Desert Solitaire

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EDWARD ABBEY

Born to an organist mother who taught him to love art and an anarchist father who taught him to be skeptical of the government, Edward Abbey took to literature and politics at a very young age. Honorably discharged from a clerk position in the military—a distinction he rejected—Abbey studied the use of violence in political rebellion and openly espoused anarchy in his published essays. Thanks to these interests, the FBI opened a file on him; "I'd be insulted if they weren't watching me," Abbey later bragged. His early love of nature—cultivated in hitchhiking trips throughout the American West—brought him at age 29 to Arches National Monument, near Moab, Utah, for a summer park ranger job. Here, he kept notebooks that he would later turn into his politically charged memoir, *Desert Solitaire* (1968). Though several of Abbey's novels became Hollywood films, this memoir, coinciding with the 1960s environmentalist movement, became his first real bestseller. He furthered that book's harsh political rhetoric in *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975), a novel that later inspired the real-life eco-terrorist group Earth First!. Abbey continued to publish environmentalist novels, memoirs, and political commentary until he died at age 62. For these two influential works, and for his angry presence as a public figure, Abbey is regarded is an essential figure in the environmentalist movement of the 1960s and '70s.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The creation of the U.S. National Park Service is the foundational context of Abbey's book. Founded in 1916, President Woodrow Wilson intended it to protect the nation's wilderness. By 1956, however, the time when Abbey began to work for this agency, Abbey felt that the Service had been compromised by government officials' desire to develop the parks and rake in huge profits from tourists. While living in the desert, Abbey saw the effects of this corruption—namely, ugly paved roads—and it outraged him. Shortly after Abbey's time in the desert, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Wilderness Act (1964), with the aim of defining, and therefore protecting, America's uninhabited nature reserves. In Abbey's view, however, this still didn't go far enough to protect nature: the thriving automotive industry kept the interstate system hard at work, and industrial commerce was stronger than ever. Abbey published his resultant outrage in *Desert Solitaire*, hoping to rally citizens into protest. He timed this call to action perfectly. By 1968, the disastrous Vietnam War and the resulting hippie movement had just begun to unite the U.S.—and indeed the world—in a widespread mistrust of government authority and an unprecedented concern for the environment. At 40, Abbey was a generation older than most protesters, and his gun-rights advocacy and aggressive masculinity can hardly be deemed hippie, but this explosive counterculture propelled *Desert Solitaire* to the front lines of environmental advocacy.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Abbey's main literary predecessors are the American Transcendentalists, who advocated a return to the wilderness. Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay *Nature* (1836) is similar to *Desert Solitaire* in that both espouse a view of the natural world as divine. Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) documents the author's two-year removal into the woods, much like Abbey's summer of solitude in the desert—though Abbey refutes Thoreau's belief that wilderness and society are incompatible. Abbey's favorite nature memoir seems to be *An Exploration of the Colorado River* (1875) by the former Union general John Wesley Powell, who charted the first expedition of Glen Canyon. Abbey retraces Powell footsteps in his own trek to the region—noting his debt to Powell's bravery and sensitivity. Abbey also quotes the poetry of Robinson Jeffers, especially "Shine, Perishing Republic" (1925), a short but searing indictment of America's capitalist greed. The idea of "inhumanism," Jeffers's theory that humans are no better than animals or the earth, is a guiding principle in Abbey's work. Aside from Jeffers, Abbey often quotes other poets—especially nature-loving Romantics like William Blake and William Wordsworth—and wishes that his prose could work as poetry does.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness
- **When Written:** 1956-1967
- **Where Written:** Moab, Utah
- **When Published:** 1968
- **Literary Period:** Postmodern
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** Arches National Monument near Moab, Utah
- **Climax:** Abbey's takes a hiking trip through Glen Canyon with his friend Ralph Newcomb, in which he reaches his most profound conclusions about the social value of solitude and the preciousness of nature.
- **Antagonist:** Capitalism; industrial tourism
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Dust to Dust. No one really knows where Abbey's grave is. Per his final wishes, his friends buried him in his sleeping bag in an anonymous section of the Cabeza Prieta Desert in Arizona.

Worth 1,000 Words. Abbey became such an essential figure in 1960s counterculture that the hippie era's foremost comic book illustrator, R. Crumb, produced an illustrated anniversary edition of *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, bringing Abbey's fictional eco-terrorists to life.

PLOT SUMMARY

Desert Solitaire is Edward Abbey's memoir of a summer spent in 1956, 10 years prior to writing the book, as a park ranger in Arches National Monument near Moab, Utah. Since the U.S. government has begun developing Abbey's beloved park beyond recognition, he's now publishing his experiences in that area in hopes of accurately reflecting the beauty of the wilderness and calling out the National Park Service for not sufficiently protecting it.

In the summer of 1956, Abbey makes the long drive from Albuquerque, New Mexico to Moab, Utah. Arriving at his trailer in Arches National Monument, where he'll live and work for the summer, Abbey notes the surrounding wildlife and accepts the fact that he'll be sharing his space with the animals who inhabit the area. The next morning, after watching his first, breathtaking sunrise, Abbey wonders whether appearances equal reality. He vows not to apply human-centric language to nature, hoping to bring himself closer to it and to understand its mysteries more clearly.

