

# Ecological Consciousness in Hemingway's Short Stories

**Wang Zhen**

Department of Foreign Languages, Nanyang Institute of Technology

No.80, Changjiang Road, Nanyang, 473000, China

Email: hsgz168@163.com

**Abstract** Ernest Hemingway is regarded as one of the most important and influential American novelists in the American literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many researchers have been doing academic study on his literary works. However, there are limited studies on Hemingway's short Stories from the ecological perspective comprehensively. With the hope of re-reading the text and arousing human beings' ecological consciousness to live in an ecological harmony, This article explores the ecological view that human beings regard nature as the source of spiritual strength and try to return to nature and seek for spiritual sustenance and relief in nature. Firstly, this article analyzes the respecting of life and death in the theory of "reverence for life" represented by "Indian Camp" at the beginning of *In Our Time* which is the first collection of Hemingway's short stories. Secondly, it analyzes the consciousness of ecological holism and returning to nature by "The Big Two-Hearted River". Thirdly, it analyzes the recalling to natural beauty by "Fathers and Sons." This article concludes that the process of human beings' self-fulfillment in Hemingway's short stories is also the process of their understanding on the ecological holism between human and nonhuman.

**Key words** Hemingway's short stories; ecological consciousness; respect of life

**Author** **Wang Zhen** is Lecturer of Nanyang Institute of Technology, Nanyang, China (473000). Her fields of research include English and American literature, cross-cultural communication and information technology of English teaching. At present, she runs a research group on the ecological ethics on American literature in the middle of 20<sup>th</sup> century. She published 1 monographs and edited 4 English textbooks.

## Introduction

Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) is regarded as one of the most important and influential American novelists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His tough man, death theme and iceberg writing style make his works popular among the world. However, there are limited studies on Hemingway's short stories from the ecological perspective comprehensively. Some famous critics had described Hemingway's ecological consciousness before. For instance, Robert E. Fleming in his *Hemingway and the Natural World* said that "there are fewer writers who have closer relationship with nature than Hemingway does in the foreword of Hemingway and the Natural World" (Fleming 3). Alfred Kazin in his *On Native Grounds* also indicated "no nature writer in all American literature have Hemingway's sensitiveness to color, to climate, to the knowledge of physical energy under heat or cold, to the knowledge of the body thinking and moving through a landscape that has called Hemingway's barometric accuracy which is the joy of the huntsman and the artist" (Kazin 6). Hemingway once mentioned in an interview that "understanding and love of nature is simpler, but nobler than simply understanding the geology of rocks and the chemical composition of trees" (Williams 14). All of these show Hemingway's close relationship with nature.

To some extent, Hemingway is a son of nature. His growing in the embrace of nature, the early education from his parents and the implementation of his close contact with nature has a direct impact on his thoughts of relation between man and nature. For him, nature is not only helpful but also peaceful and beautiful. He truly praises of nature, shows his endless compassion to the devastated nature and ridicules pitilessly man's pride and conceit activities towards nature. In his early short stories, Hemingway depicts the characters that alienate against nature, society and themselves. The heroes lose the close relations with nature and are filled with despair for lacking of real communication with each other. Hemingway explores the root causes of ecological crisis in natural, society and spirit which oppress human beings so heavy that they fall into deep depression. He holds an idea that the war and mechanized production destructs the natural beauty and creates a variety of ecological crisis between man and nature, man and man and the spiritual parts of human beings in modern society. Then, He begins to look for ways to overcome ecological crisis. The hero "Nick" in Hemingway's short stories grows up with the gradual formation of his ecological consciousness such as "respect for life," "rebuilding the ecological holism to nature" and "remembrance of nature." Their reverence to nature and being integrated in nature sets an example for us who are in

the era of ecology.

