick saw, Hemingway could have known of only through locals’ tales of the lumbering Seney made infamous by local storytellers, muckraking journalists and the legends they jointly spawned” (par. 2). Svoboda effectively highlights the anachronisms of the

parallels between Hemingway's burned Seney and the actual Seney that Hemingway could not have known. Part of his explanation of Hemingway's inconsistencies is that Nick does a sort of metaphoric time travel in this story.

Near the real, logged over Seney of 1919, Nick never could have walked in a grove of old growth pines, although in Hemingway's description of one of the 'islands of pine trees' with their high branches, Nick seems to journey back in time to the forest primeval. This seems to work in much the same way as Hemingway's earlier implication that Nick had seen the nineteenth century Seney of lumberjacks and saloons. (Svoboda par. 9)

But in constructing the wilderness setting of "Big Two-Hearted River," Hemingway is typically modernist. As a writer, he does not seem to mind using both an older version of Seney—both as a saloon-filled, lumbering boom-town and as a burned over wasteland—even though both of these events predate his experience. He further complicates this ahistoricity by setting the action of the story in 1919, a good twenty or thirty years after those events took place. Nick walks through a real landscape in a real place but the place and time of the story are inconsistent with what we know of the actual town. Hemingway the writer rejects the logic of time and place in favor of using the correct landscape that will project Nick's inner struggle. Hemingway does not imply "that Nick had seen the *nineteenth century* Seney of lumberjacks and saloons," (par. 9, emphasis added) but that the Seney he had seen had lumberjacks and saloons. For Nick, these things happened in the much more recent past and not in the nineteenth century. Regardless of the condition of the Seney that Hemingway saw when he visited it in 1919, Nick does not need to "journey back to the forest primeval," (par. 9) for that forest exists for Nick right where it is set. As Svoboda concludes in his final paragraph, "We live in a Michigan selected by

Hemingway to parallel Nick's states of mind . . . in a timeless Michigan, a Michigan of the writer's and the readers' imagination" (par. 12).

William Adair acknowledges that "many of Hemingway's best readers have told us that the landscape of his fiction is real and at the same time interior or symbolic" and this assertion is certainly true of the type of wilderness in "Big Two-Hearted River" (260). The wilderness landscape into which Nick escapes serves as a way of understanding Nick's war trauma. In *A Moveable Feast*, Hemingway discusses the story without clearly naming it and says that "the story was about coming back from the war but there was no mention of the war in it" (76). Hemingway is half-right in saying that there is no war in the story, for there is no mention of it at all, and many readers have difficulty finding out just what Nick's problem is. But the war emerges in the landscape, "in such muted allusions as the burned-out town of Seney, the fire-blackened grasshoppers, the memory of 'corpses' of fishes floating in streamside pools, and of course the swamp" (Adair 261). By revealing obliquely the psychological war wounds in the landscape but not in explicit words, Hemingway provides a quintessentially modernist perspective. First, he is breaking with the tradition suggested in much fiction before him that one must make the conflict of a story relatively explicit. Concerning the modernist approach to art, Harmon and Holman state that "the modern revels in a dense and often unordered actuality as opposed to the practical and systematic, and in exploring that actuality as it exists in the mind of the writer it has been richly experimental" (326). This approach to the structure of storytelling is similar to the naturalist approach, which holds that because life does not happen in accordance with Freitag's model of plot, stories

shouldn't be bound to this model. Hemingway refuses to be bound by the model that involves characters revealing their conflict through thought, speech, or other characters' observations.

Nick Adams's psychic conflict is revealed by means of the landscape in which he journeys. He does not quite "create the world in the act of perceiving it" (Harmon and Holman 326), but rather the landscape reflects his state of mind. This approach is important not only as a modernist artistic statement but in order to convey an emotion that cannot be conveyed through usual means. Hemingway once described soldiers coming home from the First World War as being not only beat but "beat to the wide," so tortured and beaten down that they were unable to share their experience with anyone who had not experienced the same thing. For those who had experienced the same sort of trauma, there was no need to talk. In "Big, Two-Hearted River," Nick Adams parallels J. Alfred Prufrock, who cannot convey his emotions to others, and evokes the woman in "The Waste Land" who laments "talk. Why do you never talk?" Nick's very isolation and aloneness in the wilderness around Seney are symbolic of the inner focusing of his thoughts. He apparently does not wish anyone's company, for he specifically travels away from people to a place where he will confront only fish, insects and plants.

Nick's modernist problem with communication is further compounded by his desire to cease communication with himself as well. As with other wildernesses, this wilderness allows for a change of priorities and responsibilities. Nick "felt he had left everything behind, the need for thinking, the need to write, other needs" (Hemingway, "Big, Two-Hearted River, Part I" 134). If there is anything that human society requires it

is “the need for thinking.” One must understand place and duties and act accordingly. Eventually the reader discovers that the thinking that Nick wishes to leave behind is not just cognitive processes, but remembering and philosophizing. His problem is not with the act of thinking but with the act of thinking *about* things, things which are too painful to deal with. So, instead of closing out only the painful memories, Nick tries to block all of his thoughts *about* memories, so much so that he even tries to repress memories about his old friends with whom he had earlier come camping. If he longs for anything, it is “the old feeling” from the past before the war. He desires emotion only, feeling rather than thought. Nick leaves all thinking behind except for the most basic thinking connected with survival. He thinks ahead for good camping spots, carefully and purposefully pitches his tent, and prepares his dinner carefully.