Soon, park superintendent Merle McRae and chief ranger Floyd Bence bring Abbey some supplies. After sharing a meal together, the men leave, and Abbey is struck by how isolated he feels in his solitary lifestyle as a park ranger. But soon, he discovers the rich animal life around his trailer, even domesticating a friendly gopher snake. Listing different nearby species, Abbey can't help but personify the animals as he marvels at their beauty and complexity. He explores plants, too: by May, a nearby **juniper** has particularly obsessed him, as the 300-year-old tree seems tied to another realm. As Abbey begins his ranger duties, he makes his rounds to various landmarks, awestruck by the enormous rock arches and lamenting how carelessly humanity tends to treats the environment.

Abbey soon feels he could live here forever—but one day, some government engineers stop by his trailer and inform him of the enormous **highway** they're plotting into Arches. Abbey realizes that the isolation and rarity of the desert he's come to love will disappear. Jumping ahead in time to 1967, he notes that this highway was realized and how Arches—along with many other parks—has flooded with tourists and industry. Abbey calls this development Industrial Tourism, and he rails against it. Stemming largely from a disagreement about the 1964 Wilderness Preservation Act, "Developers" claim that roads increase access to the parks, while "Preservers" argue that pavement defeats the point of nature. Abbey sides with the Preservers, as parking lots and paved roads spoil the point of nature, which ought to liberate people from technology and refresh their lives in society. Abbey outlines several steps that would solve the problem of Industrial Tourism—namely, to confine parking areas to the outskirts of parks, to stop all new paved roads in the parks, and to employ more rangers in the field to help with increased foot traffic.

Moab's uranium deposits induce another kind of greed: after the nuclear bombings of Japan, the Atomic Energy Commission encouraged a wild scramble for uranium in Utah and Colorado. Many amateur prospectors risked their lives trying to strike it rich, or died. One especially sad (though likely mythical) case was Alfred T. Husk, who uprooted his family from Texas to try his luck finding uranium in the Canyonlands of Moab. In his frequent absences from home, his wife began an affair with his business partner, Charles Graham. This turned fatal when Graham killed Husk in a fit of rage and accidentally got himself killed too. Though the murder leaves Husk's son Billy-Joe for dead, the young boy spends several telling days in the wilderness, much like Abbey himself, bonding spiritually with nature in a way that his greedy father never could.

Abbey's occasional work for the paranoid local cattle rancher Roy Scobie prompts his thoughts on death: to die in nature would be a natural dispersal of human energy back into the landscape to which it rightly belongs. Scobie's irrational phobias blind him to this basic truth. His stinginess—aside from depriving his embittered assistant Viviano Jacquez of adequate payment—prompts Abbey to lament how commercial industry, overpopulation, and rampant tourism have imperiled honest ways of life in the American West. The perfect example of this are the local Navajo, ravaged by population growth and robbed by capitalism of their native freedom and communalism. Cowboys like Scobie and Leslie McKee, now poor thanks to mechanized cattle farming, are also hurt—their image reduced to Hollywood caricatures and tourist attractions.

Returning from political observations, Abbey notes the many forms water can take in the desert. He provides readers with a useful manual on hydrating in emergencies. Storms and flash floods are the most noteworthy phenomena. Their indescribable strangeness forces Abbey to describe them with creative language and, in one case, a poem.

As summer rages on through July, the heat becomes unbearable. The mere sight of cold mountains on the horizon refreshes Abbey, leading him to believe that all of nature, by simply existing, plays a similar role in refreshing urban city dwellers. Nature must be preserved because it inspires

hope—and because it would be the perfect venue for a populist uprising against a tyrannical government, which Abbey believes is a real danger in America.

While out on a cattle mission one day, Abbey learns of Moon-Eye, a legendary wild horse who's been missing for 10 years. Abbey obsessively tracks him down one day, and when he finds him, he and the horse enter a standoff that lasts hours. Though he fails to bring Moon-Eye home, Abbey talks more to the emaciated horse—using human logic, persuasion, and kindness—than to any other character in the book.

By June, Abbey and his friend Ralph Newcomb trace John Wesley Powell's historic path down the Colorado River through Glen Canyon, an area that has since been flooded beyond recognition. As they plumb potentially unexplored caves, grottos, cliff paths, and shorelines, as well as the great Rainbow Bridge, Abbey comes to believe that it's a divine area. The loss of this holy place is incalculable—like the great Chartres Cathedral being covered in mud. Aside from discovering nature's spiritual qualities, Abbey's extended time with Ralph Newcomb renews his affection for humanity, and he ruminates on how feeling liberated in nature makes individual people capable of love.

Abbey puts these ideas about solitude to the test during another trip: in Havasupai Canyon, near the Grand Canyon, Abbey spends six solo weeks in perfect communion with nature, occasionally celebrating with nearby Native Americans and, once, nearly dying in a recessed rock pool. Naked as Adam in the Bible, Abbey enters a dreamlike existence, almost forgetting that he is distinct from the surrounding trees.

Back at Arches, in the miserable heat of high summer, Abbey is enlisted into a manhunt for a missing tourist. Abbey and his search party find the dead photographer at Grandview Point, leading Abbey to envy the man his natural death out in the open, away from hospitals and priests. He imagines that the man's energy has been recirculated into the bodies of buzzards who eat him. To escape the oppressive August heat, Abbey explores nearby Tukuhnivats mountain. It's snowy and beautiful at the summit, and he admires the birdsong, the aspen trees, and the landscape far below, which he jokingly renames from his perch, drawing attention to the possessive and arbitrary nature of language. But he becomes convinced that the desert—unlike mountains or the sea—is the most alluring ecosystem on Earth.

