ISSN: 2710-0170

The Spirit of Wilderness and Survival in Beartooth

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Abstract

The changing cognition of wilderness reveals the complex interaction between human and nature. Wilderness is no longer perceived as a land entirely separate from humanity; instead, modern society places greater emphasis on the symbiotic relationship between human and nature, as well as the state of human existence under the influence of the wild. As a writer who has long resided in the American West, Callan Wink strives to capture the regional landscape of the American West, particularly Montana, the living conditions of its residents, and the formative influence of the environment on human character. His novel Beartooth (2025) explores how to balance traditional wilderness survival with modern civilization to meet contemporary needs through the protagonist's struggle for survival. Through textual analysis and interpretation of the novel, this study compares two distinct eras of wilderness. It aims to explore how to mediate between traditional wilderness survival and modernized existence by showing two different modes of preserving the spirit of wilderness within the text, thereby examining paths toward achieving harmonious coexistence between human and nature.

Keywords

Beartooth, the spirit of wilderness, survival.

1. Introduction

1.1. The Changing Cognition of the American Wilderness

Since the initial landing of the Mayflower on the North American continent in the 16th century, the concept of "wilderness" entered people's view. As a key term in American ecological thought, "Wilderness" holds significant importance for understanding ecocriticism in the United States and even the world. In the Bible, and in later Judaeo-Christian traditions, "*Wilderness manifests both as place of sanctuary and as place of sanction*" as Kylie Crane puts it [1].

This type of wilderness belongs to what Greg Garrard calls the "Old World wilderness", commonly found in early literary texts. Furthermore, as Ma Te notes, wilderness in early texts was not only associated with mystery and threat but also presented another image---that of a garden. For instance, in Arthur Barlowe's *the First Voyage to the Continental North America*, the imagery of wilderness in the author's depiction differs drastically from that of Bradford; he portrays Virginia as an exotic garden, even describing the local natives as "very handsome and friendly"[8]. Thus, for early colonists, the desolate American continent was both fraught with peril and imbued with freedom and opportunity. Scholar Yang Jincai points out:

"*In American literature, wilderness is synonymous with forest, and its literary metaphor symbolizes both individuality and* freedom*, as well as danger and sin*" [12].

In the Romantic literature and art of the 18th and 19th centuries, wilderness was endowed with sublime aesthetic value. The philosopher Edmund Burke (1729–1797) argued that the terror of wilderness itself constituted a form of beauty---a sublime beauty. The sublime evokes awe and power and the beauty is gentle and pleasing. This sanctification of the wilderness, however, has led national parks to seldom protect critically endangered habitats[1], falling into the trap of pursuing the sublime for its own sake. From earlier associations with mystery and fear, and

ISSN: 2710-0170

through the lens of Romanticism, the connection between wilderness and human grew stronger, plunging people into fervent admiration and praise. Frederick Jackson Turner[2], the American historian, was the first to systematically articulate the significance of the Western frontier in shaping America's traditions of freedom and democracy, as well as constructing American national and cultural identity[11]. Thus, the myth of the American West was constructed, making the conquest of wilderness appear not only as a rational triumph of civilization over savagery, but also as an inevitable choice for empire-building.

Entering the 20th century, some writers began to subvert the traditional Western genre, criticizing the myth of the West and exposing the colonialism, violence, and ecological destruction behind it. In *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), John Steinbeck uses the Joad family's journey west to express concerns about ecological crisis and condemn destructive human actions[10]. Renowned Western author Cormac McCarthy, in his Border Trilogy, revises the history of American westward expansion, reveals the true intentions behind the Western myth, and reflects on the devastating impact of modern industrial civilization on Western agriculture and cowboy life---demonstrating that the myth of the West has lost its historical foundation [11].

Meanwhile, economic development in modern society has brought about survival pressures, leaving people torn between urban life and the wilderness. For instance, Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road* depicts the protagonist Sal's inability to find the wilderness of his imagination and achieve a poetic dwelling[9].

In summary, the evolution of the concept of wilderness reveals the complex interaction between human and nature. Wilderness is no longer seen as a space entirely separate from humanity. Modern society places greater emphasis on the symbiotic relationship between human and nature, as well as the state of human existence under the influence of the wild.

