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English 3624

Nature's Impact on Human Spirituality in James Still's "White Highways" and "Heritage"

James Still spent his life and career among the mountains of Appalachia, and his attachment to the region permeates his writing. We can see clearly Still's spiritual connection to his environment in the poems "Heritage" and "White Highways." Together these two poems provide a steady example of how place can capture a person's soul and govern both their philosophy and their physical movement. In "White Highways" Still uses the contrast between modern paved highways, and traditional mountain paths to illustrate the spiritual value of living in the mountains. In "Heritage" Still describes the raw geological power of the mountains, and shows how this power of nature grips the human imagination and holds on for the duration of one's life, drawing you back again when you wander. Though they use different approaches, both "White Highways" and "Heritage" ultimately illustrate the spirituality of living a life connected to the ecosystems and the heritage of the Appalachian Mountains.

A detailed literary analysis of "White Highways" makes clear Still's message about the inhuman nature of modern roadways. The poem is divided into three separate stanzas, the first two of which describe the speaker's experience with paved highways. Still describes how the speaker has traveled to the highways, and has learned that they are not as spiritually fulfilling as the quiet mountain paths of one's ancestors. In these two stanzas, Still uses the present perfect tense to describe the speaker's journey to the highways and his subsequent return. By doing so he shows the ongoing nature of the lesson the speaker has learned, and that the speaker's scorn

for the highways is ceaseless. This gives the poem a sense of being continuous and relevant to the reader, and emphasizes that the lessons the speaker has learned are important enough to remain with him and keep him from wandering back to the highways, and the modern world they represent. The use of the present perfect tense forces the reader to recognize and respect the Mountains' power over the human spirit, and validates Still's warning against wandering far away.

In addition to careful verb choice, Still uses carefully contrasting diction to highlight the difference between the first stanza, which describes the speaker's experience with the highways, and the second stanza, which focuses on the mountain trails he has returned to. The highways are described as "stoneless and hard," and as a force that has caused, "The hills pushed back and bridges thrust across / The shallow river's span," (Still 4-5). The words "hard," "pushed," and "thrust" create a sense of the cold inhumanity of the highway—in direct contrast to the comfortable feeling created by the second stanza, where Still uses words like "worn," "steady," and "slow" to describe mountain trails. The cold, desolate imagery and the dreary tone of the first stanza are in direct contrast with the familiar, homey imagery of the second stanza. Still creates two contrasting images between these two stanzas to help communicate his message that the peaceful mountain paths are part of the heritage of Appalachia, and are therefore of greater value than the cold highways.

The second stanza is also more metaphorical and spiritual than the first; Still uses a metaphor to describe the place the speaker returns to as, "The long way around,/ The far between, the slow arrival," (9-10). This indirect way of describing the speaker's mountain environment shows that the beauty and value of the mountains can not be explained in the same

cold, quantitative terms of the highway. The highway's impact is hard and deliberate, while the mountains are spiritual and elusive.

The third stanza serves as a warning to those who might choose the conveniences of modernity and forget the value of simple nature, saying, "O do not wander far / From the rooftop and the hill-gathered earth," (Still 13-14). The "rooftop and the hill-gathered earth" seem to be creating a warm environment that will protect the reader, while the "wayfarers measured with a line" of the next line evoke an image of lonely, geometric pavement that wanders spiritually from the contentment of nature (Still 14-15). Still's warning here is in sync with the overall message of the poem: the highways (and the modernity they represent) are not as valuable as the familiar paths of one's ancestors. The highways have destroyed some of the Mountain's natural landscape and will not bring those who travel them peace or understanding. Just as a trip home after an absence can restore one's energy and happiness, Still's image of the inviting and home-like mountain paths illustrates their value as restorers of the human spirit, as sacred places link us with those who came before, and with the Earth.