By Labor Day, Abbey discovers that the tourists he hates so much are not so bad. The local Mormons—despite their ridiculous beliefs—are especially worthy, among the first people to forge a compassionate, efficient community in this unforgiving climate. Their achievement leads Abbey to further mediation on the desert's unique allure: it's a totally alien place, neither hospitable like the mountains nor forbidding like the sea. Furthermore, the desert's perfect clarity conceals nothing. It exists *exactly* as it appears, driving people mad in the quest to understand it more deeply and inviting an almost religious obsession that only a few writers have tried—and largely failed—to describe.

Despite Abbey's bitterness toward society, he admits that it's humanity's false superiority—not individuals themselves—that he hates. He learns this about himself in a debate one night with a mysterious tourist, J. Prometheus Birdsong, who praises humanity's technological and medicinal achievements, to Abbey's great frustration. In Abbey's mind, Earth is so much greater than humanity; he meditates on this, and on humanity's religious follies, as he watches the night sky.

Abbey's last retreat, with his student friend Bob Waterman, is to a complex of dangerous canyons known as The Maze. As the men traverse a nearly unpassable rock path in their jeep, Waterman confides in Abbey that he's considering a permanent retreat here, in order to escape the military draft. After reaching the canyon rim, they rappel into the canyons below, where they explore the untouched rock formations and debate the usefulness of language. At first, Abbey thinks that language helps people understand and remember their environment, but Waterman calls this a greedy impulse—which Abbey then agrees with. When rain arrives, threatening their ability to exit via the rock path, Waterman gives up his hope for asylum, and they leave in a hurry.

When it's time to leave the desert, Abbey both dreads his return to Manhattan and becomes eager to see people again—to see cab drivers and train conductors, anyone at all. Though he's been mostly alone, he now feels so renewed by the desert that he's shockingly polite—despite his violent hatred—when an outspoken Nazi comes to the park. Overcome by emotion on his final day, Abbey suddenly leaves at once, not even stopping to say goodbye to his favorite juniper tree. As a new ranger, Bob Ferris, speeds him to the Denver airport, Abbey contends with another wild urge: to turn back at once. Ferris refuses, however, pressing on the gas into the sunset, and Abbey reconciles himself to his return to society.

CHARACTERS

Edward Abbey – Abbey is the author and protagonist of *Desert Solitaire*. He's a 40-year-old American writer looking back on the summer he spent 10 years ago, in 1956, as a park ranger in Arches National Monument, a desert national park in Utah. A hot-headed and opinionated outdoorsman, Abbey has a deep spiritual bond with nature and detests industrial tourism. Almost entirely alone in his park ranger duties, Abbey dominates the memoir, so readers get to know his feelings on everything from cactus flowers and ants to world religion and international politics. During his six months in the desert, Abbey deepens his connection to the landscape, discovers spiritual truths in the desert's various rock formations, and

thinks hard about the effects of solitude. He records his thoughts and experiences in notebooks which he later arranges into *Desert Solitaire*. After repeated attempts to become one with his environment, he concludes that animals and the earth are just as important as humans. The desert's mystery and beauty convince him that the earth is as divine as any god. And after so much time alone, his solitude renews his affection for other people, allowing him to bond with friends like Newcomb and Waterman who join him on his hiking trips, as well as locals like rancher Scobie and his assistant Jacquez. Abbey also develops political insights: interspersed throughout his spiritual growth in the desert, with the hindsight of 10 years, Abbey reflects angrily on society's injustice toward human and non-human beings alike. His main motive for writing the book is the recent development and commercialization of his beloved desert—especially the breathtaking Glen Canyon, an area where his most rewarding adventure took place. Looking back on the desert's profound rewards, Abbey argues that the wilderness is essential to society and that it must be protected. He concludes that capitalism, political tyranny, and human arrogance are responsible for nature's destruction. He offers solutions—such as mandatory birth control and strict regulations on the national parks—to help prevent these evils. Abbey's foremost goals are to preserve the environment and to help revitalize the Western communities which have been most affected: Native Americans, cowboys, and Mormons. Ultimately, Abbey returns to his hometown of New York City with a newfound sense of balance: a deep reverence for nature alongside an appreciation for the bustle of city life.

Ralph Newcomb – Newcomb is a friend of Edward Abbey's; he's a former cowboy who now studies Eastern philosophy. Despite being disabled in one leg, Newcomb accompanies Abbey on a life-affirming, week-long boat trip through Glen Canyon—the central adventure of *Desert Solitaire*. As the character who spends the most time with Abbey, Newcomb cements the book's main social lesson: that prolonged, solitary exposure to nature can rejuvenate people's respect for one another. This is exactly what Abbey discovers when, after months alone in his desert post, he embarks on his trip with a heart full of affection and trust. Abbey and Newcomb yoke their rafts together, symbolically making the journey as one entity. From this pivotal moment, readers understand Abbey's wider argument that escaping alone into nature conversely enables people to coexist happily in society. Newcomb is notably stoic and level-headed, facing each obstacle the men come up against with a calm resourcefulness rather than panicking. This imperturbable behavior reinforces three of Abbey's arguments: first, it gives readers a living example of Abbey's conviction that wilderness—rather than the corrosive excess of city life—can calm people, make them more reasonable, and support their basic needs. Second, Newcomb's calmness also helps suggest that humans are one with Earth. That he is "tranquil as the sky overhead" suggests Newcomb and the earth share an equal attitude—an idea that Abbey echoes during their trip in Glen Canyon and elaborates upon throughout the book. Third, the fact that Newcomb studies the Indian mystic thinker Sri Aurobindo suggests that Newcomb's happy stoicism comes from his rejection of Western, capitalist ways of thinking. This is exactly the rejection that Abbey, the enemy of commercial ambition and American politics, wants his readers to partake in.

