The Male Hero v. Mother Nature

by Ruth M. Dilley

Gender, the social identity of being female or male, shapes life in a myriad of ways. Gender socialization shapes personality, social relations, and even knowledge itself, defining the very reality one experiences. I suggest that gender roles shape social relationships with Nature, not by virtue of inherent sexual differences, but rather, via cultural constructions of both gender and Nature that define our perceptions of ourselves and the world with which we interact. Ecofeminism provides a lens through which to view this gender-based construction of what I propose are problematic social roles. Through an ecofeminist analysis, the binary distinctions between male and female, society and nature, are shown to carry both subtle and direct consequences for human development, human action and social relationships with Nature.

By looking at a female and male prototype from literature by Kate Chopin and Ernest Hemingway through an ecofeminist analysis, we can view this gendered relationship with Nature, which I believe is linked to the current environmental crisis. Before looking at the ways gender may influence relations with Nature, it is again important to emphasize that this analysis investigates social roles and social constructions. No inferences are made with regard to static qualities fully manifested by real women and men, but rather social patterns that are acted out by members of society.

We also need a working definition of Nature. I define Nature in this essay as the physical environment apart from human designed settlement. The natural world includes the Earth, plants and animals, the weather, the natural elements. Nature is internal and external to the human "settler," ourselves biological creatures synthesized with natural forces such as sexuality and the life cycle, while dependent on Nature for our subsistence.

Merlin Stone tells us that once, God was a woman. Carolyn Merchant writes that we have lost the organic world (1). The organic world was alive, interconnected, female, and revered as the powerful source of all life prior to the Scientific Revolution's mechanization of the universe. The Earth is no longer viewed as an organic living being within the mechanistic, empirically based epistemology that has had such force in defining the modern world. Although many modern cultures generally don't talk about Mother Earth, the feminization of Nature is still evident today, albeit diminished in vitality, in the proverbial phrase "Mother Nature," in the use of feminine pronouns relating to Nature (i.e., "her secrets will be revealed"), and in language used to describe Nature before and after human contact. As Judith Plant declares: "Our language says it all, a virgin forest is as yet untouched by the hand of `man'" (1). Conquered Nature is described through metaphors of rape, as in raped and ravished lands (Gray 33). Indeed, one of the marks of civilization is the taming and conquest of Mother Nature.

Ecofeminism is born from the feminist and ecology movements. As such, ecofeminism explores associations between sexual exploitation and ecological exploitation, and exam-

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ines the conceptualizations of both women and Nature in an historically androcentric culture. Ecofeminism agrees with the critique that the social hierarchy perpetuated within patriarchy as a system of social organization includes human separation from and dominion over Nature. Ecofeminists suggest that a patriarchal, gendered consciousness views the world in binary opposites, such as male/female, man/nature, rational/irrational, and good/evil, etc. Judith Plant writes that "Making the connection between feminism and ecology enables us to step outside of the dualistic, separated world into which we were all born" (5). According to ecofeminism, definitions of separateness such as polemic constructions of male and female as two distinct categories, and humanity as separate from the natural world, are constructions that invite relations of superiority and conversely, inferiority. Ecofeminists call the myth of objectivity into question by showing that women and Nature have not only been classified and conceptualized as separate from men, but have, because of their "otherness," been represented and treated as inferior to all that is associated with maleness in patriarchal societies. In this construction, one means by which masculinity is proven is by dominating women and nature.

In a gendered consciousness, Nature is an adversary to masculinity. Dualistic modes of thought that accept maleness as the norm define the "otherness" of Nature as an inherent deviance and threat. And so, to defend masculinity, a male hero combats the forces of Nature. Gray points out that the masculine hero appears in cultural "myths and stories [where] the strong man is portrayed as struggling against a problem—nature, fate ... struggling to overcome and prove himself a hero" (49). The masculine identity, the gendered male, must be not only separate from, but also prove dominance over Nature. Hence, traditional masculine identity is proven through the subordination and conquest of the natural environment, acted out for example, by Hemingway's Nick Adams.

Feminine identity, while associated with Nature and natural cycles, also has a gendered consciousness that includes human separateness from Nature. But femininity, like Nature, is defined as the opposite of masculinity. This potentially aligns the feminine identity with Nature, since femininity is not dependent on establishing dominance over Nature. But a different problem in distortion arises here. For if femininity shares with Nature in associated qualities that are characteristically passive, then the power and ability to transform social and natural situations is diminished. Edna Pontellier characterizes this dilemma; although she can experience connection with Nature, she can not make the changes she desires in her life, and so, can not live in her social environment. Thus, Edna and Nick seem to be in different positions in relation to Nature by virtue of their gender.

Nick Adams, the Hemingway alter ego in his early novel In Our Time, and Edna Pontellier in Chopin's The Awakening both stage their dramas of selfhood in the natural world. A general summary of the two texts, where the two characters live, will show that beyond some obvious differences in subject matter and geographical setting, a shared theme runs parallel between the two characters in how they act in and towards Nature. Edna and Nick's thoughts, feelings, and actions while in the natural environment will be the basis of my analysis of the feminine and masculine gendered relationship with Nature. In particular, I will examine how within a gendered consciousness Nature can serve as a human home, something humans can be a part of, and also how Nature can be a thing one

must have power over and subdue.