Therefore, from an ecological perspective to study Hemingway and his short stories, it's helpful to understand Hemingway's works deeply and awaken human beings' ecological consciousness by exploring the performance of his hero's ecological dilemma and their returning to nature. Nick, the main hero in the series of Nick Adams Stories, develops Hemingway's ecological consciousness gradually in his growing-ups. When Nick is a child in "Indian Camp", his father takes him to Indian camp to help an Indian wife to deliver a child. He experiences the life and death through the new-born baby from the dystocia wife. Then he gets the primary ecological thoughts of reverence of life and death. When Nick is growing up, he is completely disappointed, even loses his belief after the war. When he returns to nature after the wounds which he gets from war, he is calm and lives a plain life in "The Big Two-Hearted River." When Nick is a father and drives to his hometown with his little son, he reminds himself of the memories in his childhood and the strong desire of missing his dead father. All release him. He recalls to all the beauties in nature in "Fathers and Sons."

Hemingway informs his ecological view of human and nature in his whole literary career which is the ecological harmony between man and nature, man and man and the inner part of man themselves in the mid-20th century. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, because of human's greed, militancy, human being's experience two World-Wars. In his early works such as "The Big Two-Hearted River" and "Fathers and Sons," etc., Nick, in the course of his teenager growth, witnesses the ecological dilemma in the society, especially the ecological alienation between man and nature, man and man and the inner part in human beings after experiencing the deep hardship of the war and the extreme disappointment with the post-war life. People pursue pleasure and stimulation from disillusionment and emptiness, but they cannot get rid of mental and physical pain and suffering. In Hemingway's post-war trilogy: *The Sun Also Rises* (1927), *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), human society in Hemingway's works has developed materially, but people are often tedious. Although he is scanty to describe the nature, all the descriptions are impressive. Human beings regard nature as the source of spiritual strength, trying to return to nature and seek for spiritual sustenance and relief in nature. Meanwhile, Hemingway uses the main hero Nick in his short stories to represent himself to deliver his earlier simple ecological idea, questioning that the development of modern civilization is to the cost of destroying the ecology. At the same time, he sincerely praises the value of nature to show the desire of the pursuit to human beings' back to nature and the ecological harmony between man and

nature, man and man and the inner part of human beings.

What's more, Hemingway's short stories whose hero is Nick Adams reflect the ecological problems on social issues. After The First World War, the Lost Generation cannot really achieve harmony with nature, instead their sense of alienation and loneliness increase. To find the spiritual home in their growing up is the eternal pursuit and common experience of human beings. In Hemingway's works the heroes put in the bosom of nature and rehabilitate in nature away from the hustle and bustle of the world; the heroes recover themselves original simplicity, giving up the pursuit of material and relive a simple natural life; the heroes look at nature as the spiritual home of humanity and are in full integration with nature. Meanwhile, Hemingway emphasizes to love and respect for life and nature, and understand and esteem the nonhuman beings. He regards all living creatures as individuals with full equality and unity. Not only can he identify with their sufferings, but also make his own efforts to protect them. In American literature few literature works have this unique perspective of a systemic ecological view and its social significance of Hemingway's Nick Adams Stories. According to Hemingway, the nature is the source of his life. Love of nature and demands for knowledge of nature are main themes in his writings. The thesis mainly interprets and emphasizes the subject of Hemingway's ecological consciousness from the perspective of Hemingway's short stories, that is, ecological harmony is the end-result of human and nonhuman beings.

### **Ecological Consciousness of Respecting for Life**

"Respect for Life," a concept that develops from observation of the world around us, says that the only thing human beings are really sure of is that they live and want to go on living. This is something that they share with everything else that lives, from elephants to blades of grass, and every human being. So they are brothers and sisters to all living things, and owe to all of them the same care and respect. Schweitzer writes: "True philosophy must start from the most immediate and comprehensive fact of consciousness and this may be formulated as follows: 'I am life which wills to live, and I exist in the midst of life which wills to live'" (Schweitzer 253). In nature, one form of life must always prey upon another. However, human consciousness holds an awareness of, and sympathy for, the will of other beings to live. An ethical human strives to escape from this contradiction so far as possible. Though human beings cannot perfect the endeavor they should strive for it: the will-to-live constantly renews it, for it is both an evolutionary necessity and a spiritual phenomenon. Life and love are rooted in this same

principle, in a personal spiritual relationship to the universe. Ethics themselves proceed from the need to respect the wish of other beings to exist as one does towards oneself.