The other sort of thinking he allows is that of observation and it is this observation that is most important to the story. What Nick sees not only gives the reader the lay of the land but also reveals Nick’s inner wilderness. Susan Schmidt finds that “the wasted land mirrors Nick’s malaise” in a very symbolic way (par. 1). Of the burned town of Seney and surrounding burned landscape, she says that “the hillside has fire scars like Nick’s emotional scars” (par. 2). But a one-to-one correlation of the details of landscape and Nick’s inner wilderness are not really necessary. Rather, the landscape as a whole, the destroyed and burned over town is more a general reflection of Nick’s state of mind. Seney historian Lewis Reimann noted that “the burned over land [around Seney in 1894] had the appearance of a modern battlefield where army after army had fought back and forth over the same territory” (qtd. in Svoboda par. 6). The emotional and

psychological equivalent of this blighted battlefield is what Nick finds impossible to express and necessary to repress. Schmidt's further asserts that "Hemingway uses ecological and mythological imagery to suggest that Nick's recovery adumbrates the returning fertility of the land" (par. 1). I would suggest that the relationship here is closer than Nick's recovery being a vague foreshadowing of the land's recovery. Nick's viewing of the land—supposedly something that takes only observing but no real thinking—allows him to connect with the emotional wasteland within himself.

Because Nick is a writer it is fair to assume that he knows something about metaphor. By observing and then describing the observations to himself, his unconscious is finding a way of representing his psychological and emotional trauma by figuratively viewing the landscape, as in the way the mind sometimes creates metaphorical dreams. Nick's detailed focus on the charred landscape shows the reader that the wasteland wilderness is more important to him than a landscape whose change merits some minor mention. Rather, he thinks carefully about parts of the landscape that the reader can see as reflecting Nick's inner landscape: "The grasshopper was black," Nick observes. "As he had walked along the road, climbing, he had started many grasshoppers from the dust. They were all black . . . they were just ordinary hoppers, but all a sooty black in color. Nick had wondered about them as he walked, without really thinking about them" ("Big, Two-Hearted River, Part I" 135). Hemingway takes pains to establish that Nick was able to "wonder" about the grasshoppers being black "without really thinking about them."

By laying out a difference between wonder and thought, he emphasizes the modernist preference for the unconscious over the logical, and by privileging alogical

wonder, he opens a door to Nick's unconscious mind, which is in control as Nick observes the landscape. As his wonder turns to inquiry, "he realized that they had all turned black from living in the burned-over land. He realized that the fire must have come the year before, but the grasshoppers were all black now. He wondered how long they would stay that way" (136). He realizes that the landscape affects the creatures in it, and that creatures in a blighted landscape—like Nick in the landscape of the war—are colored by the destruction in the landscape. As Nick nears a conscious understanding of his psychological predicament through his analysis of the grasshopper in its own wasteland, he returns to wondering instead of thinking and "wondered how long they would stay that way." Nick then tosses the grasshopper into the air and tells it to "fly away somewhere," much as he has fled his own external wasteland but is still metaphorically stained by the effects of living in it over a year ago. Then, almost as a hedge against thinking, Nick retrieves his pack and continues his trek—like the grasshopper—away from the burned out place and to a better, greener place. This physical movement parallels the movement of his inner landscape from a troubled emotional state towards a more serene state.

Perhaps the part of the wilderness landscape that best reflects Nick's inner landscape is his camp near the river, a setting described near the end of Part I and discussed in further detail in Part II. In contrast to the burned over area of Seney, the area near his campsite is a fecund Edenic wilderness. The meadow near the river is already covered with dew as the sun sets, so that "his trousers were soaked with dew as he walked." Instead of the heat and barrenness of the charred area of Seney, this area is

covered with grass and moisture. The river runs nearby, making “no sound. It was too fast and smooth” (137). The river is more important than just a place to fish, however. It serves as connection to and reflection of Nick’s fractured inner self. The river is a liminal place where aspects of the swamp and meadow come together. This space is vital for Nick because it gives him a place in which he may both reflect his inner struggle and confront the dark side of his psyche. The first description of the river and occurs right after Nick gets off the train in “Big, Two-Hearted River, Part I”. Nick’s intense focus on the river suggests that it represents more than just a landscape, but is something important and personal to him:

The river was there. It swirled against the big log spiles of the bridge. Nick looked down into the clear, brown water, colored from the pebbly bottom, and watched the trout keeping themselves steady in the current with wavering fins. As he watched them they changed their positions by quick angles, only to hold steady in the fast water again. Nick watched them for a long time. (133)

Because Nick “watch[es] the [the trout] for a long time,” it is logical to assume that the trout and the river hold more than a passing interest for him. Hemingway makes clear from the details of the description (the color of the river, the source of its colors, the details of the movements of the fish, the names of the parts of the bridge) that Nick knows the area well and has studied it before. After reading the rest of the story, we can read this passage and find that the river and the fish are similar to Nick’s psychological situation. Where Nick struggles to keep from thinking too much, the trout “keep themselves steady in the current with wavering fins.”

Throughout the two-part story, Nick's attempts to keep from thinking too much require him to be constantly working against a tide of thought and emotion. Like the fish, he must "keep [himself] steady" and, like the fishes' fins, his mind "wavers" as he attempts to do so. Only with difficulty does Nick see the big trout at the bottom: "Nick did not see them at first. Then he saw them at the bottom of the pool, big trout looking to hold themselves on the gravel bottom in a varying mist of gravel and sand, raised in spurts by the current" (133). Like the first trout Nick sees, he describes these trout as struggling against the current to keep from being swept away. The big trout, however, must hold steady in a more difficult environment, "in a varying mist of gravel and sand, raised in spurts by the current" (133). An important signal that the trout are connected to Nick's emotional state is the two-line paragraph following the description: "Nick's heart tightened as the trout moved. He felt all the old feeling" ("Big, Two-Hearted River, Part I" 134). The river itself, described as "brown" and "glassy convex," is difficult to see into. The language associated with the river is one of struggle: "its surface pushing and swelling smooth against the resistance of the log-driven piles of the bridge" (133). After Nick hikes away from the bridge, the language associated with his movement is also of struggle. Although "he was happy," the pack is described as "much too heavy" and required him to "lean forward to keep the weight of the pack high on his shoulders" (134). Like the trout, he must struggle with what keeps him from moving forward physically and emotionally.