Bob Waterman – Waterman is a friend of Edward Abbey's; he's a student at the University of Colorado who is avoiding the military draft. Waterman drives down to Moab from Aspen to join Abbey on a weekend trip into a cluster of canyons called The Maze. Waterman is well-prepared for their descent, packing plenty of rope and nimbly navigating the steep, rocky path in his jeep as Abbey walks ahead, clearing brush. Like Ralph Newcomb during Abbey's trip to Glen Canyon, Waterman is reluctant to return to society. But whereas Newcomb's reluctance stems from his rewarding camaraderie with Abbey, Waterman avoids civilization because he has been drafted by the military. He is essentially a refugee, seeking shelter in the wilderness against an unfair and senselessly violent political system. In this way, Waterman illustrates Abbey's argument that humans need wilderness as an antidote to the evils of society—not just because periodic isolation benefits society, but also because untamed wilderness is the perfect venue for off-the-grid political refuge and for armed rebellion against totalitarian regimes. Ten years later, at the time of *Desert Solitaire*'s publication, Abbey expected Waterman's example to resonate with the thousands of angry protestors who burned their draft cards during the Vietnam War. In addition to his political role, Waterman helps illustrate Abbey's belief that language is an artificial construct and that it removes people from reality. In one scene, as the two men contemplate distant rock formations, Abbey wants to find names for them, insisting that language helps people comprehend the world. Waterman refuses, arguing that to name something is useless and possessive—a view that Abbey ultimately agrees with and echoes throughout the book.

Roy Scobie – Scobie is a middle-aged cattle rancher who employs Edward Abbey as a cow wrangler from time to time, alongside Scobie's assistant Viviano Jacquez. Scobie's main character trait is his obsession with mortality: he's terrified that he will die of a random heart attack. As Scobie, Jacquez, and Abbey ride in search of stray cattle, Abbey often catches Scobie deep in thought about his impending death or muttering about the friends he's lost prematurely. Abbey disapproves of Scobie's obsession, and he thinks of all the philosophers he could invoke to dispel Scobie's fear. However, Abbey concludes that this would be no use, so other than some small talk, the men tend to ride together in silence. Abbey's frustration with Scobie illustrates two of his main arguments: the first is that death (especially out in the open desert, under the sun) is a natural

part of life. Dying simply means a return of the human life force to the natural landscape—it's nothing to be scared of. The second argument is that rational philosophy, even from heavy-hitting thinkers like Plato and Sophocles, is ultimately useless against an experience as deeply lived as Scobie's phobia. As a cowboy, Scobie is also significant as a casualty of an increasingly mechanized and alienating economy. Thanks to industrial cow farming, Abbey argues, authentic cowhands are disappearing all over the West. Scobie is the prime example of this endangered way of life: he's hard-working and autonomous (Abbey can barely ride along at his pace) but also frail, paranoid, and a little delusional. Scobie's extreme stinginess (he barely feeds or pays his employees, and he uses half-broken equipment) illustrates the sunken state of the once-thriving Western lifestyle. Scobie seems as needlessly obsessed with money—the very thing that threatens his way of life—as he is with death. In retrospect, Abbey reflects that Scobie ironically did die of a heart attack.

Viviano Jacquez – Jacquez is Edward Abbey's friend and the assistant to the cattle rancher Roy Scobie; he accompanies Abbey on excursions to wrangle Scobie's cows. Hailing from the Basque region of Spain, Jacquez's parents brought him to Utah to be a sheepherder. A highly capable and companionable worker—though also lazy and tardy—Jacquez eventually ended up in Scobie's employ, working overtime to save up money. Because of his poor English and dark skin, Jacquez is mistaken by the locals for being Mexican and is sometimes a target of their racism. As a result, Jacquez has become resentful not only toward Mexicans (as well as Africa Americans, Navajos, and all minorities) but also toward his own lineage—he's a self-hating outsider who drinks too much and scolds himself for being a "dumb Basko." Thanks to Scobie's stinginess, Jacquez is also grossly underpaid—another a cause of Jacquez's bitterness. Abbey describes Jacquez's unfortunate resentments in order to show American society's power to enforce racist and capitalist ideals onto its citizens. For this reason, Abbey includes Jacquez in his extended discussion of the disenfranchised Navajos, people forced out of their native customs and into an industrialized, money-obsessed society.