"Indian Camp" is the first short story in *In Our Time*. The short story shows the emergence of Hemingway's ecological dilemma of life and death which permeate much of his subsequent works. In the story, Nick's father, a country doctor, has been summoned to deliver a baby for a woman who has been in labor for days, with Nick and his uncle going along with him to paddle a canoe across a lake to an Indian camp. At the camp, they find the woman in a cabin lying on the bottom of a bunk; above, laying her husband with an injured foot. While Nick holds a basin as his assistant, his father performs an emergency cesarean section using a jack knife. Afterward, Nick's father realizes the woman's husband has fatally slit his throat with a razor during the operation. In the end, Nick and his father, in the canoe, on the lake, paddle away from the camp. Nick asks his father why the woman's husband kills himself, as he silently tells himself he would never die. Here, "life" and "death" is the intact circle in the whole ecosystem. Because of his reverence for life, he believes in his never dying. Reverence for life refers to the reverence of all life in nature, especially human's life. The existence of life is valuable. Life is dignity. Status and rights cannot be replaced and redeemed. Life itself is priceless, and the supreme. Without life, the value of life would be impossible. Life's existence is premised on its development; with life, it can be valuable. Life is the prerequisite and basis for value. Human beings have to revere for life, with the purpose of arousing the man's concern of the dignity of life, and make them realize the true meaning of life, the true value of life, and then seek way out of ecological dilemma.

Nick's first understanding on "death and life" starts at the lake. Lake is the dividing line. This side of lake is Nick's better world, while the other side of lake is full of a fallen, suffering and injustice world. When Nick comes from lake with his father to visit a patient in Indian Camp, he is an appearance of innocence, and when he comes back, Nick has said farewell to the little boy's innocence and set foot on the road leading to worldly adults' life. What is the key of his growing up? That is to learn to face the absurdity of life and the horrors of death. Nick deeply realizes that life is a competition with death in the battlefield, where pleasure and pain, hope and loss are mixed, neither can hide nor escape. Nick has to face to the "death" by the woman's husband who commits suicide in this story. The husband, perhaps, commits suicide because he is driven frantic by his wife's pain, and perhaps his own. Standing before the dilemma of the will to live, a person is constantly forced

to preserve his own life. If he has been touched by the ethic of respecting for life, he destroys life only under a necessity he cannot stand for or avoid it. For Schweitzer, mankind has to accept that objective reality is ethically neutral. It could then affirm a new enlightenment through spiritual rationalism, by giving priority to volition or ethical will as the primary meaning of life. Mankind has to choose to create the moral structures of civilization: the world-view must derive from the life-view, not vice-verse (Schweitzer 20). Respect for life, overcoming coarser impulses and hollow doctrines, leads the individual to live in the service of other people and of every living creature. In contemplation of the will to live, respect for the life of others becomes the highest principle and the defining purpose of humanity. Here, Hemingway gives readers the thought-provoking space to indicate Nick's strong desire of living forever, which is the strong insistence of "reverence for life." Hemingway's work is more complex with a representation of the truth inherent. If nothingness is existed, then redemption is achieved at the moment of death. The human beings who face death with dignity and courage could live an authentic life. Respect for life is the basic emotion that people have to pay back to nature and thanks to the mother of the land.

This story is the start of Nick's experience of life and death which exists in the series of Hemingway's short stories to implicate his ecological consciousness: reverence for life, which claims that life and death is in a circle. Life and death is the connected process of the whole life. Once people died, which means his or her life would rebirth in another process of life. The new life is beginning. From the ecological view, as the tiny part of the whole nature, living or dying is just the different course. The integral life is a circle without any destination.

### **Ecological Consciousness of Rebuilding the Ecological Holism**

Ecological holism is the key of ecological thoughts, which figures that all the creatures existed in nature; the entire process of nature and ecosystem should be considered as an ecological concern. A holistic community is the highly integrated unit that operates by itself with little interaction with surrounding communities. From the ecological holism, a holistic community is one where the species within the community are interdependent on each other for keeping balance and stability of the ecosystem. It considers that the whole world looks like a super organism, meaning that every species which is a member of the community plays an important part in the overall well-being of the ecosystem; much like the organelles within a cell, or even the cells making up one organism. Holistic communities have diffused boundaries, and an independent species range. Co-evolution is likely to be found in

communities, as a result of the interdependence and high rates of interaction among the different populations.

