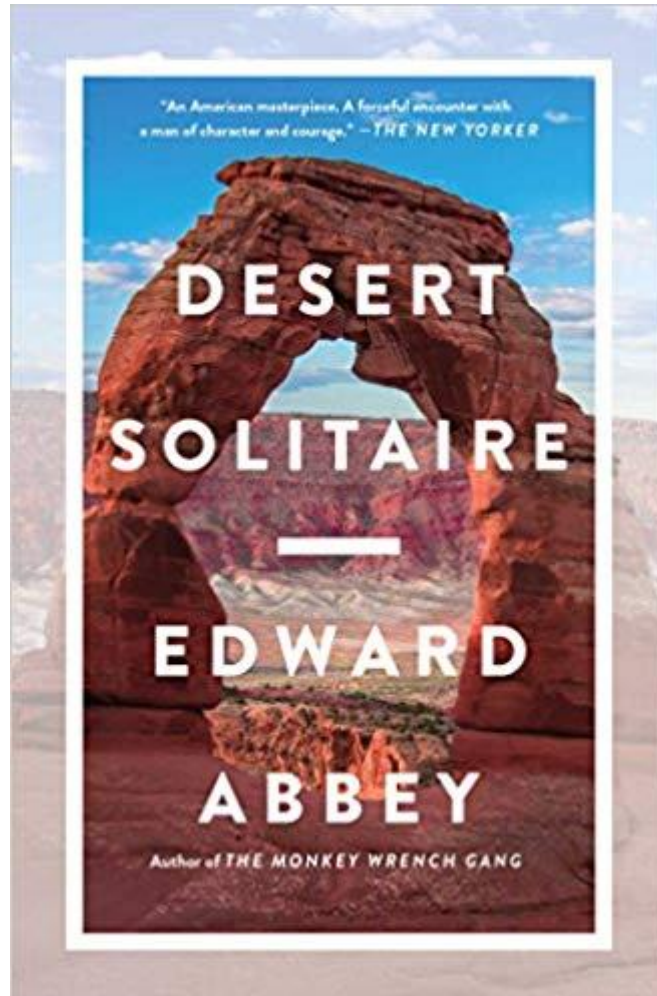


**Human Ethicality with Nature: A Critical Analysis of Edward  
Abbey's *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness***

**K. Vaideki, Research Scholar and Dr. SP. Shanthi**



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**Abstract**

This paper proposes to draw anconnection between the significance of preserving the wild and achieving environmental justice for aninhabitable future in Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*(1968). This book is an expression of Abbey's undying and indisputable love for wilderness and anintense plea against its exploitation by the oil, mining and tourism industries. It is tough to restrict to a single genre, it can be read as a travelogue,a confessional memoir, or a book on nature. In this book, Abbey contends for the cultural and psychological importance of wilderness in

moulding an individual's identity. For Abbey, wilderness required not just as an escape from authority, but also for communing with nature. *Desert Solitaire* reflects an ethical concernment for the natural world. Using the parables of nuclear war, hints of a post-apocalyptic world, Abbey presents a world which is gradually coming under threat due to unchecked technological intervention.

**Keywords:** Industrialization, Nature, Wilderness, Environmental Justice, Ethics

### **Edward Abbey**

Edward Abbey is a representative of the modern-day environmentalism of the twentieth century and seemingly a character who does fit next to the environmental forefathers Henry Thoreau and John Muir. Abbey's sources of inspiration are writers celebrating solitude and nature, the tradition started by Thoreau. The Thoreauvian legacy is apparent in Abbey's anti-government attitude and various acts of civil-disobedience and also in Abbey's patriotism. Abbey is a manifestation of Thoreau in the realities of the twentieth century.

Abbey though passionate about the American wilderness, does bring up issues of indigenous displacement caused by creation of such National Parks. With the rise of industrialization further changes are anticipated to be brought about within these National treasures. Abbey understands the need for tourism development in these lands, as it would lead to increased economic benefits, both for the government and the natives. Abbey, however, is against the use of automobiles within the parameters of the park as he feels that automobiles not only disturb the natural haven of the wild animals, but also rob the individuals of the opportunity to relish the elegance of nature.

