



## Contextualising Environmental Vision of American Wilderness in Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*

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### Abstract

This paper explores how the American wilderness is represented in Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* (1968). The idea of the wilderness is subjective because of each one's personal meaning: it is not easy to define. When writing about the desert, Abbey's vision is extremely unexpected because it presents a unique perspective on what is typically thought of as the wilderness. It is a complicated and even conflicting idea. The physicality of the desert heightens the distinction, which is the primary theme of *Desert Solitaire* rather than the triumph of separation. Additionally, it serves as a trip guide, offering readers who wish to tour the Southwest thorough markings. Abbey shared the belief that all life on the Earth is interconnected. He evokes a sense of mystery and wonder for the unknown by using the metaphors of the water and the countryside. The reader's aesthetic sense is stimulated by the untamed rivers, rocky cliffs, craggy lakes, and the untainted beauty of the desert, which makes them consider the splendour and strength of a different planet. Much of Abbey's activism is reflected in his work, which conjures an environmental ethic. He promotes the preservation of a reciprocal interaction between humans and nature in his book. He promotes a deeper awareness of the natural world by making a vast and abstract environment understandable to the reader, which is crucial if we are to prevent the biosphere from degrading.

**Keywords:** Human, Earth, Nature, Wilderness, Desert

### 1. Introduction

Edward Abbey is one of the leading authors of American environmental literature. He is regarded as a legend in the field of nature writing. The environmental movement was significantly influenced by his writings. In addition to providing the movement with philosophical underpinnings, he made a highly useful contribution. At a time when religious fanaticism, environmentalist spirituality, and postmodernism are assaulting Western culture,



his literature has taken on new significance. A tendency that now has the propensity to see the wilderness as a victim rather than an adversary. Man starts to see how fragile his surroundings are. His perspective on the woods drastically shifts because of this new understanding.

Throughout the 18th century, philosophers exalt man's rational thinking and instinctual virtues; they dream of new social-political systems in which man's intrinsic dignity and capability would find fruition. Tyranny-ridden, war-ransacked, Europe is a weird site for rehabilitation of man, but the American wilderness which in the 17th and 18th centuries rose up as a pristine globe appeared an excellent testing field for the new notions of human nature. Man's confidence in the power of reason is strengthened by scientific growth, and America becomes the site where man's confidence can be validated.

## 2. Environmental Consciousness

With *Desert Solitaire*, Abbey established himself as the leading literary proponent of wilderness protection. It involves talking about environmental consciousness and putting out ideas about how essential social processes are necessary to maintain the resuscitation of wilderness regions. It is a declaration of his unwavering love for the wilderness and a passionate defence of it against the tourism and oil-mining sectors. It is difficult to categorise into a single writing genre; it might be interpreted as a candid memoir, a trip tale, or nature writing. Abbey argues in this book for the cultural and psychological significance of wilderness, which he believes is essential to shaping the American identity. Beyond the realm of human centrism, it is a defiant and nontraditional approach to wilderness development, a perfect combination of environmental justice and environmental ethics issues. According to Bill McKibben's *American Earth*, "it would be good to have Abbey as a guide if one is trying to move into the uncharted territory beyond anthropocentrism" (413).



*Desert Solitaire* chronicles Abbey's time working as a park ranger in the Glen Canyon during the 1950s. It is both philosophical and anecdotal in its approach, and it is divided into eighteen sections, each of which is a moving depiction of the desert's beauty and majesty. In addition to expressing his unrivalled passion for the desert, it delves into important environmental justice and developmental concerns. His account of his first day of ranger duty opens the book. He is astounded by the desert's majesty and desolation as he finds himself at "the centre of the world, God's navel" (4). He calls the area "Abbey's country" and himself its magnificent "custodian," (5) demonstrating his overwhelming avarice and possessiveness. He envisions a world in which the person merges with the non-human environment while yet embracing uniqueness, as she stands there, removed from the bustle of civilisation, questioning the "bare bones of existence" (7). His portrayal of these deserts' landscapes, which evokes the ruthless roughness of the desert, helps to bridge the gap between man and nature.

