

Miriam Gieske
Freshman Studies
Mr. Gervais Reed
March 11, 2004

Human Interaction with Nature in the Works of Aldo Leopold and Elizabeth Bishop

The poet Elizabeth Bishop and the naturalist Aldo Leopold share a keen power of observation, a beautifully detailed manner of writing, a love for the beauty of nature, and an interest in how people interact with the natural world. Like Leopold, Bishop examines human interactions with nature on both the personal and the ecological level. On the individual level, a hunter's contact with the animal he or she is hunting changes his or her attitude toward nature in both Bishop's poem "The Fish" and Leopold's essay "Thinking Like a Mountain." On the larger level, both Bishop in her poem "The Mountain" and Leopold throughout the *Sand County Almanac* envision the role of human beings in relation to the rest of the natural world as one of exploration and interpretation through science and art.

In both Bishop's "The Fish" and Leopold's "Thinking Like a Mountain," the person's contact with a wild animal comes about through hunting. In theory, hunting is a sport, "a challenge of fang against bullet" (Leopold 129), in which the animal has a fair chance of escaping. In reality, however, there is no real challenge for the hunter in either case. Leopold and his companions, "pumping lead into the pack" (130), kill the wolf not by skill but by the sheer number of bullets, while Bishop's speaker testifies, "He didn't fight. / He hadn't fought at all" (5-6). Thus, both call into question whether their hunting is actually a sport.

Both Leopold and Bishop's speaker are initially unaware of the true value of the creatures they hunt. Leopold writes, "I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunter's paradise" (130). Bishop's speaker, with her detailed and evocative visual descriptions of the fish, seems more sensitive to its significance, but when she looks into the fish's eyes and it does not look back at her, it is clear that she has not yet made a connection with the fish. For both narrators, this lack of emotional connection changes when they notice some striking detail about the wolf or fish which awakens them to the symbolic value of the animal and transforms their way of relating to nature. Leopold sees "a fierce green fire dying" (130) in the eyes of the wolf and senses that his neat equation of fewer wolves equals more deer is inadequate, and that wolves have an importance unknown to him. He goes on to develop a new conservation ethic, one that values wolves as well as deer and protects wild animals for their own sake and that of the ecosystem, not just for the pleasure of hunters. Bishop's speaker notices five fishhooks dangling from the fish's mouth and realizes how many times the fish has battled for its life and won. Its fighting spirit earns her respect and causes her to release the fish.

The particular symbolic value that each writer finds in the wild animal is evident in his or her beautifully poetic descriptions of the animal. Each admires the animal for its undaunted courage in the face of a harsh existence. Bishop repeatedly uses words and images which personify the fish as a wise old warrior: the fish is "battered and venerable" (8), his skin is "like ancient wallpaper" (11), and the broken fishing lines that hang from his mouth are "like medals" (61) or "a five-haired beard of wisdom" (63). For Bishop, the fish's symbolic value is found in its old age and its history of struggle and victory.

Leopold, meanwhile, discovers the symbolic value of wolves in their “wild defiant sorrow” and “contempt for all the adversities of the world” (129). He also finds it in their mysterious significance, about which the mountain knows but human beings can only speculate.

Unlike Bishop, Leopold advances a practical argument for exercising restraint in hunting: without wolves to keep their population in check, deer multiply out of control and destroy their own habitat. He makes clear, however, that he discovered this pragmatic reason quite a while after he first sensed that there is something wrong with exterminating wolves, and that it was the “fierce green fire” (130) in the eyes of the old wolf which impelled him to change his mind and his ways.

Both writers also explore human interactions with nature on the ecological level. Bishop’s poem “The Mountain” and Leopold’s essay “Thinking Like a Mountain” each deal with an anthropomorphized mountain which has its own opinions regarding human interactions with it. Bishop does not explicitly define either who or what the speaker of the poem is or to whom the lines “tell me how old I am” (8) and “you never stay long enough” (23) are addressed. Based on the words “the valleys stuff/ impenetrable mists/ like cotton in my ears” (9-11) and “the waterfalls/ go unwiped” (30-31), it seems clear that the poetic “I” is the mountain itself, personified as an old man. It appears that the mountain’s speech is addressed to human beings, for only they climb up a mountain carrying lights (21-22). Both Leopold and Bishop contrast the great age of the mountain with the youth of human beings. However, where Leopold’s mountain is old and wise, Bishop’s is old and decrepit, almost senile, and where Leopold associates youth with

inexperience and reckless folly, Bishop associates it with activity and the ability to learn and teach.