### **Autobiographical Work, *Desert Solitaire: A Season In The Wilderness***

Abbey's landmark, autobiographical work, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* (1968), is an expression of his undying, indisputable love for the wilderness and a passionate plea against its exploitation by the oil, mining and tourism industries. This book has a cult following even today. As subtitled *A Season in the Wilderness*, it chronicles Abbey's experiences of having worked as a Park-Ranger in the Arches National Monument in Moab near Utah during the 1950s and 1960s. *Desert Solitaire* becomes Abbey's first bestseller and earned him a lot of critical appraisal. It is hard to confine to a particular genre of writing, it can be read as nature writing, a confessional memoir or a travel narrative. It is a fusion of philosophy, power, humour, and beauty. In this book Abbey contends for the psychological and cultural significance of wilderness which he felt is essential for moulding the American identity. An unconventional and rebellious form of wilderness advocacy, *Desert Solitaire* is a perfect mix of environmental ethics and environmental justice problems that moves beyond the realm of human centrism. If one is trying to move into the uncharted territory beyond anthropocentrism then it would be good to have Abbey as a guide.

### **Protecting the Environment**

For Abbey, writing is the only means to protect and preserve the environment from the forces of industrialization. Anecdotal and philosophical in its outlook, *Desert Solitaire* helps in gaining a deeper knowledge about the bond between man and nature by appealing to the aesthetic sensibilities of the reader and simultaneously evoking an ethical insight of their natural world. Abbey writes ardently in defence of the American Southwest as he believed that writing is the only way he could protect these Canyon lands from the destructive forces of industrialization. His non-conventional style of writing and his defiance of all that conformed to the modern industrial way of life appealed to a number of nature lovers and earned him a massive fan-following. Abbey's love of all that is natural and distrust of all unnecessary machines is apparent in majority of his works.

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## Noise Pollution

In *Desert Solitaire* we find him expressing his disgust at the noise created by the generator inside his house trailer, "I'm shut off from the natural world and sealed up, encapsulated, in a box of artificial light and tyrannical noise" (15). Abbey strongly believes that these products of the civilized and industrialized world led to man's estrangement from the natural world. Yet we find him using all the so called "indispensable conveniences like the gas cook, gas refrigerator, hot water heater," (4) thus proving that civilization is in fact a crucial part of wilderness. The book is an attempt by Abbey to find the middle ground between conserving wilderness and achieving development and progress for a better future.

## Anecdotal and Philosophical

As the title of the book suggests, *Desert Solitaire* is a document of a season that Abbey spent in the Glen Canyon as a park-ranger in the 1950s. It consists of eighteen sections, each an eloquent expression of the beauty and power of the desert, the work is anecdotal and philosophical in its outlook. It is not just an expression of Abbey's unparalleled love for the desert but also an exploration of several important environmental justice and developmental issues. The book begins with Abbey's description of his first-day on duty as a park-ranger. Finding himself at "the centre of the world, God's navel"(4) Abbey is bewildered by the beauty and expanse of the desert. He is overcome by a greed and possessiveness which is evident in his calling the land "Abbey's country" and himself its proud "custodian" (4-5). Standing there, away from the clamour of civilization, confronting the "bare bones of existence" Abbey dreams of a world where the self fuses with the non-human world yet retains its individuality (7). Evoking the rugged harshness of the desert, Abbey presents the mural of these deserts in a new light, which help connects man with the natural world.

## Position on Industrialization

Abbey is not completely against industrialization. In *Desert Solitaire*, one can find him talking about making the best of both the worlds. He acknowledges the fact that despite its many adverse impacts, tourism did have positive impacts on both natural and artificially constructed environments. Tourism had after all motivated the preservation of sensitive ecosystems like the Everglades National Park in Florida. Abbey acknowledges the fact that an increased tourist influx would help boost the economy of the region, in terms of more money, motels, restaurants, gas stations, roads etc. His only objection is against achieving growth for the sake of growth which in accordance with him is the ideology of the cancer cell. He urges the Park service authorities to focus on ways to conserve both-wilderness and civilization.

## Seeking a Middle Ground

Abbey tries to reach a middle ground by offering solutions that would help save the parks and also benefit the tourists who come to these regions seeking for some outdoor recreation. Some of the solutions suggested by Abbey in the work include - banning of all automobiles within the park, constructing trails rather than new roads for the visitors, with emergency shelters and water supplies along the way and employing more park rangers to assist the tourists with activities like reading a topographical map, saddling a horse, building a fire etc. Having suggested these measures, Abbey realizes that adopting these suggestions could mean delivering a big blow to the Industrial Tourism sector. However, the benefits in terms of health and pleasure would far overcome the monetary losses which the tourism industry may earn. Abbey's concerns are undoubtedly directed towards attaining a sustainable environment for the future generations. Preserving the wilderness is the first-step towards accomplishing this goal. An environmental activist, he strongly believes that

only an upheaval in the thinking and working of the official system could bring about the required changes.

