

Miles Bent

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Warren

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Aldo Leopold's Unique Elegy:

Consolation and Agency in "Marshland Elegy" and *A Sand County Almanac*

The cranes stand, as it were, upon the sodden pages of their own history... An endless caravan of generations has built of its own bones this bridge into the future, this habitat where the oncoming host again may live and breed and die.

Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*

In July 1934, a passionate young conservation professor named Aldo Leopold embarked on a fishing trip that would alter his perspective on many of his own philosophies. Leopold taught conservation and wildlife management at the University of Wisconsin, but he spent most of that summer of 1934 helping local Wisconsin farmers combat the effects of a series of dust storms and drought-related issues—primarily peat fires—that threatened the biota of the entire state (Meine 329). Few places in the area were left unscathed after the fires left their mark on the landscape, but Leopold was determined to visit a marsh that had survived the recent fire threats because he realized that it was a likely breeding ground for a population of sandhill cranes, a species with which he was unfamiliar. The marsh provided Leopold with his first glimpse of the notoriously impressive birds, an experience that he later dubbed “a noble sight,” and one that “flipped a mental switch in [his] mind” (Meine 330). The crane’s dwindling population and their majestic presence in the face of numerous ecological threats to their habitat intrigued Leopold, and he began to study them intensely, devoting “much thought to their

role in nature's scheme." As he ruminated on the cranes' uniqueness, Leopold made a connection, "heretofore only implicit in his appreciation, between a natural object's beauty and its evolutionary history" that he would later apply to his own thinking (Meine 330). The cranes would become a symbol of evolutionary time for Leopold, and his temporal understanding of nature and history changed the more he considered them. In 1937 Leopold memorialized his first memory of the cranes in the essay "Marshland Elegy," his "classic celebration and lamentation of Wisconsin's sandhill cranes" (Meine 337). The piece exhibits remarkably descriptive imagery, powerful analyses, and an illustrative personal narrative that is rarely found in an environmental essay, and Leopold's writing conveys his conservationist zeal as well as his literary abilities. The essay indirectly appeals to humanity to consider our actions carefully as we interact with the natural world, and the cranes become the focal point of his narrative—iconic symbols of an evolutionary history that we risk losing touch with.

I chose "Marshland Elegy" as the focal point for this study because of its importance to Leopold, and because I believe the essay plays a more significant role in his collection of essays than it is given credit. As Leopold began planning to publish a collection of essays in the early 1940's, he initially wanted to title the book "Marshland Elegy" (Ribbens 98). This proposal of a provocative ecological collection with a title that references a literary term such as "elegy" is rather striking. But perhaps more significantly, Leopold's intent indicates that his plan, whether deliberate or otherwise, utilized literary means to persuade his intended audience of something. Although Leopold was eventually convinced to change the collection's title, this initial intent stresses his sense of how important the essay was. "Marshland Elegy" also exhibits vivid literary techniques and a carefully assembled

structural composition that reveal a concerted effort to craft a persuasive literary piece with elegiac form, another unusual approach in conservationist writing. The elegiac nature of “Marshland Elegy” then invites the reader to reevaluate the entirety of *A Sand County Almanac* itself as an elegiac work, and shows that individual agency plays a significant role in Leopold’s most classic text.

This essay explores “Marshland Elegy” by first outlining the historical evolution of elegies to provide a foundational understanding of the literary form, and then analyzing the utility in considering “Marshland Elegy’s” elegiac form as a synecdoche for *A Sand County Almanac*. My argument will then examine the effects of Leopold’s legacy when applying the elegiac form, including what consolation, if any, he offers us, and what that means for the human-nature relationship he values so highly, particularly as it pertains to human agency and individual roles. My evaluation of “Marshland Elegy” as an elegiac literary narrative eventually identifies it as an incomplete elegy, though I find that its deficiencies strengthen, rather than subtract from, Leopold’s comprehensive message of consolation because it forces the reader to directly engage with their own solutions to the problems Leopold poses.

