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Intro/ Nature Writing  
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*The Most Beautiful Place on Earth*

"There are mountain men, there are men of the sea, and there are desert rats. I am a desert rat. But why? And why precisely what way, is the desert more alluring, more baffling, more fascinating than either the mountains or the ocean?" (Abbey 298-299). He left the question at that and went on to explain the world's great spirits without realizing he answered his own question in the question itself. In Edward Abbey's anarchic, humanistic ways he was drawn to the desert initially because it has been largely neglected by society throughout history. It was this that instigated Abbey's interest in the desert, but the desert itself then went on to prove everything he had anticipated it would prove. Edward Abbey used his famous novel, *Desert Solitaire* to portray the desert as a vehicle for humans to either build a relationship or reconnect with nature and spirituality. The desert is metaphorical for a potential paradise, but is restricted by people who are chained to their societal, cultural, and/or political values.

Abbey saw it fit to portray nature as wild and uncontrollable to get his readers to respect nature. Without respect, a bond is virtually impossible. He understands that people of this culture hold strong anthropocentric views, which is the underlying problem. Abbey tactfully comments on an illusionary man who might underestimate a sandstorm, "... if one is foolish enough to drive his car into such a storm" (Abbey 17). In his nonchalant way of simply showing the power of nature he is non-offensive, yet gets his point across. Even the confines of society's closest companion, the automobile, cannot save one from the perfect storm. Another example renders this very concept equally as effectively: "Stepping carefully around the straggling prickly pear..." (Abbey 29). This philosophically and literally suggests that nature is not there for humans to walk all over. If people are careless and not respectful there are serious repercussions.

Abbey's more typical-of-a-nature-writer side truly shines through in his explanation of why the desert is the perfect place to form a bond with nature in the case of the very first words of the book: "This is the most beautiful place on earth," (Abbey 1). If the relationship between humans and nature must be bioregionalized, literally saying it is "over there" rather than all around us, it might as well be prevalent in "the most beautiful place on earth." Abbey does this because he knows that it is a stretch to ask people from all walks of life to unite with nature *everywhere*. He is trying to appeal to the largest audience as possible.

Another reason Abbey sees the desert as an ideal place to build a relationship with nature is because it puts our human lives into perspective. It enables readers to envision "... a world which surrounds and sustains the little world of men as sea and sky surround and sustain a ship," (Abbey 45). This goes along with the common themes in nature writing of vastness and timelessness. Abbey uses this technique to belittle the individual's life down to a tiny spec, allowing him or her the chance to see the world as a web. The concept of perspective and interrelatedness removes the anthropocentrism, or human centered view on the world, from readers, even if just for a moment. At the same time the reader may feel the most insignificant he or she may have ever felt before, he or she has been granted the opportunity privileged enough to be part of something so grand, to finally see the world as it truly is. To see a world as a web of connections that allocates life to the next species based on the survival of the one before it.

Not only does Abbey feel that people can connect with nature itself, but spirituality through nature as well.

If a man's imagination were not so weak, so easily tired, if his capacity for wonder not so limited, he would abandon forever such fantasies of the supernatural. He would learn to perceive water, leaves and silence more than sufficient of the absolute and marvelous, more than enough to console him for the loss of the ancient dreams (Abbey 176-177).

Here, Abbey is suggesting that in the desert, God is all around. In fact, he is telling his readers to go see for themselves; however, he is making one condition: open your mind and look for God. There is no need for God to be an abstract, intangible being when He is all around us. He is in the water. He is in the leaves. He is in silence. He is everywhere. If people do this, actually do this, Abbey then says, "You may find proof for or against His existence," (Abbey 45). That seems fair enough. He is not giving readers an ultimatum, he is admitting that through this process one may or may not find God.