In "Big Two-Hearted River," Hemingway describes Nick's mentality in original nature by trip, camping and fishing which is far from the civilized society. Nick suffers a lot in The First World War and hopes to return to the mother of land to recover him. As long as being close to nature, Nick's hurt heart begins to revive and his soul is inspired. Nick gradually realizes the co-existence with nature is the process to recognize him. There is a vivid description of the nature in the beginning of the story.

The train went on up the track out of sight, around one of the hills of burnt timber. Nick sat down on the bundle of canvas and bedding the baggage man had pitched out of the door of the baggage car. There was no town, nothing but the rails and the burned-over country. The thirteen saloons that had lined the one street of Seney had not left a trace. The foundations of the Mansion House hotel stuck up above the ground. The stone was chipped and spilt by the fire. It was all that was left of the town of Seney. Even the surface had been burned off the ground. (Hemingway 163)

The scenery is the reflection of Nick's physical experience and mental representation. The high-tech armed war, which is the background of the story, leaves ruin and pain and remediation. A mess of plants and animals lose their habitat because of destroy of the earth. Human beings need to seriously rethink over their actions. The peace in the world is the common wish of man in the earth. In order to protect the sole planet for human and nonhuman living, human beings should stop their cruel battle to hold a better place for creatures in ecosystem to live in.

Along with the advance of the plot, the story describes Nick's understanding of ecological holism by his treatment to other creatures in nature. As Nick tries to interact with nature closely, a change occurs in the story, coming alive with his continually stabilizing condition. As Nick hikes through a burned-out forest he notices grasshoppers that have turned black from the effects of the fire which burns down the town, as well as the passivity of the trout in the river, resting in the current rather than fighting upstream.

Nick also realizes, upon stepping off the train in Seney, and seeing the "burned-over stretch of hillside," that he himself has changed just as much as the land had. The reference of the hopper's blackness caused by fire in this story is an ecological

warning:

Now, as he watched the black hopper that was nibbling at the wool of his sock with its four-way lip, 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. Carefully he reached his hand down and took hold of the hopper by the wings. He turned him up, all his legs walking in the air, and looked at his jointed belly. (Hemingway 165)

Nick lets the hopper fly away somewhere finally. When he wants to catch the trout, he “has to wet his hand before he touches the trout, so he would not disturb the delicate mucus that covered him. If a trout is touched with a dry hand, a white fungus attacks the unprotected spot” (Hemingway 179).

At the end of the story, Nick returns to nature wholeheartedly for his recovery from the brutal war. Nick catches a small fish, and releases it, knowing that the larger fish are to be had. Soon, he strikes a big fish: “There was a long tug. Nick struck and the rod came alive and dangerous, bent double, the line tightening, coming out of the water, tightening, all in a heavy, dangerous, steady pull” (Hemingway 180). Nick enjoys the moment when the fish leader would break if the strain increases and lets the line go. After the big fish gets away, Nick proceeds to catch two medium-sized fish and is satisfied with them. He begins to lose interest in fishing and instead wishes that he could have a book to read. Eventually, he notices a swamp upstream and thinks about the complications of fishing in it. Nick tries to fish in the swamp. Nature’s function of comforting man’s heart makes Nick regain the confidence and psychological balance in the process of his close relationship with nature. He drops his pack and rod-case and looks for a level piece of ground. He pulls out all the sweet fern bushes. His hands smell good from the sweet fern. Inside the tent the light comes through the brown canvas which smells pleasantly. Already there is something mysterious and homelike. Nick is happy as he crawls inside the tent. Nature embraces Nick’s wound body and hurt heart and supplies the necessities of living.

In this story, Hemingway explores his ecological consciousness of ecological holism. The human and nonhuman world should be in harmony to maintain the sustainability of the earth. The mercy of the wild nature recovers human beings and makes them more energetic and enthusiastic.