The Literary Elements of “Marshland Elegy”

Analyzing a work as elegiac depends intrinsically upon a comprehensive understanding of the elegy itself. The elegy has a rich literary history that traces its origins back to ancient Greece and Rome. The term originally “referred not to a genre or subject matter but to a specific verse form” and meter (Preminger and Brogan 322), although the elegy eventually assumed a much broader usage. The earliest elegies were formal, often ceremonious laments, particularly “in response to the loss of someone or something near

and dear” (Nagy 13). As it was introduced to more people around the world, elegy evolved to contain nuanced differences that were unique to each culture, but its forms typically followed the Greek or Roman interpretations that concerned sadness, death, loss, or rejection of love. Popularity and widespread usage meant that the metrical form gradually mattered less and less, and writing was increasingly identified as elegiac based on subject matter and genre. M.H. Abrams claims that after John Donne’s poetry temporarily redefined the elegy in the seventeenth century, it “began to be limited to its most common present usage: a formal and sustained lament in verse for the death of a particular person” (Abrams 72).

Funeral Elegy

One of the most traditional types of elegy is the *funeral elegy*, whose popularity throughout literary history reinforces Abrams’s claim of its prominence. Lorna Clymer writes that the funeral elegy enjoyed immense success in Early Modern England as a method of exploring mortality and mourning because its structure promotes an urgent, intense exploration of mortality, “as if the devastating focus could not be sustained indefinitely” (170-1). Most funeral elegies follow a specific structure in which the speaker laments, then praises the deceased, and concludes with a consolation of some sort. Elegies’ success certainly depend upon the combined effect of the entire piece, but its utility as a method of expression is most effective because, unlike other forms of pure lament or memorial, it “frequently includes a movement from expressed sorrow toward consolation” (Preminger and Brogan 322). This consolation, typically offered toward the end of the composition, often plays the largest role in responding to the experience of loss that the audience feels, and is an integral part of any elegy. It links the sorrow voiced by the poetry

to the reconciliation and acceptance that accompanies the emotional release. Consolations take many forms in elegies, but usually serve to move the audience to a deeper resolution, both at the prospect of the recent death and the listener's own imminent mortality (Clymer 172). The exploration of consolation in Leopold's "Marshland Elegy" is crucial to the argument presented in this paper.

Pastoral Elegy

The *pastoral elegy* is another type of elegiac form, one that Clymer believes replaced the funeral elegy in the mid-eighteenth century as a mourning device because it offered "a wider range of affect" and was not restricted to "overtly occasional topics" such as funerals (Clymer 183). Pastoral elegies "represent both the poet and the one he mourns—who is usually also a poet—as shepherds" (Abrams 72). In this sense, the pastoral elegy can also be considered a funeral elegy, but its unique qualities separate it from the previous subtype. Abrams reviews the important conventional features that typically appear in pastoral elegies, and portions of his list are replicated as follows:

All nature joins in mourning the shepherd's death; the mourner charges with negligence the nymphs or other guardians of the dead shepherd; there is a procession of appropriate mourners; the poet raises questions about the justice of fate, or else of Providence, and adverts to the corrupt conditions of his own times; there is a closing consolation. (Abrams 73)

To this list of elegiac conventions, Preminger and Brogan add "outbreaks of anger or criticism... and the use of imagery such as water, vegetation, sources of light, and emblems... drawn from a natural world depicted as either injured victim or site of renewal" (Preminger and Brogan 322). Additionally, pastoral elegy is closely associated with idyllic

conceptualizations of nature and classical mythology, particularly in its “sentimental attachment to a bygone time and/or ethos” (Watterson 139, 136). Many of these elements contribute to romanticizing the dead beloved and transforming him into a heroic figure or idyllic symbol, which differentiates the pastoral from the funeral elegy. But while they undoubtedly differ in certain components, the two elegiac forms share the same basic structure that is essential to the elegy’s efficacy: the traditional lamentation / praise / consolation narrative progression.

Prose Elegy

More recent literary elegies have adopted yet another elegiac form, the *prose elegy*, which is particularly useful to evaluate “Marshland Elegy” and Leopold’s other essays. John Vickery argues that modern novels and other literary forms helped shift elegiac focus from pastoral to prose in an effort to better represent emotion and to illustrate new human reactions to death and loss. He claims, “the twentieth century gradually transformed the elegy into a focus on the diversity of losses occurring in human life and a shaping of new (or different) elegiac responses to them. To the death of the individual, the modern elegy added most of the forms of personal, intellectual, and cultural loss suffered by mankind” (Vickery 1). This transition occurred in the mid-1900’s, right around the time that Leopold was writing, and many of his essays, including “Marshland Elegy” itself, can be viewed as a response to the contemporary experimental techniques to convey elegiac sentiments. Some of the ways modern authors delineate these shifts are to transform the conventional formula of older elegies; the traditional lamentation / praise / consolation structure still usually appears in more recent elegiac works, but frequently in modified or altered ways.

