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"A Comparative Look at John Muir and Sue Hubbell: The Relationship between Nature and Human Culture"

Nature writers John Muir and Sue Hubbell have led strikingly different lives which is reflected in their individual writing styles. Muir's narrative is a linear journey where he tries to find himself out in the wilderness, while Hubbell's is a cyclical model that deals more with an introspective type of reflection that can only occur when one is surrounded by the natural world. Despite the differences between the two, Muir and Hubbell share more similarities than contrasts. One similarity is that they both deal with the same subjects in order to underscore their environmental philosophies. From the ecology of the land, to tourism, to learning to live with human culture, these two nature writers share a core environmental belief that when people cast aside the abstractions of human culture they are able to gain a spiritual connection with nature. For both writers the tedious problems and worries of human culture distracts us from learning and becoming part of a larger reality of life that is found in nature.

A major difference between John Muir's My First Summer in the Sierra and Sue Hubbell's A Country Year is each author's motivation for their own separate experiences. Muir accepts the job as the shepherd's keeper because he says it will allow him to travel to Yosemite. The underlying reason, though, is that this is a journey of Muir discovering himself and holiness in the wilderness. Before the journey he is full of self-doubt as he states that, "I judged, however, that I was in no way the right man for the place, and freely explained my shortcomings, . . ." (4). Over the course of his journey, Muir overcomes fear and doubt as he faces off with a black bear, becomes the first person to climb Cathedral Peak, and precipitously stands on the edge of a two thousand foot drop at Yosemite Falls. Like Mr. Delaney in the beginning, Muir comes to trust himself, and as a result, he does not question his own ability to connect with nature. Since Muir is emotionally and spiritually connected to everything in nature, his observations and experiences go beyond the disciplines of biology, botany, and geology; they go beyond the sciences and into the metaphysical. The central theme of Muir's narrative and his best lesson is not ecology, but is almost religious as he learned of the unity and interrelation of the human spirit with nature. This is best summed up when Muir states that, "We are now in the mountains, and they are in us, . . ." (15-16).

There is also this same sense of uncertainty and doubt in the beginning of A Country Year, but it stems from not knowing what the future holds, as opposed to self-doubt. One reason that Hubbell is filled with questions about life is because her experiences in nature are shaped by the loss of her marriage, and the questions, in part, stem from the sense of uncertainty that this loss has created. Reflecting on this in her forward, Hubbell states that, "there are more questions than answers" (XIV). Yet, instead of allowing herself to become confused by these questions, she embraces them and strives to live them, and through the act of life the questions become not so important as the living. Hubbel's narrative, like Muir's, is about observing the world around us.

While Muir can be considered a nomad since he seeks to separate himself from human culture and his journey is more an aimless ramble, Hubbell is domestic in the sense that she is rooted in one place and strives to maintain a connection with human culture. Her cabin and land she owns in the Ozarks is representational of Arcadia, Hubbell's attempt to bring the best of human culture and nature together, unlike Muir who strives for a strict dichotomy between the two. In order to reflect this relationship, Hubbell's observations tend to be more domestic than

Muir's. Most of her observations are in relation to running a home or farm, or in Hubbell's case a bee farm. She deals with creatures most people can find at home, creatures with a "domestic" lifestyle. The fact that wildness can be found inside and around the home, and not just in the wilderness, is a reason most people despise cockroaches, termites, brown recluse spiders, moths and their ear mites, snakes, and coyotes. These observations of Hubbell's are reflected in the fact that she sees the natural world as an integral part of everyday existence where the garden outside the front door, such as Hubbell's bee hives, provides an experience as immediate and direct as Muir's Sierra Nevada mountains.

A problem both nature writers struggle with is the tourist. In My First Summer in the Sierra Yosemite is portrayed as already being a tourist attraction. By the time Muir arrives in the Sierras, Yosemite is already a major tourist destination. As his party approaches Yosemite the excitement begins to bubble over in Muir so that he cannot help but press Yosemite onto his own shepherd, Billy, as if it was the gospel. Muir's selling point is the awesome waterfalls, to which Billy replies that people should stay away from them because of how dangerous they are. "There is nothing worth seeing anywhere, . . . Tourists that spend their money to see rocks and falls are fools, . . ." (147). Muir silently remarks to himself that Billy fails to see nature's glory because he is smothered "beneath mean pleasures and cares" (147), which cause him to become so intertwined with the trappings of society that he fails to see anything outside of human culture, specifically sheep culture. Later, Muir believes this scenario will be different with his professor friend because if anyone will understand the beauty of Yosemite, it will be the educated professor. Yet, even though he understands nature, the professor is too busy to appreciate what it is that he is studying. Muir sadly learns that the professor and his entourage do not have the time to stay and enjoy Yosemite's natural wonders. Muir becomes "surprised to learn they are to leave the valley to-morrow or next day" (186). Muir then concludes that he is happy to be so overlooked by human culture and society that he is not required to be anywhere.