Billy-Joe Husk – Billy-Joe is an 11-year-old boy who perishes in the Canyonlands after fleeing the murder scene of his father, the amateur uranium hunter Alfred T. Husk. Though probably a myth, the history of Billy-Joe and his father appears in Abbey's book as a cautionary tale against Utah's uranium rush. After Husk is murdered by Charles Graham as an indirect result of his greed in the uranium business, Billy-Joe wanders for days in search of help, eventually baking to death in a floating cottonwood tree trunk. After eating a strange flower, Billy-Joe hallucinates a burning bush: a scene which refutes Moses's biblical vision and bolsters Abbey's belief that the earth, not the Christian deity, is holy. Further, as Billy-Joe wanders, he removes his clothing (an echo to Abbey's own primal, naked revelations in the Havasu area of the Grand Canyon), he watches the canyon walls "breathe," and he sympathizes with the stars. Alongside Abbey's experiences, Billy-Joe's moments of oneness with the earth suggest that humans are a natural part of the landscape rather than masters of it, as Billy-Joe's father believed himself to be. To complete the analogy, Billy-Joe wears a straw hat (as Abbey does in Havasu) and at one point takes shelter in a hollowed-out tree trunk (as Abbey does when hunting the wild horse Moon-Eye). With these parallels to a child's life, readers see that Abbey's convictions about the earth's primacy aren't just the labored arguments of an intellectual writer; these same beliefs are also the instinctive, immediate experiences of an uneducated boy. If Billy-Joe can intuitively draw the same value from the wilderness that Abbey does, then so can anyone else.

Alfred T. Husk – Husk is a foolhardy amateur uranium hunter from Texas who is rumored to have mortgaged his farm and relocated his family to Moab, Utah, following the World War II uranium craze. Ravenous to make his fortune, he partners with the slick prospector Charles Graham and canvasses the Canyonlands obsessively for the prized mineral, eventually losing his young wife to Graham, who ends up killing Husk in an altercation. Though Husk's tragic story is probably a local legend, Abbey includes it as a cautionary tale against the greed of those who destroy the earth for financial gain. Husk disappears for long periods into the desert canyons—as Abbey himself does—but he does so for the wrong reason: monetary greed. Whereas Abbey's extended isolation brings him closer to his friend Ralph Newcomb and to humanity in general, Husk's isolation only estranges him from the young Mrs. Husk and, ultimately, brings about his own demise when Charles Graham seduces Mrs. Husk and kills Alfred. So, even though Abbey advocates isolated self-discovery in the desert, he uses Husk's example to warn against doing so for any motive other than nature's inherent rewards. By contrast, Husk's son Billy-Joe, who flees the scene of the murder and dies of exposure in the desert, deliriously grasps some of these rewards before his untimely death—a stark counterexample to the greed of his father.

Charles Graham – Graham is a smooth-talking and charming businessman in Moab. He meets the overeager Alfred T. Husk, a greedy and foolish recent transplant from Texas, and gains the Husk family's trust by flashing his impressive pilot's license. Graham lures Husk into a partnership: he will supply some promising, remote canyon land and Husk will comb it for valuable uranium, splitting any profits. In Husk's absence, however, Graham steals his wife, Mrs. Husk. After breaking the news to Husk, Graham kills him—but he ends up dying too, while trying to send Husk's body off a cliff. Graham is the straightforward villain of a morality tale at the center of *Desert Solitaire*, in which Husk's desire to exploit the earth ends up killing him and confirming Abbey's hatred of industrial greed.

As the instigator of Husk's fatal project, and as the person who steals Mrs. Husk, Graham personifies two things: the self-destructive force of greed and the social alienation that results from the arrogant misuse of nature. The fact that Graham's pilot license—a symbol of modernity—charms Husk and his son Billy-Joe illustrates the hollow attraction of modern technology, which Abbey deplores throughout the book as a wedge driven between humans and their natural environment.

John Wesley Powell – John Wesley Powell was a Union captain in the American Civil War, and later, the first modern explorer to chart the dangerous Colorado River and surrounding Glen Canyon. Abbey greatly admires the fearlessness and aesthetic delicacy of Powell's published account—two qualities Abbey hopes to emulate in his own memoir. He invokes Powell frequently as he and his friend Ralph Newcomb retrace the explorer's steps along the Colorado some 90 years later. In this way, Powell serves as Abbey's literary and exploratory model: for instance, he's sensitive and spiritual enough to name a rock feature Music Temple, a move that Abbey notes with delight. In another way, however, Powell serves as a moral conscience against the recent damming of the Colorado, a development that forever obscured Glen Canyon's beauties and moved Abbey to publish his protests in *Desert Solitaire*. Abbey invokes Powell's memory as he rails against the dam's new artificial "Lake Powell," a name intended to honor—but, in Abbey's opinion, a destructive disgrace to—the brave explorer.

Moon-Eye – Moon-Eye is a wild horse, formerly owned by the rancher Roy Scobie, whose mysterious 10-year absence in the wilderness prompts Abbey to search for him . After hunting Moon-Eye's tracks, Abbey confronts the horse in a stand-off that lasts hours. As they stare each other down, Abbey talks to the horse, using logic and persuasion to try to lure him into his grasp. Though Abbey's attempt is fruitless—the horse bucking whenever he gets within reach, eventually sending Abbey away exhausted—Moon-Eye elicits Abbey's longest chunks of dialogue in the entire book. Abbey spends more words on him than on Ralph Newcomb, his weeklong companion in Glen Canyon. The horse's ability to inspire language suggests that Abbey regards him as an equal, an example of Abbey's wider argument that humans are not superior to animals or to the environment.