In Part II, the river is the place where meadow and swamp, light and dark consciousness, and healthy and diseased mind meet. As he wakes, Nick describes the

landscape almost graphically: “There was the meadow, the river and the swamp” (“Big, Two-Hearted River, Part II” 145). This description is similar to Tuan’s separation of city, countryside and wilderness (109). For Nick, the river functions as a liminal space where he may come into contact with his own fractured psyche, where the inner and outer mind, the dark and light may be encountered all at once. Descriptions of the river are ambiguous in Part II. When Nick “stepped into the stream . . . it was a shock. His trousers clung tight to his legs. His shoes felt the gravel. The water was a rising cold shock” (“Big, Two-Hearted River, Part II” 148). The reality of the river’s experience is vastly different from what Nick was expecting as he had watched the river before.

Further description reminds one of the trout in Part I and connects Nick symbolically with the big trout who tried to keep their place on the bottom: “Rushing, the current sucked against his legs. Where he stepped in, the water was over his knees. He waded with the current. The gravel slid under his shoes” (148). The river here is not quiet and smooth as it is described in earlier parts of the story, but anthropomorphized. Coming alive, it “rushes” and “sucked against his legs.” After Nick catches his first trout, the river becomes only a harmless “stream” (149). As the river nears the swamp, however, it becomes a “dammed-back flood of water above the logs. The water was smooth and dark” (148). All at once the river is dangerous, dark and peaceful (like Frost’s description of the woods as “lovely, dark and deep” in “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”) and it serves as a liminal space where Nick may move from the psychological comfort represented by the safety of the meadow to the psychological

illness represented by the swamp. By fishing in the river, Nick does not have to dash all at once into the swamp and into his own problems.

Nick's inner struggle is also reflected in this outer wilderness through the vehicle of fishing. When he fishes with grasshoppers from the meadow instead of artificial flies from his fly book, he takes something from the meadow where he has established a comfortable and homey campsite and introduces it into the river. The trout then take the grasshoppers under the surface of the water as Nick begins to delve, if only metaphorically, under his own surface. Nick crosses the boundary between meadow and swamp and psychological dark and light when he throws the "offal" from the cleaned trout onto the swamp-side bank of the river. Even though Hemingway describes the entrails in positive terms, he chooses the term offal instead of entrails or guts (the term Nick, as a longtime fisherman, might have used). Offal serves as a pun for the awful life Nick is at once trying to forget and to confront. He tosses what is offal/awful to the dark, difficult swamp side of the river and later tells us that he will fish there another day while acknowledging that the fishing there will be tragic.

As Nick approaches the river for the first time in Part I, he sees the trout "rising to insects come from the swamp on the other side of the stream . . . the trout jumped out of the water to take them" (Hemingway, "Big, Two-Hearted River, Part I" 138). Then "the insects must be settling down on the surface, for the trout were feeding steadily all down the stream . . . rising, making circles all down the surface of the water, as though it were starting to rain" (138). In these sentences, the worlds of the swamp and river meet as the insects are devoured by the trout. The rain simile also hints at further fecundity. In Part

II, the river and the meadow side (Nick's side) of the river come together when Nick fishes with natural, live grasshoppers rather than using any of the artificial flies he has brought with him. The grasshoppers he finds in the meadow while it is still wet with morning dew are different from the grasshoppers that were blackened by the destruction of the fire in Seney, and that Nick released with good wishes by saying "fly away somewhere," though both are representative of their type of wilderness. In the meadow, he takes "only medium sized brown ones and put them into a bottle" (Hemingway, "Big, Two-Hearted River, Part II" 145). He doesn't mention what other colors of grasshoppers may be available, but it's logical to assume that in a verdant meadow there would also be green and perhaps even yellow grasshoppers.

If so, Nick chooses from his landscape the grasshoppers that are halfway between the extremes of the green grasshopper who live among the healthy grass in the meadow and those who live among the burned landscape of Seney. Most of the grasshoppers he gathers—"about fifty"—come from underneath a log that he turns over. The symbolism here suggests that Nick is no longer identifying solely with the wasted wilderness of the war which would have turned him black like the Seney grasshoppers, but that he does not yet identify himself with the green grasshoppers that take their color from the healthy plants they are near in the fecund wilderness. Rather, he chooses grasshoppers that are brown like the earth underneath the log—fecund but not exactly alive yet. Hemingway makes a one-line paragraph of the sentence "He had rolled the log back and knew he could get grasshoppers there every morning" to emphasize the importance of the brown grasshoppers to Nick's stay.

Much of the wild landscape of the river hints at Nick's interior struggle. After he hooks and loses a trout that was "the biggest one [he] had ever heard of," Nick sits on a log in the river smoking a cigarette and observes the landscape: "the river ahead entering the woods, curving into the woods, shallows, light glittering, big water-smooth rocks, cedars along the bank and white birches, the logs warm in the sun, smooth to sit on, without bark gray to the touch" (Hemingway, "Big, Two-Hearted River, Part II" 151). The imagery here is generally genial and positive as the river moves into the woods. The water is shallow, "glittering" with light; the trees are either those with positive mystical associations such as the cedars, or those with connotations of light, like the "white birches." The rocks and logs in the water are "smooth." The woods figure a type of positive wilderness where there is shelter and freedom from destruction and where there is little tragedy. One marker of both tragedy and of the boundary between the meadow and the woods is a "great elm tree [that] was uprooted . . . gone over in a storm" which marks the boundary of "where the meadow ended and the woods began." But even the tragedy of the tree's toppling is not a deadly one; it "lay back into the woods, its roots clotted with dirt, grass growing in them, rising a solid bank beside the stream" (151). We are told not that the tree is dead, but that it is lying in the woods, pointing back into the woods, it seems. The roots are "clotted" with dirt, suggesting a healing, like that of blood clotting to stem further bleeding. The grass that grows on the soil of the roots shows that there is regeneration and recovery in this tragedy. The tree's roots also form a border, "a solid bank beside the stream," that shelters the positive wilderness of the woods from that

of the stream and swamp further beyond. The woods represent a beautiful sublime wilderness. What is there is light, positive, hopeful.