1.2. The Introduction of Callan Wink and Beartooth

Callan Wink is the author of the novels *Beartooth* and *August*, as well as the short story collection *Dog Run Moon*. His work explores themes of masculinity and the influence of the American West. In an interview with Jamie Kahn, editor of Epiphany magazine, Wink mentioned that his writing is highly dependent on familiar settings and characters. Whether in short stories or novels, the core material comes from the small town in Montana where he has lived for many years. The characters in his writing are often profoundly shaped by the Western environment. *August* and *Dog Run Moon* vividly depict the regional landscape of the American West (particularly Montana), the living conditions of its residents, and the formative power of the environment on individuals[5].

Beartooth sets its story against the backdrop of the American West's natural landscape, specifically, in a hand-built log cabin deep within the Absaroka-Beartooth Mountains. Following their father's death, two brothers---Thad and Hazen, live in isolation, making a living by logging. The older brother, Thad, bears the main responsibility of survival: he is responsible and pragmatic, yet often torn between modern society and a primitive existence in the wild. The younger brother, Hazen is more feral, violent, raw, and simple and unable to integrate into modern society, he shares a deeper resonance with the natural world and represents an absolute form of wilderness survival. When an outsider named "the Scot" tempts the brothers with a substantial payment to illegally collect antlers in Yellowstone National Park, questions of survival, morality, and their father's teachings become entangled. This venture ultimately leads the two brothers down divergent paths.

Through textual analysis and interpretation of the novel, this study will compare two distinct eras of wilderness---that of the father's generation and that of the son's. It aims to explore how to mediate between traditional wilderness survival and modernized existence by showing two

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different modes of preserving the spirit of wilderness within the text, thereby examining paths toward achieving harmonious coexistence between human and nature.

2. Old Lauren: The Sage in the Wilderness

"*Wilderness served as the matrix of American civilization. Americans not only built this civilization with raw materials drawn from the physical wilderness but also used ideas and symbols of wilderness to give it identity and meaning*" [3]. Among these, the old man of the wilderness can best embody this cultural psychology of self-identity formation. Natty Bumppo (from *The Prairie*, 1827) is a grey-haired hunter roaming the beast-filled western grasslands; Roger Chillingworth (from The *Scarlet Letter*, 1850) is a knowledgeable doctor navigating colonial New England. As Liu GuoZhi and Wang Na has noted:

"*Writers'* construction*, deconstruction, and reconstruction of the wilderness elder reflect the historical realities of their respective eras, illustrating the American nation's quest for a father figure and the process of self-identification*" [7].

In *Beartooth*, the father does not appear directly but is constructed through Thad's memories and dialogues between the brothers, becoming a symbol of traditional wilderness wisdom and values. Firstly, Old Lauren is portrayed as an exceptionally kind man who never resorted to violence. For example, Sacajawea, their mother, tells the despondent Thad how her father saved her when she was in desperate straits: "*He wrapped me in a wool blanket and carried me into the cook tent*". The only instance of violence occurred in Humboldt, Northern California, where the mother initially worked trimming buds—only to later discover that this was a front for prostitution. Upon learning this, the father rushed to the scene to rescue her and violently confronted the man who tried to stop him. Traumatized by this incident, the father grew averse to and uncomfortable with the presence of women in his life—a behavior that subtly influenced Thad as well:

"T*had froze when he saw the green stocking cap, the auburn braids. He was halfway across the threshold, and his* first *inkling was to turn, walk back down the porch, get in his truck, and drive away*" [4].

For a long time, Thad avoided interactions with women. In addition to his moral character, the father is depicted as possessing extensive wilderness survival skills and profound knowledge of nature, embodying the self-sufficient philosophy of the older generation：

From him the boys had learned geometry---he'd been a carpenter---and something of geology. He hiked with them up to Two Ocean Pass and they threw sticks in the creek there at the parting of the waters. That stick is headed *to the Pacific, he said. And that one is going to the Gulf of Mexico*[4].

Yet, Thad had never been as skilled as Hazen at fishing---a detail that reflects Hazen's innate affinity with the wilderness. Beyond imparting practical survival skills, their father instilled in them an ethic of harmonious coexistence with nature. Earlier in the novel, when Thad was still committed to earning a living through logging which is a traditional trade to make a living. Hazen couldn't understand why they didn't instead turn to poaching, which was far more profitable. Thad said to Hazen:

"*And besides that, the whole thing is just greasy. It's a waste. That's not how we were raised. Could you imagine what Dad* would *have thought? Just leaving them to rot like that*"[4]?

It is evident that the father consistently taught respect for natural resources and opposed violent killing. In the novel, the author also constructs the image of a wilderness sage. Old Lauren adhered to a philosophy of inner peace through self-contentment: "*All of this can be your home if you're comfortable in* here*. Right here is where you control your world*". At the same time, he advocated focused and diligent work: "*Sometimes the man working the hardest, the guy who*

ISSN: 2710-0170

constantly 'wears himself out,' is the laziest, unwilling to take the time on the front end to do things the right way".