Merle McRae – McRae is the superintendent of Arches National Monument; he's a thin, middle-aged family man with a gentle demeanor and a background in cattle ranching. An effective park ranger who dislikes the paperwork aspects of the job, McRae welcomes Abbey to the park on his first day and provides him with supplies, briefly reappearing near the end of the book to help search for a dead photographer. Though intelligent and concerned for the earth, McRae is resigned to the inevitable development of the U.S.'s national parks. McRae warns of these coming changes, but readers get the impression that Abbey's outrage is far stronger than his. Further, it seems that that Abbey hopes to awaken potentially complacent figures in McRae's position into decisive action against development.

Floyd Bence – Bence is the chief ranger of Arches National Monument; he's Abbey's age, a geologist by training, who shares Abbey's hatred of desk jobs and his passionate love of the open West. Like Merle McRae, Bence's role is minor: he helps orient Abbey on his first day in Arches, joking about the solitude, and he later joins the manhunt for a dead photographer. Also like McRae, he's aware of the coming development in the parks, but his closeness to Abbey in age highlights a difference between the two men: Bence seems sadly resigned to these coming changes, while Abbey, as a seasonal employee who's largely an outsider, is outraged.

Leslie McKee – McKee is a former cattle rancher in Moab who now cobbles together a living with low-paying side jobs. Kind-hearted an entrepreneurial, McKee appears in a few brief mentions to illustrate Abbey's political argument about the disappearance of cowboy culture. Along with the cattle rancher Roy Scobie, McKee is portrayed as a casualty of the new industrial order, where mechanized cattle farming has made the slow and independent cowboy lifestyle obsolete. In his youth, McKee operated a bootleg bus line, with buses that had to be literally pushed along the unpaved **roads**. He also took on demeaning work as an extra in Hollywood cowboy movies, once getting hit in the eye with a rubber arrow. These details illustrate how demeaning and difficult it's become to sustain the freedom of the cowboy lifestyle. McKee's hardships are particularly sad, since he's such a decent person—one of the area's hard-working and hospitable Mormons. Illustrating this goodwill, McKee's well-meaning wife has ritualistically bound Abbey's soul to her own, in order to save the unbelieving Abbey from hell.

The Engineers – A jeep full of anonymous engineers with the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads pulls up to Abbey's trailer one evening. To Abbey's horror, the engineers describe their assignment to chart out massive, expensive paved **roads** into Arches National Monument. Abbey reflects that their project, in the 10 years since this incident, has come to pass. Though the men are anonymous and appear only briefly to ask Abbey for water, they introduce Abbey's most important political argument: that industrial development of the national parks—especially the paving of roads—is a misguided improvement born of human arrogance, political oppression, and capitalist greed. As soon as the men drive off, Abbey retraces their path, pulling up their stakes and trashing them—his first act of environmentalist protest.

The Photographer – The photographer is a 60-year-old man who goes missing at Grandview Point (50 miles from Abbey's ranger station) and turns up dead after a rescue mission. Although this amateur photographer only appears as a corpse, the man's nephew organizes a search party comprising Abbey,

his colleagues Merle McRae and Floyd Bence, and his brother Johnny Abbey. The occasion of death allows Abbey, feeling lucky to be alive, to relish the environment in some richly sensuous language, furthering his argument that the desert uniquely inspires wonder. Though search party mocks the photographer callously as they carry his bloated corpse back to the truck, the man inspires Abbey with some important thoughts on death—namely that the open desert is a much better place to die than a hospital, as such a place invites the inevitable return of human energy back into the earth, where it belongs. These thoughts brought about by the dead photographer further illustrate Abbey's view that humans are a natural part of the landscape.

J. Prometheus Birdsong – Birdsong is an anonymous man who appears at Abbey's campsite one evening and engages Abbey in a debate on several big topics, including humanity's relationship to nature and the difference between culture and civilization. Though they disagree sharply over the inherent good of medicine, this man helps articulate Abbey's essential stance that, while humans are not exactly inferior to nature, it's a mistake to believe that they are superior. With Birdsong's help, Abbey calls the opposing view "anthropocentricity," or human-centeredness, a view he argues against as he communes with animals and the environment and as he deplores humanity's arrogant destruction of Earth. The man's pseudonym—recorded in the park's visitor book—invokes the Greek hero Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods to benefit humans. His choice of name echoes Prometheus's belief in humanity's superiority.

The Nazi – The Nazi is a German tourist who appears at Abbey's trailer one night to try to convince him of Hitler's righteousness. Abbey get so angry that he want to kill the man, but in considering that the Nazi hasn't yet enjoyed the desert's sights, Abbey lets the man go in peaceful disagreement. Abbey's tolerance of the Nazi is an important piece of evidence in his argument that nature can have a peacemaking effect on people and is essential to coexistence in society.

Mrs. Husk – Mrs. Husk is the young wife of the Texan prospector Albert T. Husk and the mother of Billy-Joe Husk. Mrs. Husk appears in Abbey's morality tale about greed and the uranium craze. As her husband disappears into the canyons to search in vain for the lucrative mineral, she falls out of love with him and starts an affair with his business partner, Charles Graham—a love triangle that culminates in death for Husk, Graham, and Billy-Joe. Mrs. Husk's emotional estrangement from Husk supports Abbey's belief that, although isolation in nature can bring the right people together, this same natural isolation, if sought for reasons of greed, often leads to alienation. After her husband's death, Mrs. Husk becomes fabulously wealthy when her husband's land suddenly proves to be rich in uranium. This ironic ending to the Husk saga shows that the rewards of hard labor in such a money-grubbing field are often randomly bestowed rather than fairly earned.