The swamp represents the terrible sublime aspect of wilderness, where the forest is open enough so that the elm might fall into it, so that light can glitter there. This description is as close to idyllic as this story gets. The swamp is a complicated territory, for it is both dangerous and intensely fecund. Unlike the burned ground of Seney, it is not a wasteland, but a tangled, dark place that could easily represent the unconscious, an inhuman place where monsters might live. Where in the woods the river becomes shallow and curves, as it enters the swamp it narrows and “became smooth and deep and the swamp looked solid with cedar trees, their trunks close together, their branches solid” (155). Instead of the river being shallow and thus easy to see into as in the woods, the water of the swamp is deep and thus may remain invisible to Nick. The trees there seem to block any light, for they are “close together, their branches solid,” a phrase that evokes the dark and forbidding forests of Hansel and Gretel, Snow White, Little Red Riding Hood, and dozens of other fairy tales in which dire things happen. Rod Giblett suggests that this reaction to the swamp occurs because “as wetlands mix the elements, they produce an aberrant ‘humour,’ or psychosomatic state, strictly a kind of phlegmatic melancholy,” referring, of course to the medieval and even pre-Socratic theory of the elements of earth, air, fire and water in human physiology. “In the patriarchal western tradition wetlands have been seen as a wilderness to be tamed,” Giblett says, “the sites of mixed elements and aberrant humours giving rise to . . . the association between

melancholy (and depression, despair, despondency, dread and the dismal) and wetlands” (156).

Hemingway has reversed the causality here, for the swamp does not create Nick’s melancholy state of mind, but rather serves as an expression or a reflection of his state of mind. He does not want to fish in the swamp because “the fishing would be tragic” (Hemingway, “Big, Two-Hearted River, Part II” 155), but he comes to the swamp carrying his own tragedy instead of waiting for one to happen to him. In the same way that his portrayal of the burned landscape in Seney shows his state of mind, his perspective of the swamp, and refusal to view it further, shows his fear of dealing with the darkest parts of his own unconscious. Perhaps to Nick, the swamp represents the dual and contradictory identities that other writers in English have seen, “either a place of teeming life or a region of creeping death, either an uninhabitable and impenetrable swamp or a life-giving and enjoyable wilderness” (Giblett 130). While Nick views the swamp with apprehension for the present, at the end of the story, he states that “there were plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamp.” For all its “tragedy,” the swamp remains a place that Nick is drawn to, as if he has a need to fish there. And certainly, he does, for he needs to come to some terms with the “tragedy” he has been through in his war experience; and his trip to the woods, river and swamp represents his way of dealing with that wounding and finding some source of healing. Perhaps Hemingway was doing in the 1920’s what Giblett challenges writers of the 1990’s to accomplish: “The challenge today is to see wetlands as regions of both life and death, as

living black waters, in a kind of postmodern double vision which is both poetic (but not romanticist) and ecological (but not mechanistic)” (130).

The swamp wilderness is also the domain of unsavory animals. The most obvious of these are the insects that the trout eat. The only insects we are told specifically come from the swamp are mosquitoes—ear-annoying, bloodsucking, disease-carrying, parasites. During his first night in the tent, Nick uses a match to kill one that has come to the wrong side of the river and violated the separation of swamp and meadow: “A mosquito hummed close to his ear. Nick sat up and lit a match. The mosquito was on the canvas, over his head. Nick moved the match quickly up to it. The mosquito made a satisfactory hiss in the flame. The match went out” (“Big, Two-Hearted River, Part I” 142). Nick uses the light of the match both to locate and kill the mosquito, reinforcing the light/dark dichotomy between the woods/swamp or the meadow/swamp and the benign/ terrible sublime wilderness. After he kills the mosquito, everything is right and Nick can return to sleep. The other animal that resides in the swamp is the mink. “As Nick watched,” as he emerges from his tent, “a mink crossed the river on the logs and went into the swamp” (Hemingway, “Big, Two-Hearted River, Part II” 145); like the mosquito, the mink crosses back and forth between the two worlds.

But the mink does not have the same noble connotations as do the trout or the kingfisher that flies down the river in “Big, Two-Hearted River, Part I.” After Nick cleans his two trout, he “tossed the offal ashore for the minks to find” (“Big, Two-Hearted River, Part II” 155), because they are opportunists who dine on the most disgusting parts of the fish. But the description of cleaning the fish is not as one might

expect and changes the way the reader must see the minks. As Nick cleans the trout, “all the insides and the gills and tongue came out in one piece. They were both males; long white strips of milt, smooth and clean. All the insides coming out all together” (155). Instead of reacting to the entrails as disgusting, Nick uses the adjectives of “smooth and clean,” words not usually associated with fish guts. This passage also reinforces the running theme of the inner and outer that subtly pervades this story. The trout—both males, like Nick—give up what is inside of them easily, “in one piece.” Those pieces are thrown “ashore for the minks to find” and the shore on which he throws the offal is most likely the swamp side of the river, for we know that Nick has seen a mink enter the swamp earlier. The minks serve, then, as something like helpful spirits that take what is inside and move it further into the wilderness of the swamp. At any rate, what they eat is clean, smooth and white, rather than bloody and disgusting.