Analysis of "Heritage" reveals Still's personal attachment to the mountains, and the strong hold they can exert on a person. Heritage has a tone of resignation—the speaker is almost choosing to be trapped by the spirituality of the mountains. Still's deliberate lack of punctuation adds to this tone. By choosing not to include any commas in the poem's very first sentence, Still creates an immediate sense of the power of his feeling. The next omission of a comma comes at the end of the first stanza: "And burns its strength into the blistered rock / I cannot leave. I cannot go away," (Still 8-9). By leaving off a comma between "rock" and "I cannot," Still shows the magnitude of his feeling of being confined to the mountains—he experiences an onslaught of

emotion and there is no time for a comma. The speaker's passionate omission of punctuation shows just how powerful his feelings are; it illustrates the inescapable hold the mountains can have over a person's soul, and the shadow they cast over all other places and ways of life.

Still's verb choice throughout "Heritage" creates a sense of the power of the mountain ecosystem. In the first stanza, the mountains "topple their barren heads," the forests "slide uprooted," and the rivers "glean the valleys," "drown lush pennyroyal," and "unravel rail fences," (Still 2-6). All of these verbs suggest the mighty power of nature, which can not be influenced by simple humans, and help the reader understand the magnitude of the force that the speaker must struggle against if he wishes move away from the Mountains. By beginning with a description of the power of nature, Still shows how significant man's connection with this place is. The reader gets a true sense that man is just a tiny part of this ecosystem, and that, at any moment, the Mountain's force might grip him and take hold. Emphasizing the Mountains' power adds weight to the spiritual connection the speaker feels with the land.

Still uses the second stanza to show the spiritual connectedness of the speaker and his environment. The speaker is "one with death rising to bloom again" (Still 14), he is a part of his environment, and he recognizes the beauty in the cycle of death and rebirth. Finally, the speaker "cannot pass beyond [the hills]," (Still 15). The use of "pass beyond" is notable here, it gives a metaphorical, elusive feeling and shows that the speaker's connection to the mountains not only keeps him physically stationary, but also trapped in the Mountain-mindset. Neither his person, nor his psyche can "pass beyond" the mountains.

In both of these poems, Still chooses to use the word "I." The use of the first person is significant because, in exploring the other examples of Still's work, I find, most commonly, a use

of the third person. By making these poems personal, Still shows the reader the strength of his feelings. Still feels moved to describe how much he cares about the natural integrity of the mountains in “White Highways,” and communicates his strong sense of belonging to the mountains in “Heritage.” Using “I” helps the reader see how powerfully these feelings have moved Still, and helps us to relate to him as a person and to understand the emotion of the poems from a human perspective. We are given a chance to experience Still’s powerful relationship with the mountains, and are able to put ourselves in his shoes.

The title of each poem is also worthy of recognition, as it helps define the action that takes place within the poem. In “Heritage,” it is nature who is responsible for the most powerful action of the poem. In the first stanza, Still describes the action of the mountains, the forests, the rivers, and the Sun using very deliberate, powerful words. By doing so he establishes nature as a compelling force in the poem, and then moves on to describe the speaker’s response to living in the mountains. “Heritage” is a poem about the natural heritage of Appalachia, the common bond between nature and man, and so, is named to describe this kin-like relationship between nature and her people—the “Heritage” of the mountains. In “White Highways,” unlike in “Heritage,” nature is a force that is acted *upon*, rather than the entity responsible for direct action. In this poem the speaker’s own actions and his own experiences take center stage, while nature serves as a force that is acted upon by modern highways. “White Highways” is about the modern paved highways that influence modern life in the mountains, and the speaker’s response to them. Its title is representative of this. By understanding that the title of each poem defines the action that will take place, the reader is better able to understand the focus and the resulting message of each poem, and to focus on the true meaning of each poem.

Both “Heritage” and “White Highways” are poems that communicate the spirituality of a mountain way of life. “White Highways” is a comparative warning against wandering from the home the mountains create. Through his use of verb tense and contrasting diction, Still shows that this home is more spiritually fulfilling than the modern world of the paved highways. “Heritage” is a personal description of the powerful hold the mountains can exert over one’s soul. The raw natural power of the mountains and the connectedness of the speaker and his environment show how overwhelming the feeling of belonging to a place can be. Both poems illustrate the passionate relationship Still had with the mountains he live in, and the spirituality that comes with such a relationship.

Works Cited

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