Yet, as a traditional wilderness elder, this sage also had his limitations. He refused to participate in modern societal systems, such as voting or purchasing permits. This suggests his inability to adapt to modern society and foreshadows his ultimate obsolescence. After his death, the lack of health insurance resulted in overwhelming medical bills and tax issues---burdens that fell heavily on the two brothers, especially Thad, who was more familiar with worldly matters. The traditional lifestyle of logging and self-sufficiency was no longer viable in an era of rapid economic development, advanced healthcare, and science-driven governance.

For the brothers living on the margins of civilization, they faced a dual challenge: the need to carry forward their father's wilderness ethos, which had always been their way of life and the environment that shaped them, and the pressing reality of having to integrate into a society whose laws and systems could not be ignored, as their father had done. Ignoring these systems was not an option, as illustrated by the constant mail reminders threatening the loss of their home for unpaid bills. This transition is powerfully symbolized by the burning of their father's bed:

"*His father's bed had been* wet *at the end, too, foul. And when he was finally gone Thad and Hazen had dragged it to the backyard, spilled diesel fuel over it, and set it on fire*" .

This act represents not only the end of a life, but the end of an era and a way of living.

3. The Brothers: Survival Dilemma in Modern Civilization

In *Beartooth*, the survival dilemma of the younger generation no longer follows the self-sufficient, harmonious model of their father's era. Instead, they are caught in the vortex of modern economic and legal systems. After their father's death, due to his lack of health insurance, Thad is burdened with enormous medical bills and delinquent property taxes. Failure to pay these would cost them their only home. Thad visualizes debt as a monster devouring him. He constantly calculates income and expenses, only to find the result always "*subtract, subtract, and subtract again*" . This is a vivid portrayal of his desperate financial struggle and inability to make ends meet. This is a form of modern economic anxiety their father never had to face. Although both brothers inherited substantial survival skills, they each falter in fully embracing the core of their father's wisdom spiritually and practically, leading them down divergent paths of struggle.

Thad's contradiction lies in his steadfast adherence to his father's moral teachings and his inability to find a viable way to survive within that framework. For instance, while his father always emphasized working not only hard but also with purpose, Thad excels only in basic survival. Near the end of the antler-poaching trip, severely injured, he realizes he has been "wearing himself out", failing to inherit the most crucial philosophy his father imparted---against the dangers of "wearing yourself out". For a long time, he is tempted by the Scot's proposition, entangled in a wrong relationship. And he didn't grasp the core point of selling firewood, causing his survival dilemma to some extent. His father once said: "*If he was smart he'd take the wood up to Big Sky and charge the second-home, ski-vacation crowd an arm and a leg*". Yet Thad never acts on this advice. He works diligently but aimlessly, without strategy or direction. This indicates that while he inherited his father's sense of responsibility, he lost the practical wisdom that enabled his father to navigate the wilderness with adaptability and foresight.

Hazen, on the other hand, survived in the wilderness precisely because of his innate wildness and natural affinity with the elements. Unlike his father and Thad, Hazen was more violent and primitive, which was exemplified by his unique ability to sense whether a bear was nearby "by smell", his graphic efficiency in harvesting a bear's gallbladder, and his willingness to burn

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down "a spruce about fifteen feet tall" just to keep warm.When learning to fish, Hazen grew impatient with his father's meticulous approach to tying flies and crafting lures. He repeatedly expressed his frustration to Thad: "*Proper proportions provide a pleasing presentation. Remember him and that ruler? I hated that ruler*". In the end, however, with his raw instinct and a tangled clump of fishing materials, Hazen consistently caught more fish. His strength lay not in systematic knowledge, but in an innate, almost unutterable intuition.

This foreshadows the divergent survival paths the two brothers would ultimately take. Thad inherited the family house, along with its heavy debts and the ongoing financial pressure of maintaining this legacy, leaving him trapped in a cycle of modern economic anxiety. Hazen, more primitive and instinctive, possessed a natural affinity with the wilderness that could not be converted into social or economic capital in the modern world, nor was it ever fully recognized. Thad often dismissed him as immature and unreliable, referring to his skills as "full of shit". Moreover, unlike their father's generation, which could relatively freely draw resources from the wild, the brothers now had to navigate a society governed by federal authority, a powerful state apparatus, and stringent laws. Traditional practices such as collecting antlers were now labeled as criminal. Thus, each brother faced a distinct form of existential struggle: one ensnared by the demands of a system he could not escape, the other rendered obsolete by a world that had no use for his kind of wisdom.