Leopold utilizes these experimental variations of elegiac composition in “Marshland Elegy” to demonstrate his conscious efforts to persuade his reader in a unique way.

Praise in “Marshland Elegy”

This understanding of elegiac history and form will now allow an effective analysis of “Marshland Elegy,” an essay that has been called Leopold’s “classic celebration and lamentation of Wisconsin’s sandhill cranes,” (Meine 377) and “a lovely but devastating ecological essay” (Ribbens 105). These paradoxical statements accurately account for the essay’s contrasting narrative style, and the combination of praise and lamentation evokes the structure of a funeral elegy. The speaker’s tone throughout the essay demonstrates a rising and falling pattern that is unique in *A Sand County Almanac*, and the segments are woven together in a way that leaves the reader with a comprehensive sense of loss and grief that is conventional in traditional elegies. The mourning of the cranes and the destruction of their marshland habitat drive sentiments of death, loss, and lamentation typical of elegies, and as such resemble the foremost reasons for regarding the essay as an elegy.

However, the essay begins with praise and veneration rather than with mourning (a variation from the elegiac norm that will be addressed later in this paper). Indeed, it is easy to imagine the introductory scene of “Marshland Elegy” as being narrated by Leopold himself, since the speaker’s tone of admiration in the opening lines is readily identifiable as the emotion a conservationist might express as he discovers the majestic sandhill cranes in their natural habitat. The passage depicts a tranquil Wisconsin morning on a marsh, and the scene instills in the reader an intense reverence for the serene, simple beauty of the environment:

A dawn wind stirs on the great marsh. With almost imperceptible slowness it rolls a bank of fog across the wide morass. Like the white ghost of a glacier the mists advance, riding over phalanxes of tamarack, sliding across bog-meadows heavy with dew. A single silence hangs from horizon to horizon...

At last a glint of sun reveals the approach of a great echelon of birds. On motionless wing they emerge from the lifting mists, sweep a final arc of sky, and settle in clangorous descending spirals to their feeding grounds. A new day has begun on the crane marsh. (Leopold 95)

Leopold offers his elegiac tribute to the crane in these first few lines, though the narrative simplicity of the scene could make it difficult for readers to identify his writing as praise. Rather than celebrate excitedly, Leopold typically offers his highest praise in plain, elegant verses like these throughout *A Sand County Almanac*; his clear affinity for the cranes' simple grace and their natural environment dominates the passage.

The prose is also filled with literary techniques that warrant a second reading of the raw imagery depicted in the scene. For instance, Leopold's frequent use of alliteration, such as in the phrases "across the wide morass," and "a tinkling of little bells falls soft upon the listening land," demonstrates his ability to create melodic prose rhythms and displays a literary intent that is rare in ecological writing (Leopold 95). The alliteration lends itself to Leopold's characteristic simplicity and elegance because it is an understated literary technique, but it simultaneously highlights different elements of the essay that would otherwise go unnoticed. For example, the alliteration that opens the scene emphasizes the deliberately slow and unhurried pace with which the passage begins, which is in turn

complemented by a crescendo of various noises and activity—both in Leopold’s syntax and the narrative progression—that mark the marsh’s transformation as its residents wake up. The scene finally culminates as the sun rises, permitting the narrative focus to shift entirely to the “great echelon of birds.” The scene depicts the cranes symbolically descending from the heavens to provide stability to the day just as sunlight dawns on earth. Yet the marshy landscape, hanging silence, and ghostly fog represent an ominous stillness before they are interrupted—like the calm before the storm—that hints at an inevitable transition to lamentation.

Time and Evolution in “Marshland Elegy”

Following the iconic opening scene, however, an interlude separates the essay’s praise of cranes from the next elegiac section (which laments their demise). These pages introduce the crane as “a symbol of a past which could never be regained, but which contained values that were alive, and could contribute in the present and future” (Meine 331).

Our appreciation of the crane grows with the slow unraveling of earthly history. His tribe, we now know, stems out of the remote Eocene... When we hear his call we hear no mere bird. We hear the trumpet in the orchestra of evolution. He is the symbol of our untamable past, of that incredible sweep of millennia which underlies and conditions the daily affairs of birds and men.