In contrast to Muir, Hubbell is not as inviting to the tourists who come to the Ozarks. She uses some of the creatures around her home as guardians that help keep the flow of tourists down, much like Cerberus of Greek Mythology who was the three-headed dog that guarded the entrance to Hades. Hubbell says that there is much psychomythology about snakes and most of it is contradictory, yet most people's fears are not based on rational thought and "Hubbell likes to show that many humans react to some creatures—for example, snakes and poisonous spiders—out of ignorance and fear, which makes for poor observation: 'It is hard to tell what a snake is up to if you are running away from it or killing it' (53)" (Allister 47).

Hubbell also talks about the brown recluse spider, which like the snakes, is turned into a scary beast by human culture because people do not properly observe the world around them. She says that most people's reaction to the spider's bite is no worse than that of a mosquito. Yet, this tiny house spider, like the snakes, serves its purpose in keeping people out of the Ozarks. In this respect, Hubbell is like Muir in that she "has extended public understanding to a branch of the animal world that people don't tend to accord much respect" (Holmes 150-51). For Muir's tourists and shepherds truly do not accord Yosemite the respect it deserves.

Even though Muir is not an overt polemicist, in him there is a gentle, kinder, more subdued version of polemics. This is best seen when he observes the tourists fishing on the banks of the Merced River, which unlike Hubbell's tourists, these people fail to see the beauty about them. Muir notes that most of the tourists were looking down, completely unaware of the sublime beauty playing above them in the form of waterfalls. These "wise-looking people" were spearing worms onto fish hooks in order to catch trout:

> Sport they called it. Should church-goers try to pass the time fishing in baptismal fonts while dull sermons were being preached, the so-called sport might not be so bad; but to play in the Yosemite temple, seeking pleasure in the pain of fishes struggling for their lives, while God himself is preaching his sublimest water and stone sermons! (190)

This is the climax of Muir's sermons. He equates Yosemite to a temple of God and becomes incensed at the tourists who may as well be fishing in sacred baptismal pools. Just for a moment Muir becomes like an angry prophet of God scolding the straying Israelites. Then, like a Sierra summer thunderstorm, the torrent has passed and all is once again calm and peaceful as Muir reflects back on his friend and former professor.

Drawing a stark contrast with Muir, Hubbell does not engage in "nature sermons," nor does she attempt to convince people to see the natural world from her point of view. The best evidence that Hubbell is not a polemicist is in the dam episode. Here she is offered a prime opportunity to become one, but she tries to diffuse the situation by looking humorously at both sides of the argument. Even though she is staunchly against the dam, she reveals her role as mediator when she says that "Once I tried to stop a war, . . ."(168), perhaps referring more to the dam episode than Vietnam. Hubbell deals with "progress" very differently from Muir, where Hetch Hetchy Valley was "an ecological disaster that Muir denounced with prophetic fury, . . ." (McKusick 172). Hubbell approaches the issue of the dam in a very calm and matter-of-fact manner. In a rather unemotional style that is relatively free from bias, she presents both sides of the issue, then looks at the facts, and arrives at the conclusion that people are getting themselves worked up for no reason because the dam was never a feasible option in the first place.

Despite Muir's intense dislike for blindness to natural wonder that stems from being chained to human culture, even he cannot escape the chains of the economy. Muir's economic concern becomes evident during the bread famine, with the bread representing humanity's daily worry, and when the bread runs out all preoccupations become focused on getting more bread. On his travels Muir is constantly seeking refuge in nature from human culture, but the irony is that bread is one of the oldest products of human culture. Even Muir's enlightened walks into the wilderness become dimmed when he says that he is "Rather weak and sickish this morning, and all about a piece of bread. Can scarce command attention to my best duties, as if one couldn't take a few days' saunter in the Godful woods without maintaining a base on wheat-field and gristmill" (77). Muir becomes like the sheep from an earlier episode when they gained their freedom and did not know what to do with it, they "seemed glad to get back into the old familiar bondage" (57). In the same way, Muir becomes glad to be back in the bondage of the economy when Mr. Delaney arrives with more stores of bread. In a twist of irony, as soon as he is chained to the economy again, Muir turns his "eyes to the mountains, and to-morrow we go climbing toward cloudland" (83).

Unlike Muir, Hubbell has no qualms about lingering between the natural world and the capitalist economy of human culture. Hubbell's connection to the economy is the bees she keeps, through which, "She built up a substantial business and wrote an entire book about it, *A Book of Bees*, published in 1988" (Holmes 153). Part of Hubbell's business is labeling the honey jars, which is the work of human culture. Like Muir's shepherds who become blinded to the natural world through their quest for wealth, Hubbell admits that the label-pasting "machine is so noisy that I can't listen to the radio, . . ." (158) and that "pasting label after label neatly and precisely

makes me sleepy and dull" (158). The final stage in Hubbell's business is the selling and marketing of her honey. She would leave her world of the Ozarks for the urban centers of Dallas, Boston, and Manhattan where she would spend weeks on the road as a traveling saleswoman, but when she leaves the work of the economy behind and returns to her home in the Ozarks, Hubbell is "grateful, and I always am, to turn at the mailbox and head down my lane" (117). In this sense, Hubbell, who hovers between the culture of economy and the culture of rural life, is to a certain extent what Gretel Ehrlich calls a "culture straddler" (86) because, as Hubbell states, "Living even the modestly domestic life that I do in a wild place requires a constant balancing act" (204).