The minks also fulfill Nick’s description of the ideal swamp creature. When he is viewing the low branches of the trees and the closeness of the trunks to each other, he recognizes that “it would not be possible to walk through a swamp like that. The branches grew so low. You would have to keep almost level with the ground to move at all. You could not crash through the branches. That must be why the animals that lived in swamps were built the way they were, Nick thought” (155). The slender, low-built mink would fit Nick’s requirements perfectly. Further, the mink shows an adaptation that goes further than the Seney grasshoppers’ blackness. Where the grasshoppers seem to adapt to the environment by changing their color in a short time, they will likely return to their previous color once the landscape changes. The adaptations required for life in the

swamp, however, require more than just a cosmetic makeover—they require long-term Darwinian adaptation. One’s whole body must adapt to moving beneath branches and under trees rather than “crashing through” them. Although the mink has adapted to living in the real swamp, Nick realizes that he will have to adapt his thoughts and approach if he is to fathom his psychological and emotional swamp.

If Hemingway represents the subtle use that modernists make of the wilderness for the expression of the inner psyche, Robert Frost represents the more explicit use of the outer wilderness to express the inner psyche. While I don’t pretend to discuss in this short chapter all of Frost’s poems that fit the inner / outer template, three poems serve as good examples of Frost’s concern with internal and external wilderness. These poems also show a progression from a frail response to inner wilderness in “An Old Man’s Winter Night” to a more stoic, almost bragging acceptance of an intense and depressing inner wilderness as a source of pride for how much the speaker can endure in “Desert Places.” I will treat the poems in the following order to illuminate this progression: “An Old Man’s Winter Night,” “Tree at My Window,” and “Desert Places.” “An Old Man’s Winter Night,” from the 1916 collection *Mountain Interval*, shows the old man clearly inhabiting some sort of inner wilderness, for he is both forgetful and paranoid and hence has lost the control of his surroundings that he may have had in a more civilized circumstance. This poem is more about people in general confronting interior wilderness than it is about an old man confronting what is outside.

It is easy to misread this poem to represent merely a speaker confronting a winter night in the country. The speaker must deal with real aspects of the country such as

"sounds, familiar, like the roar / Of trees and crack of branches," frost on the window panes, "snow upon the roof / . . . icicles along the wall." But the old man in this poem is not so much being seen by the outdoor wilderness as he is looking at himself. The opening lines seem to state clearly that everything outside of the man's house is gazing through the windows at him, or at least that he thinks that this is so.

All out-of-doors looked darkly in at him
Through the thin frost, almost in separate stars,
That gathers on the pane in empty rooms.
What kept his eyes from giving back the gaze
Was the lamp tilted near them in his hand.
What kept him from remembering what it was
That brought him to that creaking room was age.
He stood with barrels round him—at a loss.
And having scared the cellar under him
In clomping here, he scared it once again
In clomping off—and scared the outer night,
Which has its sounds, familiar, like the roar
Of trees and crack of branches, common things,
But nothing so like beating on a box. (ll. 1-14)

Frost immediately problematizes this reading, however, by describing the setting in ways that make it impossible or improbable that anything could have "looked darkly in at him," for in the second and third lines, we find that the out-of-doors must look in "through the thin frost . . . that gathers on the pane in empty rooms." The frost upon the windows would make it difficult for anyone or anything outside to see much at all through them; it would be more likely that frosted windows in a lighted room would return the gaze of the person attempting to look out through them. In lines four and five, Frost lends credence to this reading by telling us that "What kept his eyes from giving back the gaze / Was the lamp tilted near them in his hand." A lamp between the old man and the window would

obliterate his reflection until the lamp was removed. Because we are given no details of how the out-of-doors manifests itself as it looks in, and because we know that the windows are opaque with frost, it is likely that upon entering the room the old man noticed his own face, still distant in the dark reflection in the window, and when he held the lamp up to it, his reflection was eclipsed.

Such a reading requires the old man to not be in his right mind, and the poem supports this view: he is senile and forgets why he comes into the "creaking room." He manifests some paranoia about what is lurking outside and in his cellar and so finds some comfort in "having scared the cellar under him / In clomping . . . and scared the outer night," which he fears because of its "common things" "like the roar / Of trees and crack of branches" (ll. 9-13). By choosing "roar" as the active verb for the trees, Frost makes the trees into dangerous animals or vague monsters, somewhat as he does in his 1913 "Storm Fear" in which the wind "whispers with a sort of stifled bark, / The beast" (ll. 4-5). But in "Storm Fear," the concerns are real: the speaker worries about how well he and his family will survive a terrible storm that has snowed them in. There is no such real concern in "An Old Man's Winter Night." It has snowed but there is no blizzard and no concern about freezing to death, only the sounds of "common things."

One of the old man's greatest fears is a lack of light. Early in the poem, nature (or something) looks "darkly in" and he holds a lamp up to the window in an attempt to see outside or at least to counteract the darkness. In line seventeen, his lantern apparently goes out, for Frost writes that he has "A quiet light, and then not even that." It is only once the moon rises—"so late-arising"—that he is able to return to sleep. Line fifteen,

right at the middle of the poem, may give some insight into this connection between comfort and light:

A light he was to no one but himself
Where now he sat, concerned with he knew what,
A quiet light, and then not even that.
He consigned to the moon—such as she was,
So late-rising—to the broken moon,
As better than the sun in any case
For such a charge, his snow upon the roof,
His icicles along the wall to keep;
and slept. The log that shifted with a jolt
Once in the stove, disturbed him and he shifted
And eased his heavy breathing, but still slept.
One aged man—one man—can't keep a house,
A farm, a countryside, or if he can,
It's thus he does it of a winter night. (ll. 15-28)

On one hand, the old man, with his "quiet light" hardly makes a dent in the darkness around his immediate surroundings. His light in the country will be a lonely light that is useful only for illuminating himself. The moon, on the other hand, is able to light the countryside and thus keep "his snow upon the roof, / His icicles along the wall." Once he is able to consign the countryside and his house to the moon, he sleeps, though fitfully.