### **Ecological Consciousness of Remembrance of Nature**

Ecosystem is a biological environment consisting of all the organisms living in a particular area, as well as all the nonliving, physical components of the environment with which the organisms interact, such as air, soil, water, and sunlight. Human and nonhuman in the Earth should live in a harmonious life together. They revere and respect each other within the ecosystem. All creatures in the world are parts of the ecosystem and could not exist separately. The notion of ecosystem is based on the idea that the more human beings expand the “self” to identify with “others,” the more they realize themselves. The whole ecosystem is a recurrence of life and death in order to keep the balance.

“Fathers and Sons” is one of Hemingway’s well-known short stories. Nick grows up and forms his own family. He drives on his way with his little son to their hometown. On the trip, the little son is curious to know what the old hometown looks like many years ago. Through the communication with his son, Nick reminds himself of his hometown in his heart. There are so many memories. What he used to do when he was a child, and how the relationship with his parents was going on. He memorized his father with whom he admires a lot and shares the memory of his father with his little son. This is a recalled journey to become responsible for the family and construct the new relationship between fathers and sons. At the end of the story, Nick decides to be a better father who would set a good example for his beloved son.

At the beginning of the story, Nick drives through Northern Michigan. With the memory of his childhood, Nick imagines to view the raw living condition and the beautiful scene in his hometown. But the reality is completely beyond his imagination:

If it is your town and you have walked under the heavy trees, that are a part of your heart, but they are only too heavy that shut out sun and dampen the houses for a stranger. When passing the last house and being onto the highway that rose and fell straight away ahead with banks of red dirt sliced cleanly away and the second-growth timber on both sides. It was not his town. (Hemingway 369)

It not only tells Nick’s tender and repulsive psychology of his hometown, but also the elementary influence of Nick’s feeling of nature. In primitive times, the productivity in that area is most laggard. The relationship between man and nature

is the passive obedience which mainly represents the reverence and veneration of nature because of the lack of knowledge of nature and scientific understanding of the order of nature. The internal mechanism to constitute the activities of daily communication and organization is the typical mode of naturalism of being obedient of nature. It's said that the mode of civilization in primitive times has a strong ease of adherence and reverence of nature.

When Nick drives by a farm which does not get out of use,

The cotton was picked and in the clearings there were patches of corn, some cut with streaks of red sorghum. Moving here, he easily enjoyed the natural scene in the farm. As his love of hunting, he noticed hunting in his mind as he went by, sizing up each clearings as to feed and cover and figuring where he would find a covey and which way they would fly. (Hemingway 369)

At this point, Nick remembers an important rule to hunt taught by his father: "If shooting quail you must not get between them and their habitual cover, once the dogs have found them, or when they flush they will come pouring at you, some rising steep, some skimming by your ears, whirring into a size you have never seen them in the air as they pass" (Hemingway 369). This is not only the memories of his father's instruction of the techniques, but also the sincere love for father and son. When Nick understands what his father has done for him, Nick's complicated feelings mixed with hate, anger and remorse shocked himself and he could not know what to do. All of such experience is just like the unexpected dagger wings of birds blow.

Whenever Nick recalls his father, the first image occurs in his mind is his father's eyes. The eyes are very sharp to see all the changes and movements in nature. They are the bridge to connect human beings and nature. His father who is familiar with nature dies in a trap that he and his son set. The way of ending instructs that human beings must bear the serious consequences after their damage of the balance of nature.

In the story, Nick also recalls the land where he lived in his childhood with the local Indians. At that time, "there was a trail which ran from the cottage through the woods to the farm and then by a road through the slashing to the camp. There was virgin forest where the trees grew high" (Hemingway 372). Nick remembers the feeling of stepping on the entire trail with bare feet. The Indians there once lived a sustainable way of life. They picked fruit and nuts and took bark, sap, sepia and remedy from the forests. They did not easily damage trees, only using fallen leaves

to light a fire to cook. They worshiped trees' regeneration ability and the power of serving food for them. But now, the hemlock bark is piled in long rows of stacks; the trees have been felled, just leave the logs. "There was less forest and more open, hot and weed-grown slashing" (Hemingway 372). Owing to the development of modern civilization, human beings try to make fortune from the abuse of deforestation. They finally destroy the balance of ecosystem.