Isaiah 51:3 of the Bible states, "...he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the Lord," (Does 1). This passage proves that the desert has been considered a wasteland on personal levels and certainly religious ones. Worthwhile land is a garden. Again, stemming from Abbey's non-conforming ways, he does not accept this idea. "I have called it a garden, and it is—a *rock garden*," (Abbey 35). Here, Abbey almost seems to be making a mockery of the Bible. He is telling people to question authority. Abbey does believe in a God, but his God does not disown His own creation, the desert. "In the center of the world, God's navel, Abbey's country, the red wasteland," (4). For Abbey, God embraces the desert as the center of the world, not a trivial wasteland.

While the terms "trivial" and "useless" may both seem like derogatory expressions, Abbey takes pride in the fact that the desert may indeed be quite useless. In fact, this is one reason that Abbey finds the desert to be symbolic of a paradise. "It is undoubtedly a desert place, clean, pure, totally useless, quite unprofitable," (Abbey 35). Abbey finds areas that are totally

useless much more profitable than those that are exploited for service. Exploitation of land is not beautiful, it is a tragedy. Multimillion-dollar resorts on white sand on a tropical island are far from what Abbey considers a paradise.

There is a split in the desert, a split formed by society, culture, and politics. "Industrial Tourism is a big business. It means money," (Abbey 61). Many people have vacated to the desert, but most of those people have not connected with it. People who do not share Abbey's view on ideal paradise do so because they have not yet experienced it. There is a substantial difference between going to the desert to go to the desert and going to the desert to experience the desert. Abbey explained the way he saw a particular campground in the desert, "...elaborate housetrailer of quilted aluminum crowd upon gigantic camper-trucks of Fiberglass and molded plastic; through their windows you will see the blue glow of television..." (Abbey 55). One could not possibly connect with nature or spirituality under these conditions, let alone experience a paradise.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines paradise as "A place or region of surpassing beauty or delight, or of supreme bliss," (Paradise 1). Ringing phones, blasting music, and blaring television would undeniably interfere with one attempting to enjoy a region of beauty, delight, and bliss. The two distinctions here are those which Abbey would describe as potential paradise. Abbey tries to keep to remote sections of the desert, sleeps under the stars, and takes time to enjoy his surroundings. This portrays the ideal paradise that is possible to attain. Tourists flock to campgrounds, sleep in elaborate trailers, and take pictures of scenery as a trophy. This exposes the reason that the paradise is only a potential, not a reality for most. Abbey enjoys his paradise because he has dismissed all restrictions society puts on people. These restrictions are unspoken laws. These laws state that beauty, money, and power rule this culture. Specifically, the laws of beauty wildly defy the laws Abbey would have to outline beauty. "... the earth which bore us and sustains us, the only home we shall ever know, the only paradise we ever need—if only we had the eyes to see it," (Abbey 208). This further proves that Abbey believes the only logical paradise is the desert, but people are blind to that. He has crumbled the wall that is erected at the birth of most humans that separates them from nature but it frustrates him that others do not make the effort to do the same.

One very effective aspect of Abbey's writing is that he not only states problems as he truly sees them, but he offers solutions as well. He has a rather simple, though sadly not as realistic, solution to other people not enjoying the paradise he is so fond of. "Once people are liberated from the confines of their automobiles there will be a greatly increased interest in hiking, exploring, and back-country packtrips," (Abbey 68). It is on those very excursions that people will discover a true relationship with nature. It is then that people will find their spirituality. It is there that lays paradise.

Edward Abbey's persona calls for insubordination, which leads him not to the mountains or the ocean, but to the desert. "At first look it all seems like a geologic chaos, but there is a method at work here, method of fanatic order and perseverance," (Abbey 11). Abbey admits to seeing how the desert can be overlooked by many in being chaotic, but it is the devotion to nature that allowed him to see beyond that. A magical bond between humans and nature will never be formed. A light switch will not simply turn on spirituality in a persons mind. Paradise will not appear on one's doorstep. People must look deeper into the desert; Edward Abbey did and he found everything he was looking for.

#### References

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