## 2.1. Destruction of Ecosystem

Abbey's writing on the American West desert, which is not a pristine wilderness, allows him to enjoy nobility and tranquilly, which makes his view unique. He discovers the ethereal feeling of spaciousness that comes from being in the broad fields. He writes at the height of the counterculture movement and the emergence of contemporary environmentalism. He experiences a constant oscillation between social acceptance and alienation, which reflects a major conflict in American culture: the tension between civilisation and the wild. In *Desert Solitaire*, he expresses his dissatisfaction at seeing the southwestern region succumb to human craving and disdain for our needless destruction of the natural environment and want to leave civilisation. He believes that politicians have an obligation to protect the desert, which he views as the face of God. It must be protected for its own reason since it is a space large enough to accommodate his soul.



One of America's distinctive features is its breathtakingly beautiful, untamed landscapes; while there are some of these in Europe, they have been recognised for millennia. It is a fresh source of inspiration for authors and artists in America that they may use in a way that has never been done before. The 18th century's notion of the sublime gave rise to the belief that untamed landscapes may be appreciated on their own. The idea that nature possesses a certain dignity is the first indication of a love for the environment. The idea that "whether we live or die is a matter of absolutely no concern whatsoever for the desert" (267) is clearly communicated by Abbey. This proves that the desert does not care about us. It waits to be thought about; it does not care about men. What makes the desert so enticing to Abbey is the absence of any kindness whatsoever and the fact that it is devoid of all human characteristics. In a location with the fewest traces of human habitation, he discovers God. The desert is the area that has been least impacted by human activity; it is too hostile for people to live there. The only things left are God and the wilderness if there are no humans. Abbey's true religion, however, is the "religion of the Earth" more than pantheism. He aspires to become one with nature to create a committed link free from interference.

## 2.2. Nature and Wildness

We know from *Desert Solitaire* that Utah's arches are Abbey's personal haven. Although it is different for every one of us, the most beautiful spot on Earth is like our conception of Paradise. For Abbey, the love of the forest is the embodiment of Paradise. "Scorpions, tarantulas and flies, rattlesnakes and Gila monsters, cactus, yucca, bladder-weed, ocotillo and mesquite, flash floods and quicksand, and - disease and death and the rotting of the flesh" (167) are all features of his desert paradise, which is hardly an island. As a result, Abbey's Arcadia has the surprising capacity to transform into hell. For others, the wilderness may be nothing more than a leisurely wander. Everybody has a different definition of wilderness knowledge, and Abbey believes that his is insufficient. The way that illness and

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death are portrayed in Abbey's adaptation of Paradise is completely insufficient to the popular understanding of what Paradise means. This idea is consistent with the fact that American Arcadias are typically set in a wilderness that is implied to be in an innocent, original state that is outside the frontier in both space and time, rather than in a garden.

Because of his knowledge of the Utah desert and the firsthand experience he has gained there, Abbey speaks positively about it and even describe it as his paradise. During one of his adventures, he nearly killed when he collapsed in a narrow canyon. However, this experience did more than force him to face mortality; it made him understand that the desert is still his heaven, despite his total panic over the prospect of starvation. His attitude towards it remains unchanged despite this event; he understands the peril of travelling alone at his own risk, but even the fear of dying has not altered his viewpoint.

*Desert Solitaire* also aims to show us some facts about human nature, such as our desire to enjoy everything without having to work for it or deserve it. According to this book, we should have a shared relationship with nature rather than trying to usurp it as an object. We must give back to nature in return for what it has given us. It could be awe, joy, respect, humility, or something else entirely. We owe nature a debt. In the book about government policies regarding the wild and national parks, Abbey asks us to leave our cars behind and to be comfortable, even though we have no control over issues bigger than ourselves, such as climate change, population growth, and biodiversity loss. He never admits that there is nothing that can be done to address the economic and political issues facing American society.

### 2.3. Shared Relationship with Nature

The reader discovers that *Desert Solitaire* is a work about human attitude towards nature, human interactions with it, and human comprehension of it, rather than merely a depiction of the Utah Arches or the life of a ranger. This book tells us that even without the



need for exploration, one can still have a sense of discovery in nature. We must maintain the welfare of the wilderness to advance human prosperity. It is important to remember that all living things on Earth are related. Abbey thus identifies with a political viewpoint and uses writing to bring about some social counterrevolutions.

