“Axe in Hand”, Aldo Leopold

“Preserving Wildness”, Wendell Berry

*The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away, but He is no longer the only one to do so.*

—Leopold, Aldo. A Sand County almanac, and sketches here and there.(p.67)

From the very first line of text, Leopold reminds readers of our rising capacity to create and destroy plants: “The Lord giveth, and the lord taketh away, but he is no longer the only one to do so.” (67) Historically, our ancestors invented the axe and shovel. With this advancement of science came the ability to create and destroy plants. Leopold referred to this ability to give and take plants our “divine functions”(?). Leopold has bequeathed us with insight into knowledge that was far ahead of his time. The conceive the magnitude of our capability to that of duplicate a domestic canine. (Canis lupus familiaris).

Stewardship is the constant effort to reduce our impact on the environment, a slight alternative, yet equivalent to Berry’s: “the responsible use of nature” (517) Both Leopold and Berry employ stewardship, while struggling with sustainability in a new ecological model. However, in this brief analysis, I argue they do it in very different ways. Leopold emphasizes the need to carefully exercise our divine functions, and Berry suggests careful stewardship of the value of the land.

First, I apply the moral theories of Wendell Berry, into a situation presented by Aldo Leopold. Second, I examine Leopold’s actions in light of Berry’s framework. This model allows us to see that each author promotes stewardship and sustainability of the land, but for different reasons.

Wendell Berry, due to his own “manner of thinking and philosophy—which knows that all men, by what they think about and wish for, in effect wield all tools” (Leopold 68) suggests that he is forever a wielder of an axe and shovel. “The argument over the proper relation of humanity to nature is becoming, as the sixties used to say, polarized. And the result, as before, is bad talk on both sides. At one extreme are those who sound as if they are entirely in favor of nature [...] At the other extreme are the nature conquerors” (Berry 516-17)

When presented with a choice between “nature extremists” and “technology extremists”, Wendell Berry is forced to side with the nature extremists. This is due to the inescapable fact of the human perspective. “...but this choice is poor, even assuming that it is possible” (Berry 517) Mankind is homocentric in nature. This “nature extremists” side does not exist. “If I had to choose, I would join the nature extremists against the technology extremists, but this choice seems poor, even assuming that it is possible I would prefer to stay in the middle, not to avoid taking sides, but because I think the middle is a side, as well as the real location of the problem” (Berry 517) Therefore, this places him back in the center of the battle between man and nature or in other words, Ecocentrism versus anthropocentrism.

Leopold exercises his axe and shovel differently, depending upon the variables: sunlight, draught, weevil, and the birch in order to preserve the pine (his bias). The answers to Berry are second and third rule, often depend upon these variables. Therefore, in certain situations nature, or the birch, will help us to save the pine. “Birch competition is a minor affliction compared with this weevil, whose progeny kill the pine’s leader and thus deform the tree.” (Leopold, 70) On page 529, Berry notes: “humans should learn to behave properly with respect to nature so as to place their domestic economy harmoniously upon and within the sustaining and surrounding wilderness” (529) and that is “how the branches intertwine ” and tie the knot between Mother Nature’s “respectable husbanding” and the Lord’s “signature on the face” (Leopold 67) of the land. (67)

Now, I must attempt to interject Leopold into the governing walls of Berry. Doing so, I must meet the challenge of examining Leopold’s actions, perspectives and motivations.

1. What is here?
2. What will nature permit us to do here?
3. What will nature help us to do here? (Berry 525)

According to Berry, it is vital that I consider the possibilities available to Leopold and the provisions, as well as assistance granted him by nature (Berry 525).

“Again, if a drouthy summer follows my removal of the birch’s shade, the hotter soil may offset the lesser competition for water, and my pine be none the better for my bias.” (Leopold 70)

If there is a drought next summer, and the weevil, and if the pine is in the sun the weevil will lay eggs in his pine. This will cause it the pine to be deformed.

We have the pine, the birch, the weevil, and the sun. The birch blocks the sun on our beloved pine and the weevil prefers the sunlight, but when that weevil lays those eggs in that tree, it will become deformed. So nature in the form a birch is helps save the beloved pine.

Leopold would save the birch in order to save his pine. The pine is his bias.

Berry does what he does to save society, Leopold does what he does to be a successful wielder of the axe and shovel, and both result in the good of the land.

Through Mother Nature’s gift of a particular tool, it appears as if I have finally reconciled Leopold’s stewardship, and given a sustainable balance to Berry, without breaking the fundamental rules present in both essays. I conclude that Leopold does not demonstrate the same need for agricultural economics that Berry does.

As I said, November is the month for the axe, and, as in other love affairs, there is skill in the exercise of bias. If the birch stands south of pine, and is taller, it will shade the pine’s leader in the spring, and thus discourage the pine weevil from laying her eggs there. Birch competition is a minor affliction compared with this weevil, whose progeny kill the pine’s leader and thus deform the tree. It is interesting to mediate that this insect’s preference for squatting in the sun determines not only her own continuity as a species, but also the future figure of the pine, and my own success as a wielder of axe and shovel.

Again, if a drouthy summer follows my removal of the birch’s shade, the hotter soil may offset the lesser competition for water, and my pine be none the better for my bias.

Lastly, if the birch’s limbs rub the pine’s terminal buds during a wind, the pine will surely be deformed, and the birch must either be removed regardless of other considerations, or else it must be pruned of limbs each winter to a height greater than the pine’s prospective summer growth.

Such are the pros and cons the wielder of an axe must forsee, compare, and decide upon with the calm assurance that his bias will, on the average, prove to be something more than good intentions.

Leopold, haven previously informed the reader of his bias towards pine trees, proves how his bias can “to be something more than good intentions”. This on average is “for the good of the land”.

!!!!Leopold’s model of divine functions gives him the ability to create or destroy plants. According to Berry’s model, Leopold is now in a situation where there are multiple factors; !!! draught, the weevil, and his bias. Leopold is only permitted by nature to give or take, in other words, “divine functions”. Nature, in this situation, can help Leopold by means of sunlight, draught, and weevil.

Leopold exercises his axe and shovel differently, depending upon the variables: sunlight, draught, weevil, and the birch in order to preserve the pine (his bias). The answers to Berry are second and third rule, often depend upon these variables. Therefore, in certain situations nature, or the birch, will help us to save the pine.

If there is sunlight, he has a higher regard for the birch to shade the pine. Because nature, or the birch, is capable of shading the pine, the resulting weevil: whom prefers the sunlight, is thus ridden, therefore saving the pine. However, if next summer has a draught, he must decide between saving the birch or to not;

Sometimes the birch can harm the pine, but others it may shade it from the sun.

which more often than not hinders his beloved pine.

Or between the affliction of (draught, water, and sun) or the afflictions of this weevil. He concludes that the draught, water, and sun are of lesser competition.

Berry’s bias is the human perspective),

My model is:

“I always cut the birch to favor the pine” from that I cite Leopold (69)

Be appalled so am I, More often than not he lacks just a dime.

“If I . . . rub the pine [and give the] terminal buds ” a whine (Leopold sixty-nine)

More often than not we can see the divine. Just think of this, as my “wasteful time”.