Hemingway states his ecological consciousness from this story and call attention to learn lessons from the past and to revere for nature. It's totally necessary to reach the harmonious coexistence of human beings and nature, man and society, man and man and the inner part of human beings. As long as the ecosystem is in balance, the sustainable development would be realized.

### Conclusion

The environment has been in an increasingly serious threat. The true intrinsic basis of ecological crisis incompletely lies in the relation between man and nature, but in the modern people's belief crisis, which is exhibited as deepening human being's violence to nature and continuously potential destroy threatening of the antagonism between man and society. Therefore, the current ecological crisis is the direct ripple effect caused by humanity's immensurable conquer, without criticizing and thinking. Mankind only timely stop and change their way of thinking or cultural concepts could the relation between man and nature walk up to the benign development track. Modern civilization culture, especially in the process of industrial and technical development, has been completely lost or forgotten its ecological roots. The ecological dilemma of the people brought about by industrial civilization makes artists be filled with of fear, decadence, numbness and even despair. With the deteriorating global environment, we must recognize culture cannot be continuously separated with the entire ecosystem. Thus, the new vision of the literary criticism with extension to nature is ecological criticism. Though it cannot reverse the development trend of industrial civilization which has been devastating to the natural environment, it can digest the world view on opposing and separating against man and nature; animadvert on the anthropocentric ideas of subversion to conquer nature, control nature, profligate abuse of natural resources; awaken of the human beings' sense of numbness as a tool in the utilitarian driven and re-look for the lost ecological harmonious pastoral ideal in the industrial civilization.

Hemingway loves nature and shows his ecological consciousness in his works. The love of nature and the demand for knowledge of nature are the fundamental

themes in his writings. Studying Nick's respect of life and fear of death which is the most basic human cognition and ecological modality in the theory of reverence for life in Nick's childhood represented by "Indian Camp" at the beginning of *In Our Time*, the importance of willing to live to revere for life and death is learned. Nick is first disturbed by the spiritual ecological crisis that whether people could die or not in his childhood. He therefore points back to that elemental part of us that can be in touch with the will and attain what he feels quite sure, that is if human beings die, their death is another way to live a new life in the ecosystem's circle. Life gains to get long in the trial of disputing and fighting, and in which death inspires the endless love. The will-to-live is both an evolutionary necessity and a spiritual phenomenon. Life and love are rooted in this same principle and in a personal spiritual relationship to the universe; Studying Nick's consciousness of ecological holism in his youth by "The Big Two-Hearted River," it's learned that the core idea of ecological holism is to take the ecosystem's whole benefit rather than the benefit of mankind as the highest value. Whether it is conducive to maintaining and protecting the ecosystem's integrity, stability, balance and sustainable development is the fundamental measure of all things and the ultimate standard to judge human's life style. "Big Two-Hearted River" notes Nick's trip from war. His camping and fishing in his trip actually reflects his mentality in original nature far from civilized society. Along with his intimate touch with nature, Nick's numb heart is awoken and his soul is relieved. Nick profoundly understands himself and co-exists with nature in the process of cognizing nature; Studying Nick's recalling to natural beauty in his adulthood by "Fathers and Sons", the significance of developing the harmonious relationship with human and nonhuman is known. Because of human beings' destruction of nature, nature warns them to rebuild the ecological harmony for the sustainable development of the whole world. "Fathers and Sons" is to describe Nick's social character's changing to be a father. Nick drives with his son through a small town where he spends his childhood, and he begins to recall all the beauties in nature and has a strong desire to return to nature. This is a recalling journey. Nick recalls his own childhood, his father and the beautiful nature in his hometown, which is actually his introspection of ecological relationships between man and nature and man and man. The whole journey is filled with a feeling of the mourning love of earth, and a sense of recalling to natural beauty.

According to Hemingway and his ecological view in his works, it's realized that the nature is the source of human beings' life. The love of nature and the demand for knowledge of nature go with people's whole life. Human beings regard nature as the source of spiritual strength, trying to return to nature and seek for

spiritual sustenance and relief in nature, which is not only the constant theme of Hemingway's works, but also the eternal theme of ecological literature and dreams.

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