Mackie – Mack is one of Roy Scobie's cowhands who tells Abbey the story of the Scobie's wild horse Moon-Eye. This leads to Abbey's obsession with the animal and his determination to find him. Mackie finds Abbey's interest in the horse ridiculous. He himself is tired of this work and would rather be rich, though he ironically admits that with the money he'd simply buy more cows.

Bob Ferris – Ferris is a new ranger at Arches National Monument who drives Abbey to the Denver airport on Abbey's last day in Moab. When Abbey panics, demanding that they turn around and return to his beloved desert home, Ferris refuses and steps on the gas. By refusing, Ferris embodies the unavoidability of reality: despite the urge to escape into nature forever, one has to return to society at some point in order to work and have a family. Ferris's small role helps illustrate Abbey's argument that the wilderness—while an essential element of human society—is not a total replacement for civilization.

Johnny Abbey – Johnny is Edward Abbey's brother who is also spending his summer as a park ranger. Though Edward Abbey hardly mentions him, Johnny takes part in the manhunt for the dead photographer. The shock on his face when he finds the corpse suggests that he—like his brother Edward—is an outsider to the group of more hardened park rangers who mock the bloated corpse and have a snack near it.

TERMS

Industrial Tourism – Industrial tourism is the process by which an attraction like a national park is developed and modernized in order to make the location more appealing and accessible for tourists. Industrial tourism is a lucrative endeavor for the government and construction firms, as it brings thousands of motorists through America's national parks. By building roads, modern camping facilities, ticket booths, and the like, the National Park Service makes tourists' visits more comfortable and can then charge them higher admission rates. To **Abbey**, industrial tourism is the enemy of wilderness and a real threat to human rights. He believes that the tourist industry destroys wilderness to make an enormous profit, and in doing so, it deprives humans of an essential escape from the stressors of city life. The end result is an overly dense, car-addicted population that the government can easily control. In the American West, industrial tourism also encroaches upon local groups like the Navajo, cowboys, and Mormons, depriving them of their preferred ways of life.

Uranium – Uranium is a radioactive mineral used to make nuclear weapons. After World War II, the U.S. government provided a reward to anyone who found deposits of it, prompting a nationwide craze on par with the California Gold

Rush of the 19th century. Since Moab, Utah is rich with uranium, greedy prospectors flocked to the region, eager to make their fortunes. **Alfred T. Husk** is **Abbey**'s prime example of someone who sacrificed love—and his and his son's lives—to make his fortune this way. Husk's tragic story, and the uranium craze in general, help illustrate Abbey's belief that pillaging the earth for financial gain is arrogant and morally wrong.

Petroglyph – A petroglyph is an ancient Native American rock drawing, usually depicting a hunting or domestic scene, the exact historical purpose of which is unclear. **Abbey** finds petroglyphs throughout the desert. They fill him with wonder and a sense of the desert's longevity, often prompting his ruminations on human vanity and the plight of the Navajos.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

WILDERNESS, SOCIETY, AND LIBERTY

In *Desert Solitaire*, Edward Abbey's politically charged memoir of a summer largely spent alone as a park ranger at Arches National Monument, Abbey emphasizes the importance of the wilderness on several levels. In nearly every scene, Abbey describes his own love of nature and the way it empowers him, highlighting how the wilderness is important to him on a personal level. As Abbey comes to understand the personal rewards of desert seclusion, he realizes that everyone would benefit from the kind of freedom and solitude that's found in nature. He thus emphasizes nature's importance on a political level, urging the United States government to preserve its national parks so that all people can enjoy nature. Combining these two perspectives, the personal and the political, Abbey argues that the solitude of the untamed wilderness empowers individuals in a way that makes them respect themselves and one another, which in turn allows people to coexist peacefully and democracy to function smoothly.

Abbey starts with the premise that the best societies are those founded on "personal liberty." He seems suspicious of all governments—especially modern America—but several times he praises the "heroi[c]" Thomas Jefferson, whose 1776 Declaration of Independence cast off the English monarchy. Abbey also champions the writer Thomas Paine (who was hostile to all monarchies) as well as the U.S. Constitution, the first modern government blueprint based on "inalienable" human rights. Elsewhere, Abbey's argument for gun rights also echoes this document. Abbey also celebrates the government of the dispossessed Navajos, a system once based on the "liberty and dignity" of its citizens. By invoking Native Americans and the Founding Fathers, two cultures committed to personal "liberty," Abbey tells readers that freedom is an essential element of his politics.

After suggesting that the freedom is essential for people in society, Abbey shows that extended self-discovery in nature is one sure way to find it. Though difficult at first, seclusion in nature soon offers Abbey a newfound independence from other human beings. By taking his dinners outside in the open desert, for instance—rather than inside his manmade trailer—he can escape loneliness and achieve an "equanimity," or calmness, that he could never get in society. More than helping him feel comfortable in his own skin, being alone in nature forces Abbey to meet many practical needs entirely on his own. He devotes long passages to his search for clean water, his developing survival instincts, and his trial-by-error navigation of the desert. These solitary adventures give him a growing sense of dignity and self-worth: he soon describes a growing "affection," even a "love," for himself. He calls this self-empowering benefit of spending time alone in nature the "delirious exhilaration of independence," suggesting that freedom, which Abbey idealizes and regards as vital to society, can be found through solitary experiences in the wilderness.