During the industrial civilization era, coupled with the prevalence of materialism and consumerism in social life, the rapid development of technology, industry, commercial agriculture, and urbanization has led to a drastic alienation between human and wilderness [6]. Consequently, many scholars have called for the protection of wilderness to achieve harmonious coexistence between wilderness and civilization. However, the very nature of capitalist society means that everything can be commodified. Anthropocentric values and consumerist lifestyles reduce wilderness to little more than natural resources awaiting exploitation. The erosion of wilderness by modern capitalism continues unabated. It is in this context that the greedy and cunning embodiment of capitalism, "the Scot", dressed in a kilt, makes his entrance. As later revealed, he is not actually Scottish; it is a false identity meant to conjure romanticized notions of wilderness tradition. His real origins lie in Columbus, Ohio. "the Scot" commodifies wilderness resources, such as antlers and bear gallbladders, and exploits the brothers' survival struggles to lure them into illegal trade. At the time, collecting antlers within national parks was considered theft of government property, and traditional hunting-gathering practices were criminalized under modern law. When the brothers decide to engage in the illegal operation, their long-standing familiarity with the wilderness gives them exceptional knowledge of the local terrain and waterways so that they devise a plan to transport the antlers by river. However, Yellowstone National Park is tightly monitored. As Thad initially objects to the proposal of "the Scot":

"*They put microchips in antlers in the park. Did you know that? They put GPS devices in the antlers and then plant them out where someone will see them and pick them up, and then when they do they get a visit from the Park Service the next day. That's a felony*" [4].

The "microchips" and "GPS devices" mentioned by Thad symbolize the omnipresent modern surveillance system and public scrutiny. Wilderness is no longer the freely accessible realm it was in their father's time. It has become a tightly regulated and monitored "national treasure". This also means that, from the very beginning, the antler-gathering operation was doomed to fail, though Thad still clung to a faint hope of success.

"The Scot" does not merely exploit their desperation. He also appropriates and alienates their wilderness skills. Hunting bears for gallbladders and rafting to steal antlers strip their survival wisdom of its ethical and environmental context, reducing it to a purely illegal tool for capital

ISSN: 2710-0170

accumulation. The wilderness is no longer a lawless space; it has become a closely supervised and disciplined territory. This failed river expedition becomes a turning point in the brothers' future life. In modern society, the survival dilemma of the younger generation is multidimensional and intertwined. They struggle to endure within these cracks, still searching for a path forward.

4. Survival: Modes Preserving the Spirit of Wilderness

As the previous analysis reveals, neither brother fully comprehended nor inherited the true essence of their father's wilderness ethos. Thad often recalled the principles and moral boundaries his father had taught him, yet when faced with existential crises, he either succumbed to external temptations or struggled to maintain his connection to the wilderness. This is reflected in the recurring detail of the perpetually unfinished house repairs, which is a metaphor for his unresolved inner conflict and unstable life. Hazen, endowed with an innate connection to nature, embodied a primal wilderness survivor---simple and kind, yet capable of violence. After the failed antler-gathering expedition, the trajectories of the brothers' lives diverged significantly. At the end of the rafting journey, Thad passed out from severe blood loss, and Hazen stepped up to take charge:

"*Hazen had run the rest of the canyon solo. He ditched the raft he'd been riding in and climbed into Thad's. As he floated, he cut the tiedowns and started pushing antlers into the river, so that by the time he came under the bridge at the park boundary it was just him and a paddle, Thad unconscious on the floor of the raft*" [4].

In Thad's later reflections, this was one of the rare moments when Hazen proved reliable: not only did he save Thad, but he also discarded the antlers, preventing more severe consequences than a mere fine for illegal boating in Yellowstone National Park .

Following this ordeal, the brothers' roles reversed completely. Hazen took on the responsibility of earning money. He was responsible for paying off their debts and even bought his own truck. Thad, severely injured with a broken arm that left him unable to even hold a saw, withdrew into the house. He underwent two major surgeries and sank into lethargy and depression, losing interest in everything. Clearly, the failure wounded more than just his body; it shattered him psychologically. He grew dependent on medication and trapped in chronic pain:

"*Sometimes he thought that he could feel the pain before he even started the action itself, and then he wondered if the source of the* pain *was somewhere in his brain, if the pain had become some sort of bad habit, like lying around, like the pills*" [4].