The idea that a wilderness withdrawal may no longer be the norm radically alters nature writing. Additionally, Abbey was among the first to emphasise the political state of our connection to the wilderness. He portrays humans in *Desert Solitaire* as a species that is utterly cut off from the natural world and determined to acculturate to whatever it encounters. Nature and mankind are not entirely distinct from one another, but they are also inherently not interchangeable. Being wild is what allows us to exist as a species, but we cannot assume that nature and humans are interchangeable. We are tamed animals with sophisticated economies, cultures, and ways of life. He only sees this tamed aspect of people, which seems to be the source of his distaste for civilised society. He fails to recognise that these individuals are also part of the wild, trying to make it in a confusing and complex civilisation. Although individuals are not at fault, it is a grave mistake for people to be split against wildness. It is a human mistake to be split against nature and wildness as doing so is a division against oneself. Because it is reductive, it limits our identity as animals to the boundaries of our own perception, which is always a mistake. It reduces our size and our dilemma to a weak and insignificant limpidity.

The magnificent splendour and complexity of Abbey's wildernesses are reduced to layered sidewalks and parking lots, demonstrating humanity's inevitable demise as it domesticates everything it encounters. He feels powerless because of her anxiety about human progress. Although he has a deep affection for his desert, he feels that industry is abusing the environment and that "civilised" intentions need to be malevolent. He adopts a



misanthropic stance, contending that regulating the human population is the only viable means of preserving wilderness areas.

In addition to recounting his experiences as a ranger, Abbey uses narrations in *Desert Solitaire* to depict the desert's celestial qualities and give the reader a sense of how strange and out of place a road in the middle of it would be. He captures the reader's interest by adopting an ecocentric viewpoint rather than an egotistical one. He wishes to dispel this mindset that views the world through the lens of the ego. *Desert Solitaire* can force the reader to adopt a nature-centred viewpoint rather than a human-centred one. The reader must experience a fundamental shift in values as Abbey comes to appreciate the beauty of the desert. Abbey enjoys using this knowledge to evoke emotion and, in doing so, make us aware of its vulnerability if men start to meddle with it. If there are too many visitors, the Arches will no longer be wilderness; if there are coke machines and paved roads throughout, the area will not create any wilderness.

The same thing Abbey produced has become ingrained in human culture. The introduction of many devices and appliances in the 1950s marked the beginning of this domestication. The television and the automobile are without a doubt the two items that most exemplify this domestication in America. As a result of our extreme habituation, wilderness protection is fundamental and should be utilised as a means of bringing us back to the world beyond our daily existence. Abbey, however, goes beyond just stating that wilderness has to be preserved for the benefit of humanity. "Our planet is our support system and is far more sacred than any anthropocentric projection and must not be profaned by human folly," (85) he says, compelling us to realise that the earth is a living thing and that all organisms are interconnected and intricate elements of a bigger organism.

The wilderness has intrinsic value, and Abbey tries to convey this to the reader by showing them several aspects of it: In *Desert Solitaire*, there are different physical processes



of examination. All these analyses enable the reader to see the other life forms that inhabit this planet and to understand that not everything that is valued to us is necessarily important. Abbey's discussion of his encounter with the snakes well illustrates the concept of ecocentrism. They are like "totemic deities watching me" (20) to him. Throughout the book, Abbey frequently comes across anthropomorphism and the attribution of human motivations to various animals. He criticises the human predicament by drawing a comparison between it and that of animals, who "do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins, they do not sweat and whine about their condition" (21).

#### **2.4. True Wilderness Experience**

Abbey views the wilderness more as a mindset than a tangible goal. Going into the wilderness will not guarantee that one will experience it; to enjoy a true wilderness experience like Abbey had when he nearly died, you must be willing to give up your daily comforts. He uses his writing as a platform to criticise and bemoan the state of the wilderness and laments that humans have lost their connection to the planet. He has a very pessimistic outlook; it will be too late even if the remaining wilderness is preserved. The only way to reverse the decline of the eagle, America's national symbol, would be the extinction of humanity, as radical environmentalists and deep ecologists contend.