(Leopold 96)

Leopold’s valuation of the crane bridges the introductory scene and the lamentation passage by emphasizing its relationship to “earthly history” through the passage of evolutionary time. His explicit focus on the crane, rather than any other creature with

which he was familiar, as the “living reminder of America’s *evolutionary* past” suggests that Leopold was equally fascinated by the cranes’ survival abilities and their perpetuity over the millennia as he was with their history (Meine 331). Particularly given the immediacy of the fire threat at the time of his first visit to the marsh in 1934, Leopold noted that the crane population was in decline, and he wanted to show the audience that as the cranes perish so does their unique history. Leopold additionally uses his own dearth of evolutionary knowledge to emphasize the importance of protecting sources of earth’s history such as the crane, and his concerns regarding their preservation reflect his own struggles with the intensity of our own “untamable past” (Leopold 96). However, the brief discussion of evolutionary time forewarns of the crashing effect of an impending lamentation, and Leopold does not disappoint.

Lament in “Marshland Elegy”

Indeed, Leopold transitions to lamentation with powerful critical effect. His lament interestingly follows the trajectory of both the praise and the interlude, in that it is narrated as a history or a novel. Leopold writes that there was initially a healthy, even mutually beneficial relationship between the land and the environment; “Man and beast, plant and soil lived on and with each other in mutual toleration, to the mutual benefit of all. The marsh might have kept on producing hay and prairie chickens, deer and muskrat, crane-music and cranberries forever” (Leopold 99). But unfortunately “the new overlords”—here meaning humans—did not understand this, and Leopold’s real lament begins when the humans begin to get greedy and try to utilize the land, rather than take care of it:

[Humans] did not include soil, plants, or birds in their ideas of mutuality. The dividends of such a balanced economy were too modest. They envisaged farms not only around, but *in* the marsh. An epidemic of ditch-digging and land-booming set in...

But crops were poor and beset by frosts, to which the expensive ditches added an aftermath of debt. Farmers moved out. Peat beds dried, shrank, caught fire. Sun-energy out of the Pleistocene shrouded the countryside in acrid smoke. No man raised his voice against the waste, only his nose against the smell... The cranes were hard put, their numbers shrinking with the remnants of unburned meadow. For them, the song of the power shovel came near being an elegy. The high priests of progress knew nothing of cranes, and cared less. What is a species more or less among engineers? What good is an undrained marsh anyhow? (Leopold 99-100)

The crane, as the subject of the lament, is impacted directly by human abuse of the land, thus the speaker directs his criticism toward humans and their ignorance of the environmental value of the marshlands—indeed, everything besides their own self-interests. Leopold ascribes human activity an “epidemic” nature that likens them to a plague or a disease to the land, yet he also sarcastically dubs them the “high priests of progress” to suggest that they often think they know best for the natural world (Leopold 100). This passage uses lamentation to address the implications of placing human interests—particularly economic interests—above the health of the marsh ecology, and it identifies the decline in the crane population as a direct result of that negligence. Leopold also laments that even when humans do try to correct their ecological mistakes, they

inevitably cause more problems due to their inability “to think of what the country really needs” (Leopold 101). He finally grieves that even his own field of study, conservation, is “self-defeating, for to cherish we must see and fondle, and when enough have seen and fondled, there is no wilderness left to cherish” (101). This final complication concludes the passage’s lamentation on a bitter note, for there is little optimism in the analysis—only a palpable helplessness that offers no solution to the conservation conundrum.

Consolation and the lack thereof

“Marshland Elegy” reserves its consolation for the end of the essay—after the lamentation section—where a traditional elegy would typically offer the resolution of the human-environment relationship conundrum that Leopold poses. Yet the final section of the essay fails to offer such a conciliatory message in its conclusion, instead presenting a vague, hypothetical outcome:

Some day, perhaps in the very process of our benefactions, perhaps in the fullness of geologic time, the last crane will trumpet his farewell and spiral skyward from the great marsh. High out of the clouds will fall the sound of hunting horns, the baying of the phantom pack, the tinkle of tulle bells, and then a silence never to be broken, unless perchance in some far pasture of the Milky Way. (Leopold 101)

This conclusion does not encourage humans to come to terms with their own mortality, as traditional elegies do, nor does it reassure the audience in any meaningful way. At best, the seven lines that form the final passage of “Marshland Elegy” provide an extremely thin consolation, but more realistically they offer more cause for lamentation because they relate a future problem that the audience cannot address themselves. The whole essay

builds up the importance of the cranes and their symbolism and recommends them to the audience, but in this passage Leopold stresses their inevitable demise rather than the hopeful prospect of their protection. Although the reader lacks the agency to change the birds' fate, Leopold's failure to offer ostensible consolation is the most perplexing and frustrating aspect of the essay, and it leads to the structural conflict at the heart of my argument.