The real problem with the old man's interaction with the house, snowy roof, darkness outside, and the moon is that none of these affects him physically by endangering or protecting him, nor do they need his help. There is no reason for him to "consign" the "snow upon the roof, his icicles" to the moon for any practical reason. Near the end of the poem, Frost says that "one aged man . . . can't keep a house, / A farm, a countryside." If the old man's impact upon his environment is nil and if the environment's direct impact on him is nil, then his experience of loneliness and

vulnerability must be due much more to an inner wilderness than the impact of any sort of exterior wilderness. In the middle of the poem, he fantasizes that he is scaring the cellar and the "outer night" by clomping into and out of the room, but there is no evidence of any person or animal in the cellar and no evidence of anything animate in the "outer night," so the scaring is only to appease some vague fear which he makes up as he imagines being watched by "all out-of-doors."

It is most likely, of course, that the old man is experiencing a deep sort of loneliness and perhaps even depression resulting from his isolation. He hears things and imagines things and even imagines that the moon is something benevolent and helpful to him. What he fears and what he finds to help him is merely within himself. The real danger here is solitary life, a common theme with Frost also seen in "Storm Fear," where the speaker wonders "whether 'tis in us to arise with day / And save ourselves unaided" (ll. 17-18). The most important move in "An Old Man's Winter Night," however, is three lines from the end where Frost writes "One aged man—one man—cannot keep a house, / A farm, a countryside, or if he can, / It's thus he does it of a winter night" (ll. 26-28). Frost expands the poem to include at least half of the human race by changing "one aged man" to "one man"; and, by doing that, he indicts us all (writing in 1916, Frost probably uses "man" as a generic term for "humans") in the same inability to get along alone, to face our own inner wildernesses. Or, if we do manage to face the danger within ourselves, "it's thus [we do] it of a winter night," with fear, paranoia, and a feeling of extreme smallness and isolation. But in later poems, Frost moves away from the view

that people are unable to bear their isolation, even as he admits the incredible wasted spaces and wilderness that we must confront within ourselves.

“Tree at My Window” (Frost 251) is not one of Frost’s best-known poems, but it serves as a key into his concept of inner and outer weather because Frost expresses the inner and outer dichotomy most explicitly in it. In the poem, a solitary speaker observes the tree outside his window and finds in it some kinship as it suffers external tempests while he suffers internal or emotional tempests. The tree lives outside, in the realm of the physical:

Vague dream-head lifted out of the ground,
And thing next most diffuse to cloud,
Not all your light tongues talking aloud
Could be profound. (ll. 5-8)

The odd use of “head” to describe a tree and the use of “dream” as a hyphenated adjective makes the first line of this stanza read more like Ginsberg than Frost. He uses “vague” as a way of simultaneously pushing the metaphor of the tree’s canopy as being like a head and apologizing for this choice. The head of the tree is vague in the same way as it is diffuse—it has no clear borders but is defined only by the places where its leaves stop, in spite of its having spaces between its leaves. The leaves, one may assume, play the role of “all your light tongues talking aloud,” because the shape and size of the leaves and their lightness conforms well to the idea of “light tongues.” The tongues are also “light” in terms of their ability to think deeply. Frost sets limits to how far he will anthropomorphize the tree and denies that many of the “light tongues talking aloud / Could be profound.” The tree’s “head” after all, is almost as diffuse as a cloud and is

composed mostly of air. Regardless, the tree suffers, too, for it has been “taken and tossed” in the physical weather. It is against this physical weather that the speaker closes his window at night.

But being inside the house does not protect him from his own types of tempests. He has been “taken and swept / And all but lost” inside the house as a result of his emotions, his own inner weather. Frost lays out the connection between inner and outer weather explicitly in the last stanza:

That day she put our heads together,
Fate had her imagination about her,
Your head so much concerned with outer,
Mine with inner, weather. (ll. 13-16)

The first line works on two levels. One level of meaning conflates the two heads into one by “putting them together” and blurring the boundaries between the two, for both suffer the effects of weather equally despite the situations in which they experience it. Another meaning of “put our heads together” is for two people to work on the same problem together. The speaker admits that he and the tree are both “concerned” with their own types of weather, though there seems to be little they can do about it. The last two lines of the quatrain are the most explicit. They make the concept of inner and outer weather obvious for anyone who has not perceived the metaphor. Like Nick Adams’s perception of the burned landscape of Seney, the way the speaker here views his landscape—here the tree—helps to reveal what is inside his head. For this reason, he wishes to “let there never be curtain drawn / Between you and me” (ll. 3-4).

One of the most striking modernist poems about outer wilderness and inner despair is “Desert Places,” from the 1936 collection *A Further Range*. This poem has been called “the scary-funny answer to modernist alienation and despair” (Kilcup 219-20) and speaks to these perspectives in some of the same ways as does “Big Two-Hearted River,” namely by asserting that the most dangerous wilderness is within the human heart or human psyche even if science dreams up greater external horrors. In “Desert Places,” Frost uses the outer wilderness as a way of expressing a greater inner wilderness. Unlike Nick Adams’s experience in “Big, Two-Hearted River” or Frost’s character in “Tree at My Window,” there is no one-to-one correlation between the outer and inner wilderness in “Desert Places.” Rather, Frost connects the outer wilderness and the inner wilderness as a way of showing the depth of despair possible inside the speaker’s psyche and then goes the wilderness one better by saying that the inner wilderness is far more scary.

The poem is patterned by focusing on something close, then expanding to a sublimely vast view, and then focusing closely again. The poem begins, as Judith Oster notes, like “Stopping by Woods,” by having a solitary speaker who is journeying through a snowy landscape (par. 1):

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast
In a field I looked into going past,
And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,
But a few weeds and stubble showing last.