During this period of depression, Thad's relationship with his mother gradually improved. This reconciliation, in one way or another, facilitated his recovery and led him toward new life choices.

The divergent paths taken by the two brothers were directly triggered by the return of "the Scot", who suspected that they had secretly kept some of the antlers, rendering his efforts fruitless. He relentlessly pursued them, and Thad lived in fear of retaliation—especially given his history of violence, including murder. The brothers' final conversation and meeting occurred after obtaining license plates for their vehicle, in the aftermath of a violent confrontation with "the Scot". Hazen drove Thad back home, and there, he confessed the real reason he had taken the pistol that was always kept near Thad:

"*That guy I work for* shoots *his own dogs, if he needs to," Hazen said. "I just wanted to let you know that. He doesn't make me kill any dogs. I made that up. I took that .22 because I saw you had it next to you on the couch. I thought you were going to use it someday. You know what I mean? So I took it*" [4].

ISSN: 2710-0170

Throughout their lives, it had always been Thad who took care of and protected Hazen. But here, for the first time, Hazen clearly demonstrated his concern and protective instinct toward Thad. He had keenly sensed Thad's despair and dependency on medication during his deepest suffering ("*thought you were going to use it someday*") and took action by removing the gun to protect his brother. As later revealed, Hazen used that very pistol to end the life of "the Scot". From that point on, Hazen disappeared without a trace. His final words to Thad were: "*You don't need to worry about me neither*" . In that moment, it sounded less like reassurance and more like a farewell. He was setting out into the wilderness alone. Perhaps, as he once said: "D*own the Yellowstone. To the Missouri. The Mississippi. All the way to the Gulf"*.

After Hazen's departure, Thad gradually emerged from his depressive state. He spent two weeks searching through the forests, mountains, and rivers, trying to find any trace of his brother though it was always in vain. Yet deep down, he felt that Hazen would likely return one day. Although he had once considered moving into town and selling the house in the wilderness, especially after learning that a company had offered a substantial amount for it. He ultimately chose to stay and wait for his brother's return. At the same time, he returned to logging and finally repaired the roof that had long been left unfinished. In the final lines of the novel, he says: "*maybe after work he'd put on a clean shirt and head down*" "*Maybe if the band played a Haggard cover, he'd ask a woman to dance*" . He had decided to reintegrate into town life and no longer avoid women.

5. Conclusion

The novel unfolds through the survival struggles of the two brothers. In an age of relentless industrial advancement, progress often manifests as a growing separation between human life and the natural environment [6]. Yet many scholars advocate for the coexistence of wilderness and humanity, emphasizing an organic harmony between the two. Within this context, we are compelled to confront the question: How can harmony between human and nature be achieved in modern society? This further leads us to reflect: How can the relationship between traditional wilderness survival and modernized existence be balanced? This study tries to respond to these questions through the final choices made by Hazen and Thad, presenting two distinct modes of continuing the spirit of the wilderness.

Hazen chose to completely escape civilized society and return to a pure form of wilderness existence. His inherent nature could not be disciplined by modern rules, nor could his unique survival skills find validation within the civilized order. This distinctive inheritance of a particular wilderness spirit led him ultimately toward a mysterious and free state of concealment. His choice represents a resolute and adversarial form of preservation---the spirit of the wilderness endures by completely rejecting modern civilization.

Thad, on the other hand, embodies another mode of survival. In addition to possessing fundamental wilderness skills, he matured through adversity and naturally inherited the wilderness philosophy of his father's generation. The ethos he evolved aligns more closely with the contemporary ideal of coexistence between wilderness and civilization. As an individual deeply rooted in the wild, he chose to perpetuate the wilderness spirit embodied by resilience, responsibility, and self-reliance within the framework of modern society, adopting a reconciliatory stance. He rejected capitalist exploitation of the land, specifically, the offer to sell the house. He remains in his father's cabin and finally repair the roof, a symbol of his earlier struggles. In the end, he resolved to reintegrate into the community, thereby transforming the wilderness spirit into a form compatible with modernity. He achieved a balance between wilderness and civilization to attain an equilibrium of survival.

Thus, through the divergent choices of the two brothers, the novel reveals two possible ways to balance the relationship between wilderness and survival: one is to return to a primitive

ISSN: 2710-0170

mode of wilderness existence, escaping the constraints of modern civilization; the other is to reconcile traditional wilderness survival with modern civilization to meet the demands of contemporary life. Apparently, the second mode tends to be more acceptable in the modern society.

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