The Incomplete Elegy

This conflict is the focal point for the counterargument to my thesis; that "Marshland Elegy" ought not to be considered an elegy due to its incompleteness. Other potential claims that lay the groundwork for arguments against my own are as follows. First, critics might point out that Leopold switches the order of the traditional lamentation / praise / consolation format by leading with his praise of the cranes and following with the lamentation. Failure to follow traditional elegiac form could be viewed as preclusion from the traditional canon. Second, Leopold's discussion of evolutionary time introduces a unique historical perspective when he discusses cranes and their evolutionary past that do not adhere to an elegiac precedent, and therefore throws off the conventional structure and disrupts the traditional flow. Finally, and most importantly, an essay that merely laments the loss of something without providing the audience with any solace explicitly fails to demonstrate sufficient elegiac qualities because a primary purpose of elegy is to offer comprehensive consolation to the audience.

While it is true that "Marshland Elegy" fails to follow the traditional lamentation / praise / consolation format strictly, Leopold's divergence from convention in the above arguments should not detract from its elegiac value or its consideration as elegy. On the

contrary, the essay offers enough elegiac qualities to outweigh any opposing arguments. For instance, some specific examples of elegiac elements in “Marshland Elegy” include when Leopold refers back to the bygone “haymeadow days” as “Arcadian” (Leopold 99), a term that derives from the ancient Greek province and suggests a pastoral utopia, while simultaneously exhibiting “sentimental attachment to a bygone time and ethos” (Watterson 139, 136); or how Leopold’s description of the marshland’s desolation reflects the pastoral elegy’s trope of blaming or critiquing higher entities (Abrams 73). Indeed, even the essay’s closing lines resemble the pastoral imagery that John Milton immortalized at the end of his pastoral elegy “Lycidas”:

He touched the tender stops of various quills,
 With eager thought warbling his Doric lay;
 And now the sun had stretched out all the hills,
 And now was dropped into the western bay;
 At last he rose, and twitched his mantle blue:
 Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new. (Milton et al. 26)

Undeniably Elegiac

To address the first potential counter argument, it is clear that Leopold’s prose elegy does not resemble the traditional poetic form that comprised elegies until the twentieth century. But John Vickery denounces the suggestion that fiction cannot have the same profound effect that traditional elegies conveyed due to its nontraditional structure. He argues that the prose elegy’s message is equally as forceful and pervasive as that of the poetic elegy. In the modern elegy, he says, “individual contemplations of issues such as loss, memory, time, and survival augment the central focus of the traditional elegy. These topics

have increasingly generated a need to seek less traditional forms of consolatory authority with which to invest the elegy" (2), which implies that Leopold's structural differences from traditional elegies can be attributed to the different focus of his elegy. That is, Leopold is not lamenting an individual's death in the pastoral tradition; he is mourning the loss of the cranes' habitat and the demise of their population. Therefore his unconventional form is still effective because his writing is unconventional.

The previous Vickery quote also touches upon the second critique, of time's role in "Marshland Elegy." Time is one of the modern topics that Vickery says augments the central focus of traditional elegies, and because Leopold uses a broad evolutionary scope to evaluate the cranes and their symbolism, his lamentation and sense of mourning also extends to the historical past of the cranes and the marsh. Additionally, Lorna Clymer suggests that elegy is intrinsically concerned with time and temporality due to its very nature as a response to the immediacy of death (Clymer 171). Elegy's greatest responsibility is to console mourners, which involves coming to terms with mortality and the concept of everlasting time and eternity. Thus while time is not an explicit component of elegiac structure, elegy inherently requires an exploration of temporal importance, and Leopold's use of time in "Marshland Elegy" coincides with and even complements the traditional elegiac norms.