The most unifying similarity between the two authors is that they live with and appreciate what they cannot understand. Muir gives us the example of his biting ants. He admits that he "can't understand the need of their ferocious courage; there seems to be no common sense in it" (44), but yet, at the same time, Muir becomes reminiscent of Thoreau as he admires the intense industry of these creatures. Another instance of Muir admiring an incomprehensible creation is with the poison oak. Even though most people find the plant troublesome and problematic, Muir notices that it "blends harmoniously" in with the other plants and that "Like most other things not apparently useful to man, . . . the blind question, 'Why was it made?' goes on and on with never a guess that first of all it might have been made for itself" (26). With this statement Muir is working to bridge the divide that was created by Descartes and the other Cartesian philosophers between human culture and the natural world. One of the consequences of Cartesian rationalism is that nature is now viewed as a material entity that has no value outside of human culture.1 According to this rationale, if humans find no value in poison oak, then we return to the question of "Why was it made?" Muir explains that the fault is not in the poison oak, but in ourselves since we fail to see the plant's value outside of ourselves.

Hubbell finds common ground with Muir in that she also lives with the creatures whose value and purpose she fails to understand, such as the cockroaches. Hubbell always used to kill the roaches that she would find in her beehives. Even though she has not discovered why the roaches were made, Hubbell has found out that her bees can take care of themselves in regards to them and that roaches in a beehive are an indicator of an unhealthy hive. Roaches remain a mystery to Hubbell, but she has learned to take advantage of them because now when she discovers roaches in a beehive, Hubbell says that she "had better find out what is wrong with it rather than kill its roaches" (137). A creature whose meaning that Hubbell grasps even less than the cockroaches is the chigger. She understands the insect's life cycle and why they attach themselves to human hosts, but she cannot bring herself to comprehend why they were even made at all. Instead of fretting over this question, like Annie Dillard for whom this would be an essential question, Hubbell embraces it with a blend of humor and philosophy that only she can create. In regards to why chiggers were made she says that "This is one of those biological puzzles that I find cheering—untidy, unresolved, a reminder that the results are not yet all in, that we do not have the final forms, nor all the answers. We are still in process, chiggers, humans and the rest" (67).

Muir and Hubbell are similar in that they both respect and admire the creations in nature that they cannot understand. However, Hubbell goes one step further than Muir in trying to get a grasp on this complexity. Hubbell realizes that the more she looks to nature for the answers, the more questions she comes across. The summer afternoon that Hubbell observes a monarch butterfly larvae fall off of a milkweed plant, only to return to the exact same leaves the insect had been eating, serves to remind Hubbell about a quote from a physicist concerning the unknowable complexity of life. Hubbell and her cousin Asher, an entomologist, simply shook their heads in

wonder as she refers to James Jean saying that "we live in a world that is not only queerer than we think but queerer than we can think" (83). While Muir admires the complexity of nature, Hubbell admires the magnitude and the "queerness" of that complexity. The lesson from Hubbell is that life is baffling and "there are more questions than answers" (XIV). However, instead of letting ourselves become overwhelmed by the sheer volume of what we do not know, Hubbell inspires us to embrace life's mysteries and to not simply live with the questions, but to learn to live the questions in order to receive a true understanding about nature.

At first glance, John Muir and Sue Hubbell are contrasts to each other in regards to human culture. Muir wants as little to do with human culture as he can get away with, while Hubbell only wants to escape the problems of society. Yet, under the surface these two authors share many similarities at the core of their individual philosophies. The one message that is intertwined throughout My First Summer in the Sierra is that we are spiritually intertwined with the land, not just in an ecological sense, but that nature is a part of our being and a part of our spiritual selves. Likewise, at the core of Hubbell's writings we find the same message. When we leave the worries of human culture behind, Hubbell challenges "us to shift our attention from the endless distractions of the techno-urban lifestyle of the early twenty-first century and enter into the larger reality of life and land that enfolds and supports us" (Anderson 1). Like John Muir, Sue Hubbell also believes in the unity and interrelation of the human spirit with the natural world.

Notes

1. For a more in depth discussion concerning this argument see Pete A.Y. Gunter's essay "The Disembodied Parasite and Other Tragedies; or: Modern Western Philosophy and How to Get Out of It" in The Wilderness Condition: Essays on Environment and Civilization (Sierra Club Book, 1992) edited by Max Oelschlaeger.

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