The woods around it have it—it is theirs.
All animals are smothered in their lairs.
I am too absent-spirited to count;
The loneliness includes me unawares. (ll. 1-8)

The outer landscape in this setting is the first one that is close to the speaker. While in “Stopping by Woods” the action takes place in what is already “the darkest evening of the year,” in “Desert Places,” “Snow [is] falling and night [is] falling fast, oh, fast.” The field the speaker is “going past” is transformed more and more into something desert and inhospitable as the snow continues to fall. This snow is not a benign winter storm, but one in which “all animals are smothered in their lairs.” By using the carefully chosen verb “smothered,” Frost creates a snow of death; where he might have written “nestled in their lairs” to create a homey, insulated feeling, “smothered” suggests a purposeful death by asphyxiation by the hand of a dispassionate nature. In this second stanza, Frost introduces depression as an integral part of the wilderness he is “going past.” While the speaker here is “absent-spirited,” seemingly without positive spirits, the landscape consists of an active “loneliness” that “includes me unawares.” Where Frost writes “*The loneliness*” rather than just “loneliness,” he makes an implicit connection between the snow-covered field and “the loneliness” as if “the loneliness” and the field are one and the same.

In the third stanza, he strengthens this connection by linking the increase of loneliness to the increase of snow:

And lonely as it is, that loneliness
Will be more lonely ere it will be less—
A blanker whiteness of benighted snow
With no expression, nothing to express. (ll. 9-12)

As the snow continues to fall—fast, as we know from the first line of the poem—it becomes a “blanker whiteness” as it covers the “few weeds and stubble” that were sticking up in the first stanza. The congruence of the falling snow and the darkening night, the “blanker whiteness of benighted snow,” creates something even more lonely than the field at dusk. Frost’s punning description of the snow as “benighted” identifies it first as visually darkened by the coming of dusk, but the adjective also suggested that the snow is somehow unenlightened, that it misses some deep understanding. We find later that the epiphany the snow is missing is the speaker’s. The field becomes more a metaphor for modernist despair, as it has “no expression, nothing to express.” Both its ability to communicate and its ability to have meaning to communicate are voided by darkness and the “blanker whiteness” of the snow. As I discussed in the chapter about weather wilderness, the snow here serves as a moveable wilderness that transforms the landscape of woods and animals into a desert wilderness in which there is a lack of life, meaning, expression and spirit. This blank wilderness landscape reflects the “absent-spirited” psyche of the speaker who views the field in detail as he goes past it.

In the fourth and last stanza of the poem, however, Frost expands the view wilderness landscape exponentially:

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars—on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places. (ll. 13-16)

If the snow-blanked field at night is lonely and without spirit or expression, the “empty spaces / Between stars” are even more so, consisting of vast spaces of nothingness too enormous for humans even to conceive. Astronomy, as poems such as “The Star-Splitter” and “The Literate Farmer and the Planet Venus” suggest, was one of Frost’s interests. By the 1930s most of the great terrestrial wildernesses were conquered. Byrd

had overflowed the South Pole and adventurers had descended over 3000 feet into the sea and over seventeen miles high into the atmosphere. The sources of great rivers had been discovered. Theories and advances in the twenty or so years before *A Further Range* was published include some major developments in the understanding of the universe. In 1914 Einstein had proposed his General Theory of Relativity. In 1918 the 100-inch reflector telescope at Mount Wilson, California was completed. German astronomer Max Wolf had shown, in 1920, the structure of the Milky Way for the first time, and in 1923, American astronomer Edwin Hubble had “discover[ed] a distance-indicating cepheid variable star in the Andromeda nebula.” James Jeans had formulated a new stellar theory in 1926 and in 1929, Hubble had “measur[ed] large red shifts in the spectra of extragalactic nebulae.” (Grun 467-99).

The work of Wolf and Hubble implied the sublime vastness of the distances of the universe in ways that had not before been imagined. Hubble’s work with the red shift suggested that the astronomical objects were moving away from each other, often at unbelievable speeds. This new concept of the vastness of the universe created a real wilderness at precisely the time when the terrestrial wilderness had become less and less “scary,” as a wilderness ought properly to be, at least in part. So, the universe’s vastness fits even better than the snowy field the modernist feeling of alienation and detachment. However, in modernist fashion, Frost reverses the poem’s focus immediately and points it within the speaker. The astronomers—presumably the “they” who “cannot scare me”—look outward for evidence of vast emptiness, but Frost understands that “I have it in me so much nearer home / To scare myself with my own desert places” and thus trumps the

sublime vastness “between stars” that would seem to be the perfect objective correlative for a modernist angst consisting of loneliness, absent-spiritedness, benightedness, blankness, and expressionlessness. While Frost points inward (“so much nearer home”) to his own “desert places,” he simultaneously points away from himself, challenging us to imagine a more vast and inhumane place than the universe the astronomers attempt to describe.

The prevalence of the term “desert” in this poem demands special attention in the context of a discussion of wilderness. One of the contradictory Biblical images of wilderness that Tuan discusses is a desert-like “place of desolation, the unsown land frequented by demons; it is condemned by God” (109). Roderick Nash also discusses the Biblical wilderness-desert definition:

The Old Testament reveals that the ancient Hebrews regarded the wilderness as a cursed land and that they associated its forbidding character with a lack of water. Again and again “the great and terrible wilderness” was described as a “thirsty ground where there was no water.” When the Lord of the Old Testament desired to threaten or punish a sinful people, he found the wilderness condition to be his most powerful weapon: “I will lay waste the mountains and hills, and dry up all their herbage.” (14)

The term “desert” is therefore freighted with the baggage of all of the negative meanings given it by the Biblical treatment transmitted down through Western culture. Max Oelschlager also agrees that “wilderness areas are often viewed as wasteland, barren, uninhabitable, desert, or otherwise distinguished from land suited to human development in the name of progress and civilization” (356, n. 10). This definition helps to clearly identify the outer space that Frost identifies in his phrase “on stars where no human race

is” as a desert-like wilderness unfit for human development. But the wilderness connotations in the Bible also leave room for Frost’s Yankee stubbornness to rise beyond—if only a little beyond—the modernist sense of alienation and depression. The last stanza of “Desert Places” seems almost like a weather-boast: “Ha! You haven’t seen bad weather till you’ve spent a winter in New Hampshire!” he might say. But in this case he almost takes a wry pride in his own ability for suffering. “They cannot scare me” because I have even more scary “desert places” “so much nearer home.”