The final critique, that "Marshland Elegy" cannot fit the elegiac canon due to its lack of consolation at the essay's end, is the most significant for exploring Leopold's experimentation with traditional elegiac form, which by now should appear deliberate. Leopold was clearly aware of elegiac conventions and was tinkering with them in his writing; all the audience need do is read "Marshland Elegy's" title to see that. But to call his

essay an elegy and to fail to offer consolation would push the canonical boundaries beyond their limits. Instead, Leopold intentionally titled and structured “Marshland Elegy” as he did because of how it makes the reader think about consolation. He engages his audience with his praise and lamentation of the cranes and their habitat, and the lack of consolation goes against their expectations. He assumed that the elegiac structure of his writing would invoke feelings of sorrow and guilt on his audience and that they would then come to expect some form of conciliatory message. His omission of such a message encourages the reader to continue searching for consolation in the remaining pages in the same way that cliffhangers function in novels. “Marshland Elegy” was originally published as an individual essay, and Leopold’s intention may have been to make the audience evaluate their own agency in the destruction of natural lands. But the fact that he later wanted to title his entire collection of essays “Marshland Elegy” suggests he was aware the effect an incomplete elegy could have, and that he wanted to present his consolation more comprehensively. Thus while “Marshland Elegy” may be an incomplete elegy, it accomplishes the same goals that traditional elegies do—namely by compelling the audience to search for resolutions elsewhere and to explore their own understanding of consolation.

“Marshland Elegy” the Synecdoche

This conciliatory cliffhanger begs the question; where do human beings turn for comfort and solace when it is not provided to them? A reader searching for consolation after reading the incomplete elegy will not find much comfort in any of *A Sand County Almanac’s* other essays until he arrives at Leopold’s landmark work, “The Land Ethic,” which is a treatise on human responsibility and respect for the natural environment that

today remains Leopold's legacy and one of the most influential conservation essays ever written. Because "The Land Ethic" is a rare instance in which he recommends actions and proposes solutions based on his own experiences rather than simply relating those experiences to the reader, it is the only place in *A Sand County Almanac* in which Leopold offers the audience any sort of meaningful consolation. Since "Marshland Elegy" therefore engages the rest of the collection— "The Land Ethic" in particular—to complete the elegiac consolation, the entire collection is utilized to provide a comprehensive elegiac process of mourning and consoling. The elegiac form therefore also applies to *A Sand County Almanac*, and it too ought to be considered elegiac.

The collection actually does exhibit a structure that mimics "Marshland Elegy's," and therefore suggests an elegiac quality. Like traditional elegies and "Marshland Elegy" itself, *A Sand County Almanac* is divided into three distinct parts. In Part I (also entitled "A Sand County Almanac") Leopold assumes the role of an "ideal father-figure at whose hearth, literally, we learn our environmental primer lessons" (Finch xvi). The chapters follow Leopold's observations from a year on his farm in Wisconsin with an "easy, informal, inviting" tone, and the narratives are effective as anecdotes of human behavior because Leopold uses "strong vivid images, rather than lessons or formal philosophies" to convey his own appreciation for different environmental aspects in his life (Finch xvii). "Part II: Sketches Here and There" delineates a significant shift from Part I, both in tone and perspective, and it should come as little surprise that "Marshland Elegy" is the first essay in Part II. Its tone becomes "less celebratory of what remains and more eulogistic of what is lost, or being lost," and environmental loss and decay "runs nearly unbroken through [Part II]" (Finch xx). Other important essays contained in this middle section include "On a

Monument to a Pigeon,” “Thinking Like a Mountain,” and “Song of the Gavilan,” each of which echo traces of “Marshland Elegy’s” criticism of human understanding of environmental needs. Part III, “The Upshot,” contains four essays that pose broader philosophical questions by “directly addressing many of the political, cultural, social, and educational issues” Leopold was concerned with (Finch xxv). As such, the essays in “The Upshot” are “a culmination, both of Aldo Leopold’s environmental thinking and of the environmental drama of *A Sand County Almanac*,” and read “as the climax of the entire book” (Finch xxv, xxvii).