While Bishop's mountain longs for people to visit it, as seen in the words "oh children! / you never stay long enough" (22-23), it seems Leopold's mountain would much rather be left alone. After all, the mountain coexisted well with its deer until people upset the balance of the ecosystem by hunting the wolves. One is tempted to say that for Bishop, the natural world is incomplete without human beings, while for Leopold, the natural world is self-sufficient and would be better off without human interference. However, one should resist the temptation to so simplify Leopold's view of human interactions with nature. Even though Leopold values wilderness highly and recognizes that the human pressures of agriculture and recreation unavoidably threaten the few remaining wild areas, he, unlike some modern environmentalists, does not come to the gloomy conclusion that the only thing wrong with the world is our presence in it. Leopold's goal is not simply the preservation of wilderness, but the preservation of the health of the land and the creation of "a state of harmony between men and land" (207). Leopold argues that the use of the land need not result in its degradation. He contrasts the destructive impact of cattle ranching in the Southwest with the sustainable methods of agriculture practiced by the Pueblo, the peasants of India, and the Native Americans who built terraces along the Rio Gavilan, saying, "There once were men capable of inhabiting a river without disrupting the harmony of its life" (150). Furthermore, Leopold asserts that humans do have a place in the natural world; they are "biotic citizen[s]" (223). Thus, for Leopold as well as for Bishop, human beings clearly have their own role to play in the world of nature.

What is the proper role of human beings in nature? Through her mountain's repeated pleas for someone to tell it how old it is, Bishop suggests that one role of humans is to explore and reveal nature's mysteries. The fact that the mountain speaks to people implies another role for human beings, that of listeners. Her poem also hints at a role for humans as interpreters, for it is Bishop herself who, in writing her poem, gives the mountain a voice. In other words, the function of human beings may be to serve as the consciousness of the universe, or the conscious element in the universe. Likewise, Leopold speaks of science as man's "searchlight on his universe" (223), argues for "perception" as the highest form of outdoor recreation, asserts that the grebe's cry calls for "translation and understanding" (160), and through his writing gives a voice to the mountain, as well as to numerous plants and animals. If "the raw wilderness gives definition and meaning to the human enterprise" (Leopold 200-201), perhaps it is also true that human beings give "definition and meaning" to the natural world by their works of art and science.

These two works also suggest the role of humans as interpreters of nature in the way they encourage the reader to inquire into the significance of the text. By leaving the speaker and addressee of her poem undefined and by using enigmatic images such as "stone wings have sifted here/ with feather hardening feather" (25-26), Bishop invites the reader to search for and interpret the meaning of the poem. The reader's exploration and interpretation of the poem thus echoes the scientist's and artist's exploration and interpretation of nature. To a somewhat lesser extent, the reader of Leopold's "Thinking Like a Mountain" also must exercise his or her powers of analysis and interpretation to discover the "hidden meaning" (Leopold 129) in this essay, and in the cry of the wolf.

For both Leopold and Bishop, an individual emotional connection with a wild animal has the power to transform a person's attitude and actions toward nature by producing an appreciation for the intangible qualities of wild creatures. Both suggest that the larger role of human beings in nature is to explore, perceive, understand, and give a voice to the world around them through science and art. They suggest this both through what they say in their writing and by the very act of writing, which is an act of perception and interpretation of nature. However, their interpretations of the mountain's message beg the question of whether they are interpreting it correctly, or whether they are simply attributing their own views to landforms. Perhaps their works are best seen as an invitation to their readers to explore the natural world for themselves and create their own interpretations. Contact with wild creatures might change our attitudes too!

Bibliography

Bishop, Elizabeth. *The Complete Poems, 1927-1979*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Leopold, Aldo. *A Sand County Almanac*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1949.