While the tourism industry and its effect on the desert is only a social issue that Abbey speaks about in this work, the other is the construction of a dam on the Colorado River. He dedicates a whole chapter "Down the River" to expressing his displeasure against the proposal of constructing a new dam in Glen Canyon. Even though the primary objective of a dam is to give enough water for irrigation and fulfil the water requirements of the neighbouring villages, Abbey doubts that the new dam would serve that purpose. If anything it will just become a geological oddity in the middle of the desert. Before constructing the dam, the desert existed as "earth's original paradise-Eden" (189). Abbey feels he is amongst the lucky few to have seen this "Edenic" paradise. His prodigious love for nature can be viewed in personifying the Glen Canyon as a living being which once lost to human avarice could never be recovered again. While a dam is a man-made structure that could be constructed again if destroyed, the Glen Canyon and others like it could never be recovered once lost. That is why Abbey proposes that any decisions regarding such projects must be taken after perceiving all the factors.

Sometimes the natural elements in our environment are so overpowering that they should be protected and preserved despite all human reasoning. Abbey's reflections on the tourism industry and construction of the dam suggest that he is not against development rather his objections are directed towards attaining development just for the sake of it. His argument is that any developmental project should be undertaken after viewing its overall impact on humans as well as the non-human world. While the dam would definitely enable easier access of the tourists to the river and the bridge, it would turn an otherwise adventure trip into a routine motorboat excursion while also disturbing the natural haven of the fauna of that region.

The beauty of the Rainbow Bridge lay in its remoteness and the surrounding wilderness. Abbey and his friend Newcomb realize how the beauty and splendour of these Canyon lands would soon be lost through industrial development; a loss that would be irreplaceable. "There is something about the desert that the human sensibility cannot assimilate" (302). It is in the reticence of the desert that Abbey understands something important about human nature, "the unconscious fear which compels them to tame, alter or destroy what they cannot understand, to reduce the wild and pre-human to human dimensions" (240). It is an effort to control nature that humans tend to forget that their actions today could have far-reaching consequences in the future. Wendell Berry (1934), in "Preserving Wilderness" speaks about such "nature conquerors," which look at nature as an accumulation of natural resources and raw materials. However what we require to realize now is that our environment is not just a resource to be exploited for human needs; rather it embodies several human, cultural and economic advantages that have to be protected. According to Berry "a culture that does not measure itself by nature, by an understanding of its debts to nature, becomes destructive of nature and thus of itself" (45). To attain social and ecological justice it is thus imperative for human beings to reassess their relationship with land. Only by understanding one's relation with land could man connect with himself and his values. Abbey throughout the book maintains that nature has its own technique of maintaining a cyclic balance between all life forms. In the chapter on "The Serpents of Paradise" Abbey discusses about the natural link between mice, rattlesnakes and gopher snakes. One morning while he is sitting on the steps of his trailer, sipping on a hot cup of coffee he finds a rattlesnake looking up at him from under the doorsteps. Evidently the mice in Abbey's trailer have attracted these rattlesnakes as they are its natural enemies.

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## Deep-seated Ecology

Environmental problems encompass a wide range of problems such as overpopulation, industrialization, land degradation, pesticide contamination, nuclear meltdown, global warming, environmental brunt of the coal and mining industry and hydraulic fracturing. Abbey's work does not directly deal with environmental justice issues; it does give surge to a philosophical discussion on the ethicality of curbing freedom of the natural world by human intervention. Simultaneously, it also highlights the significance of protecting the wilderness, for we need such spaces; as an escape, as a place of communion with nature and as a temporary dwelling for preparing oneself to get back to civilization. Using the metaphor of land and landscape, Abbey emphasizes the role that nature plays in moulding an individual's identity. For Abbey, land embodies human, cultural and economic advantages that have to be protected. Through the story on Cowboys and Indians Abbey's message to the readers is that if we hope to achieve social and environmental justice we want to re-evaluate our relationship with land. The interconnectedness of all life and the convoluted connection between culture and land can only be explained through gaining a deeper ethical insight of our natural habitat. Through *Desert Solitaire* Abbey roots for a deep-seated ecology that moves beyond anthropocentrism.

Abbey rooted for such a deep-seated ecology in *Desert Solitaire*. Abbey concludes that by simply creating wilderness preserves we cannot hope to preserve wildness. In order to do so we have to follow an extensive approach, one which would perceive wilderness as a part of civilization. *Desert Solitaire* shows how we can hope to achieve environmental justice only by including the cultural, physical and social dimensions of both the human as well as the non-human world.

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K. Vaideki  
Ph.D. Research Scholar  
Department of English  
Annamalai University

Dr. SP. Shanthi  
Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
Annamalai University