However, Biblical desert-wilderness offers a possibility that the desert is redemptive: “On the other hand,” Tuan writes, “wilderness may serve either as (a) a place of refuge and contemplation, or more commonly (b) any place where the Chosen are scattered for a season of discipline and purgation” (110). The Hebrews under Moses wandered forty years in the wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula, and Jesus met and was tempted by the devil in a desert wilderness. Strangely, Frost’s desert wildernesses, while terrifying, are often places of contemplation and purgation. They are places, as in “Stopping by Woods” and the field in “Desert Places” that he, like the Hebrews or Jesus, are traveling through rather than places in which he lives permanently. They serve as wildernesses in which he may reflect on his own heart, his own psyche, and wildernesses from which he may both learn about himself and gather the necessities to continue his own journey. They are places in which he is meeting his own devil and, like Jesus, prevailing. The temptation of poems like “Stopping by Woods,” which is sometimes (perhaps too often) categorized as a suicide poem, is necessary so that the speaker in the poem may face his inner wilderness, accept its place in his life, then move on to his own

obligations to others. In “Desert Places,” as much as Frost acknowledges the intimate and sublime terror that expands in the human heart like a rushing universe, he (or his alter ego narrator) also comes across as a sort of psychological superman who, despite the greater and more terrifying “desert places” within himself, manages to persevere and walk past the smothering images of desertification he meets every day.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

An important aspect of Modernism is its “internationalism . . . with its free flow of artistic currents between Moscow and Rome, London and Berlin, Dublin and New York, all roads leading to Paris” (Perloff 158). Certainly, American modernists are international writers, too. Hemingway spent his famous time in Italy, Paris and Spain; Frost traveled to Britain where his first collection was published; Eliot moved to London and became a British subject; and Southerner Zora Neale Hurston spent time in the Caribbean as well as in Harlem. But American writers in the first forty years of the twentieth century incorporated the very American concept of wilderness into their work and by doing so, wrote their own version of Modernism.

It would take a place like America to propose that wilderness be a solution for anything in a time so bereft of meaning and purpose, when tradition had proved, in the tragedy of the First World War, that the old ways were unreliable. British romantic poets in the early nineteenth century had advocated nature and wilderness as an antidote (almost literally in the case of Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey”) to the malaise of civilized life and burgeoning industrialism. A few years later, Thoreau would advocate the same wilderness cure for Americans. But, as the industrial revolution gained steam, the frontier receded and, in front of it, the wilderness disappeared. In Britain, the focus turned from nature to Empire and labor. In America, Romanticism gave way to the realist movement in literature, epitomized by such novels as William Dean Howells’s *A*

Modern Instance and *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. Early-twentieth-century modernist writing focused so much on urban settings that were it not for earlier local color writers like Mark Twain and Charles Chesnutt, whose work transcended that pejorative label and became labeled realists, one might not be able to tell that America had *had* a wilderness during the realist era.

During the last decade of the nineteenth century, however, something odd began to happen. Instead of valuing progress over wilderness, the American people, or at least some of them, began to feel a certain discomfort about the great success of the cities and westward expansion. When the frontier came to an end, and wilderness ahead of it, Americans seemed to sense that something was changing. Some, like Frank Norris, worried that the end of the wilderness spelled the beginning of imperialism (Nash 149); and others, like Theodore Roosevelt, worried that the loss of wilderness would cause “flabbiness” and loss of virility in the American people (Nash 150).

In the early twentieth century, wilderness was fading from everyday reality for more and more Americans, and the industrial malaise that Norris and Roosevelt worried about continued. This restlessness and anxious separation from the wilderness that had given America its earlier identity corresponded to some of the elements of Modernism emerging in the early 1910s. While the real wilderness was replaced by vacationing in national parks, modernists replaced the “representation of the external world by imaginative construction of the poet’s inner world” (Perloff 158). While American citizens felt more and more the need to reunite with a nature and wilderness from which they had been separated, the modernist “Anglo-American lyric” represented “a story of

increasing separation of mind from nature” (Buell 199). While people felt themselves more and more alienated from wildness and from each other in their urban lives, the modernist movement reflected the sense of “the malaise of the individual in the ‘lonely crowd’” (Perloff 158).

In short, the modernist movement occurred at the same time as Americans were looking toward wilderness as a solution for a separate but related sense of loss. The nexus of these two movements created opportunities for American modernist writers to use wilderness in their work as a way of representing the fractured inner self and giving their characters a place in which they could grow, free of social constraints. Certainly, there were American modernists such as Amy Lowell, Sinclair Lewis, and Ezra Pound who use little wilderness in their works, but the absence of wilderness is conspicuous in the work of British and European modernists. Joyce’s modernist magnum opus *Ulysses* occurs almost wholly in the city of Dublin and is wholly without a wilderness setting even though Joyce modeled aspects of the novel on a classical poem filled with wilderness settings. When Yeats creates natural settings for his poems, they are usually in gardens, such as Coole Park. We must acknowledge the focus on wilderness in important works such as those by Joseph Conrad, but Britain and Europe lacked the intense interest in a recently-lost wilderness that inspired the American imagination. This drive led modernist American writers to imagine complex forms of “wilderness” that would characterize a wholly American kind of writing energized by their understanding that “I have it in me so much nearer home / To scare myself with my own desert places.”

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