The Awakening, written by Kate Chopin at the end of the 19th century, introduces Edna Pontellier, a woman of the Creole society of New Orleans who experiences a personal awakening to her inner feelings and seeks to develop her own identity. Edna's discovery of herself no longer allows her to accept the conventional feminine role of devoted Creole wife and mother. Edna is not able to achieve true autonomy and freedom in her interactions with her husband, children, or even her lover, and ultimately refuses to compromise her existence in this life. Edna commits suicide by swimming out into the ocean until she can swim no more.

In Our Time, written in the mid 1920's by Ernest Hemingway, is structured by short episodes that trace the development of Nick Adams from childhood to manhood. The last chapter of Nick's life that appears in the novel is the story "Big Two-Hearted River II." In this story Nick Adams, a young man returned from war, is on a fishing trip in the northern woods of his youth. The story begins with Nick waking up in his camp and going fishing. In fact, the action of the entire story entails the fishing ritual from start to finish.

In the final scenes of The Awakening, and the Nick Adams story "Big Two-Hearted River II," both Edna and Nick are interacting with Nature through the natural element of water. Simply put, Edna gives her life to the water, while Nick takes life from the water. The different social relationships with Nature reflected by Edna and Nick reveal a gendered consciousness within the paradoxical relationship between humans and Nature. While humans are natural beings, we seem obsessed with both subduing and returning to Nature. Nature is both the opponent to conquer and the sensuous world of solitude and pureness. Nature appears in both aspects in these two texts, but the outcomes are, again, quite different.

Nature serves several purposes for Hemingway and Chopin. The similarity of the two stories is the theme of the developing self illuminated by Nature. The natural environment provides a physical context for the action of the characters, as well as having literal and symbolic importance in the characters' personal growth and their relationships with the external world.

Literary critics have referred to the ways the two authors deal with nature. Gilmore interprets Edna as representing the challenge to the traditional role of women, and thus claims that she goes against Nature. He parallels the threat Edna poses to family values with the corresponding "conservation movement, the cult of outdoor life ... [claiming that they] were all part of the end of the century effort to reinvigorate the natural values Edna wished to overthrow" (59). In my interpretation, Edna is not a counter force to the conservation movement. Her subsequent "revolt against Nature" is not necessarily related to Nature per se, but rather to her desire not to be constrained by the social proscriptions attached to femininity and Mothering.

Hemingway's characters and Nick, the character of focus, while retreating into Nature, overwhelmingly and unmistakably participate in a violent conquest of Nature. As Frohock describes Hemingway's treatment of Nature:

> From the beginning the thing that stirred him most was violence, and the emotions of which he wrote were those stimulated by pain and killing—war, and bullfight-

ing, and big game-hunting, and fishing to kill rather than for sport." (167)

The amount of attention given to Nick's capturing and baiting of grasshoppers, catching of fish, including how they were physically pierced by the hook, and cleaning of the fish, which are all painstakingly described in the story, seems to suggest that subduing Nature is a large part of Nick's purpose.

A developing theme throughout The Awakening is Edna's experience of the sea as the expression of the inner being and life cycle. Nature symbolizes and is, for Edna, an inner and outer experience; infinite, beautiful, liberating, and absorbing. In this story Edna learns to swim, which is important in several ways. Bogard observes, "Like the bird/flying images in the novel, swimming also represents rebirth, freedom, and wholeness to Edna—it requires overcoming the split she feels between her mind and her body, between thought and feeling, between conception and acts" (190). While the first swimming episode does suggest that split, the final scene seems to resolve Edna's divided self. A turning point in Edna's journey to selfhood is when she learns to swim.

When Edna swims for the first time, she experiences the sea as infinite, and herself as powerful, but then an image of death sends her back to shore. Ringe suggests this moment of terror and recovery "reveals the intensification of self-awareness that the experience has given her" (202). It also shows her sense of vulnerability. Thus, through Nature Edna experiences rebirth and feels her own mortality. Edna's final interaction with Nature is when she surrenders her life in her last swim. Edna reaches into the water in the act of swimming, and the sea seems to physically evelope her: "The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (113). Edna's life journey is intimately bound with water through her discovery of Self and her mortality while swimming and, finally, her death. Edna's form of suicide is the ultimate union with Nature.

Nick Adams has a different relationship with the natural world than Edna. Nick does not, and can not surrender to Nature. To do so would jeopardize his conquest of Nature. Thus, "He felt a reaction against deep wading with the water deepening up under his armpits, to hook big trout in places impossible to land them" (155). In Nick's interactions with Nature, his fishing primarily, he differentiates himself from Nature by establishing dominance over it. In contrast, the sea draws Edna further into Nature, surrendering her body, and her identity to the water. Edna and Nick both find refuge in Nature. Nick's form of escape is to go back to childhood, while Edna's takes her, as a mature woman, on her final escape from society.