After this paper’s earlier extensive evaluation of elegiac form, the nature of each individual part of *A Sand County Almanac* should clearly parallel the structure already outlined in “Marshland Elegy.” Part I’s “graceful and perceptive” celebrations of nature associate it closely with elegiac praise; Part II’s essays that focus on environmental loss and deterioration immediately recommend it for consideration as the lamentation portion of the collection; and Part III’s philosophical outlook represents “not only an upshot of thinking, but a fruition of living” (Finch xxvii) that is capable of offering the audience sufficient consolation. Like “Marshland Elegy,” *A Sand County Almanac* progresses through stages of varying focus and tone that create an overall sense of loss. By considering “Marshland Elegy” as a synecdoche of *A Sand County Almanac* and viewing the collection elegiacally, the audience more fully appreciates Leopold’s intended emphasis on “The Upshot” and “The Land Ethic.” The “upshot” itself derives from the last shot of an archery tournament and represents an individual’s ultimate chance to reach his goal (Oxford English Dictionary); thus in titling the last portion of *A Sand County Almanac* “The Upshot,” Leopold suggests that his concluding proposition offers humanity the last, best chance to

solve the conservation conundrum that “Marshland Elegy” and *A Sand County Almanac* outline.

Appealing to Agency via Passivity

The “land ethic” depends upon a “personal, almost religious respect for life and for the earth that generates and supports it,” and is one of the few places that Leopold appeals directly to the individual for public support (Stegner 234). Leopold’s reliance on the individual to partake in his proposed solution offers a vital window into his own understanding of consolation, and he implies a dependency on agency to sufficiently console humanity. Thus to answer the earlier question of where humans turn for consolation, I propose that Leopold believed—or at least hoped—that humans primarily look to their own agency to enact change. Plus, “The Land Ethic” ultimately reinforces the conviction that agency does matter. This is not always apparent; Leopold’s tone in previous essays—including “Marshland Elegy”—is often distant and detached, which does not suggest much optimism for change or agency. Leopold’s restrained voice is more apparent here than in most of his other essays, which is odd because “Marshland Elegy” itself was written based on a personal experience. Leopold’s “diffidence, detachment, irony, and uncertainty” mimic the attitudes that other authors, such as James Joyce, exhibit toward their own stories, which Vickery claims is because “with writers such as Joyce, extended public or formal lamentation is found to be pointless, given the actual nature of the world” (Vickery 4). This theory is interesting to apply to Leopold’s peculiar distance from this particular essay because it is clear that Leopold did not subscribe to Vickery’s assertion that lamentation is “pointless, given the actual nature of the world.” After all, his own use of lamentation is the driving force behind much of his powerful ecological argument in *A Sand*

County Almanac, and the collection would not be as persuasive without it. Therefore while the apparent passivity in “Marshland Elegy” may initially suggest that Leopold doesn’t think agency is significant, this is only because his lack of active voice directs the reader toward the solution that heavily concerns active agency.

Legacy and Impact

Leopold uses the importance of individual agency and the elegiac structure in *A Sand County Almanac* and “Marshland Elegy” to emphasize the consolation in his comprehensive argument with which his legacy is so closely associated. Leopold is hesitant to insert himself too directly in the conversation about providing clear solutions for the simple reason that there are no easy answers to his conservation conundrum. He spent his entire life striving to understand nature and our relationships with the earth and its biota, and even he acknowledges the difficulty we find ourselves in. But ultimately, he offers humanity consolation in the form of “The Upshot,” a consolation that is only available to us through the prospect of a healthy relationship with the environment, and the philosophic hope that Leopold spent his life advocating. Rather than solely focusing his essays on humanity’s responsibility for the destruction of the habitats and species he cherished, he was optimistic of the human ability to recognize and reconcile the problems they have helped to create.

Leopold therefore uses elegy in *A Sand County Almanac* and “Marshland Elegy” as a literary technique to guide readers toward their own realizations. The experimental, intentional incompleteness of his elegy encourages the public to search for consolation introspectively to combat the lamentation that surrounds us, and his strategy to include the entirety of *A Sand County Almanac* effectively provokes thorough analyses of the reader’s

individual agency. The comprehensive collection of his works further allows the reader to directly engage with Leopold's diverse essays, which is vital to incur ecologically conscious outlooks for those who follow in our footsteps. After all, posterity, not us, will be responsible for the earth's future, and Leopold's efforts to endear the world's biota to future generations signifies the effort we all must make if we are to leave behind anything at all. The fate of the cranes and the marshes of the world depend on it.

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