Abbey discusses the connections between urban and nature areas in *Desert Solitaire*. The motorway puts both at risk: "The automobile combine has nearly succeeded in choking our cities; we must not allow it to obliterate our national parks as well" (52). Abbey asserts that mechanised tourists are the system's primary victims rather than humans endangering natural areas. The motorway and industrial tourism share the same goal, and Abbey proposes several modifications to the national parks that would counteract the growth. Vehicles are the biggest issue facing both the city and natural areas, and Abbey offers options for keeping parks car-free. Here, he positions himself as an administrator of natural areas rather than a





champion of the environment. He is primarily concerned with human experience. He addresses potential complaints, such as those pertaining to youngsters and the elderly, and provides alternative ideas to current motorway improvements. For example, Abbey hopes to increase the number of trails to promote natural areas. Instead, then ignoring people in natural areas, Abbey's development strategy makes it possible for more people to enjoy the outdoors.

The idea that the wilderness in nature writing is a place where no human life is observed is contradictory. The real wilderness areas, however, are inhabited areas. There is a dichotomy between the more competitive and more introspective uses of wilderness areas, which are contested locations. The conflict over sheep or hunters is a problem of several human concerns; while Abbey argues for more hunters, he is also arguing for the love of tourism.

## **2.5. Representation of the Natural World**

Abbey explains how the desert's exterior reality is transformed into personal and cultural experiences. Due to its low degree of meaning that is predetermined by cultural markers, the desert is an intriguing place. Even though the desert is one of the planet's most unchanging landscapes, its meaning is subject to change. To put it another way, the desert's location or outward reality is unalterable in relation to the human life cycle, therefore its use as a marker is open to creation and intervention. The power of the strange and unexpected to jolt the senses and force the mind out of its routines to force us into a re-enlightened consciousness of the wonderfulness is what Abbey attributes to Delicate Arch in *Desert Solitaire*, which serves as an example of this duality. According to Abbey's account of the "shock of the real" (37), being exposed to an unstructured outside world relativises past knowledge and encourages the development of personal markers. An unpleasant, delicate, fantastical object out of nature like Delicate Arch has the inquisitive power to prompt us that



there is another world out there, sustaining us. The desert serves as a reminder that much of the outside world is evident.

*Desert Solitaire* is a description of the author's remarkably unique exposure to the outside world with all its ambiguity rather than an attempt to depict nature. The reader is separated from that reality on two levels: first, the experience of the outside world is categorised as knowledge; second, the literary record of that information creates a marker rather than recreates the outside world. Through the book's depicted sights, this marker may guide the readers' own exposure to the outside world. Naming is an important aspect of depiction. Abbey is aware of the absurdity of naming, which frequently stems from a human sense of humour rather than any representation of the natural world.

### 3. Conclusion

Abbey emphasises that the desert must continue to be a no-man's land by telling visitors that it is vital to the well-being of society and that industrial tourism is partially to blame - more significantly, the visitors themselves. One may argue that Abbey's desire to be alone herself in the desert is highly exclusive. For him, visiting the desert is a way to experience a little bit of the remote and primal. Abbey may be arguing that the wilderness should endure for its own sake, for its inherent worth as a haven from civilisation. This perspective also gives rise to the notion that the condition of the wilderness is closely related to the infirmity of contemporary society.

Because it is groundbreaking and represents a sea change in the genre of nature writing, *Desert Solitaire* is considered a significant piece of American literature. Other writers from the South-West may have been influenced by Abbey's strong anti-pastoralist portrayal of the desert. The Grand Canyon of Arizona is America's and, controversially, the world's most fashionable and strictly regulated wilderness. Along with Yosemite Valley, Death Valley, and the Florida Everglades, the Grand Canyon of the Colorado River is considered a part of



the nation's cultural legacy. In Grand Canyon National Park, the future of wilderness everywhere may be on display right now. The Grand Canyon and Abbey's experiences living there are thus also a legacy to the American wilderness through the book. *Desert Solitaire* is a true legacy to the American wilderness since Abbey's writings offer the wilderness a voice that endures to this day.

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