The prelude to Edna's suicide is when she sheds her clothes, which prepares her to surrender to Nature fully. Edna's nakedness as she enters the water does two things: it strips her of clothing, one of the marks of civilized humanness, allowing her to be more fully absorbed by the sea, and also symbolizes an act of surrender. She makes herself vulnerable to the natural elements, "naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her" (113). Edna Pontellier made her final home in Nature.

Edna and Nick both confront mortality. References to Edna's and Nick's feelings and thoughts on mortality are made in instances while they are interacting with Nature. Nick's interactions contrast with Edna's meeting of mortality: indeed, he seeks immortality in

Nature. The earliest picture we have of Nick is in "Indian Camp" which concludes with the sentence, "In the early morning on the lake sitting in the stern of the boat with his father rowing, he felt quite sure that he would never die" (19). In all fairness, immortality is a common sentiment among the young. However, the last image of Nick in "Big Two-Hearted River" finishes with a related sentence, "There were plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamp" (156). This statement describes the perspective of a man who had recently returned from war, who was exposed to death at an early age, and yet refuses to accept that his days are numbered. It is the acceptance or denial of finality, the conquering of or union with Nature, that distinguish the different relationships with Nature held by our masculine and feminine characters.

For Nick, fishing is a test of malehood proven by the conquest of Nature. Though one does get away, he is still victorious because he catches two big fish, which he graphically thumps to death. Nick leaves the swamp with his two big trout believing that he has plenty of days to catch more fish. It is not his own mortality that Nick encounters or accepts, but that of the fish.

Following the ecofeminist analysis of gender and Nature, Nick does pursue what may be described as the male hero's conquest to dominate Nature. In fact, Nick's fishing excursion confirms his identity as an autonomous male self through victory over Nature. Edna also secures a victory in saving her sense of self, but in her story, Nature does not play an adversarial role but becomes part of the resolution of her dilemma between her awakened self and the rejection of her social role. Edna encounters herself in, and surrenders herself to, Nature, body, mind, and spirit, but at the cost of her own life. A gendered relationship with Nature is epitomized by the clear difference between conquering Nature, as does Hemingway's Nick, and embracing Nature, as does Chopin's Edna.

However, both characters symbolize a serious dilemma created by the gendered consciousness. Whereas Nick must conquer Nature to define his Self, Edna must destroy her Self to escape from society. Both gendered characters are trapped within social constructions; the male hero and the female victim.

An apparent paradox arises from within the ecofeminist analysis. Resolving this paradox provides an alternative to the fundamental duality ecofeminism critiques, expressed by the female/male, Nature/society split. The criticism made by ecofeminism is that women and Nature have been defined as different, subordinate and thus exploitable in patriarchal constructions. Does allying women and Nature in fact reinforce binary distinctions, dualistic modes of thought, and finally depreciate the analysis made by ecofeminism as essentialist rhetoric? This need not be the case. The ecofeminist analysis can be conceptually liberating for women, men, and Nature in providing a critique of dualistic cognitions that have created rigid definitions about gender, social behavior, and possibilities between the social and natural worlds. Ecofeminism can provide us with an alternative to some of our most basic polemic understandings and help lay a pathway towards a holistic paradigm that integrates the interdependence of all consciousness and life forms.

By emphasizing the treatment and conceptualizations of Nature and women as subordinate to male-associated civilized society, we need not perpetuate subordination, or at the other extreme, elevate femininity or Nature over masculinity or civilization. Ecofeminist

analysis can instead lead us to critique the cultural paradigms and social constructions that have designed and perpetuated the conquest of the natural world, the cultural passivity of the feminine, and the cultural aggressiveness of the masculine— patterns which create wounds we all can help heal in the natural and social environments. As Carolyn Merchant discusses in her work The Death of Nature: Women Ecology and the Scientific Revolution:

> Concepts of nature and women are historical and social constructions. There are no unchanging "essential" characteristics of sex, gender, or nature. Individuals form concepts about nature and their own relationships to it that draw on the ideas and norms of the society into which they are born, socialized, and educated. (xvi)

As historical constructions then, gender and Nature are open to social reinterpretation and transformation. Indeed all present and future life is living the consequences and will inherent the destruction of the male hero's conquest of Mother Nature: poisoned air, soil, water, lost forests, wetlands, ecosystems, and the tragic loss of the diversity of life on this planet. Or we can choose to live the healing. If we are to create a sustainable lifestyle, we must learn to deconstruct and reconstruct a new consciousness that allows the whole of human and natural potentials to manifest in sensitivity and strength, powerfully vulnerable. Ecofeminism inspires us to build bridges, to integrate our human experience, redefine our own consciousness, begin the personal and communal journey to wholeness, healing, union with our Selves, each other, and what is defined as Nature. This is an eclectic personal and social journey we create along the way—a hopeful and hope filled journey for each of us engaged in personal and planetary healing.

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