The newfound sense of liberty and dignity that Abbey develops from spending time alone in nature soon improves his coexistence with the people he meets. The undeveloped terrain forces residents of Moab, Utah to be "self-reliant." Since these people can provide for themselves, Abbey observes, they are "friendly, hospitable, [and] honest." This is early proof that a solitary, rugged life can have social as well as personal benefits. Abbey eventually discovers this same hospitality in himself: after some months away from the city, taking a river trip with his friend Ralph Newcomb, Abbey finds a renewed his "affection" not only for himself but also for "human kind in general." This growing camaraderie culminates in the book's conclusion, when a Nazi passes through Arches National Monument and defends Hitler. Abbey is so enraged that he "could have opened [the man's] skull," but he lets him go in peace, as the man "hadn't seen the Arches yet or even the Grand Canyon." Abbey is rarely shy about his violent impulses. That the simple existence of the desert has neutralized this conflict gives readers a convincing sense of nature's peacemaking powers.

By showing these social benefits of solitude and independence, Abbey concludes that preserved, uninhabited wilderness is essential to civilization. Abbey's emphatic wish is that readers treat his book as a manual, to unplug and try a retreat into the wilds. (He gives extended survival instructions for this purpose.) The occasional escape into rugged nature, Abbey promises, will help readers live more comfortably—first with themselves, and then with one another in towns and cities. But

Abbey's story has symbolic as well as practical meaning: even if city-dwellers never leave the metropolis, he argues, they "need wilderness whether or not [they] ever set foot in it." In this way, wildlife represents "hope," a symbolic "possibility of escape" from industrial civilization. If his readers don't actually escape into nature, then they can at least rely on the promise that nature holds of an unplugged, empowering, and independent life. For these reasons—both the actual and the symbolic freedom offered by undeveloped nature—Abbey declares that "wilderness complements and completes civilization."

NATURE, WONDER, AND RELIGION

In *Desert Solitaire*, a memoir of Edward Abbey's summer spent in the Utah's desert, Abbey shows a real contempt for human institutions—government, industry, technology, and so on. Yet, in describing nature, he frequently uses religious language, especially relating to Christianity. However, he doesn't mean to suggest that he himself is traditionally religious—far from it, in fact. Instead, Abbey advocates for a kind of spirituality grounded in nature, arguing that God can be found simply in the natural order of things, that the wonder of nature can be a religious experience, and that to immerse oneself in the wilderness is more valid than any traditional religious rite.

The vastness and wonder of the desert gives Abbey a sense that it's a divine place. Delicate Arch, a natural desert feature, is so majestic and incomprehensible that it reminds him "that *out there* is a different world, older and greater and deeper by far than ours." Inklings such as this awaken in Abbey an "awareness of the wonderful—that which is full of wonder." Experiences of natural beauty and mystery convince Abbey that the desert itself contains a godlike element. The massive Escalante River becomes the "*locus Dei*" (the location of God) and the sublime Rainbow Bridge is "God's window." The awe and wonder that Abbey constantly feels in the presence of nature gives him proof that the place is divine.

By using commonly understood religious terms, Abbey then suggests that nature can inspire a devotion just like that of organized religion. He compares specific geological features to holy sites. Glen Canyon and Havasu, for instance, are both "Eden," the garden where Adam and Eve (the the original humans in the Christian worldview) communed with God. Just as Eden disappeared as a result of Adam and Eve's corruption, Abbey laments that Glenn Canyon has been dammed and destroyed since his journey there, thanks to human intervention. With his comparisons to Eden and with his anger over humanity's ability to destroy what he deems paradise, Abbey suggests that the desert—if untouched by humans—is the place where humans can be closest to God's presence. Further, when Abbey mentions the sky, he often invokes the cosmic order of Christianity: snow and sunrise are "blessings from heaven and earth," he notes "the blue dome of heaven," and distant lightening joins "heaven and earth." The smoke of a burning **juniper**, in addition, is more holy than "Dante's paradise," the famous Italian Renaissance depiction of heaven. By invoking the Bible and the Christian concept of Heaven, Abbey gives a recognizable legitimacy to his devotion to nature.

More than being a holy site, nature becomes a place of worship for Abbey. When Glen Canyon floods beyond recognition, Abbey imagines "the Taj Mahal or Chartres Cathedral buried in mud." By using these famous religious monuments—in India and France, respectively—Abbey suggests that nature is also a house of worship, a place where humans can devote themselves to the divine. And by including non-Christian imagery like the Taj Mahal, Abbey argues that the divinity of untouched nature is accessible to people of any religion or creed. Abbey reinforces this with his many campfires, which he describes as "a ritual," a "liturgical requirement," an "offering" to "intangible beings." Just as Glen Canyon is "an" Eden—not the *only* Eden—the Escalante River contains "enough cathedrals and temples and altars here for a Hindu pantheon of divinities." This means that, for Abbey, *any* part of nature—not just its most striking monuments—can be a temple to itself. Christians don't go to church to worship the church; they go there to worship God. But, for Abbey, both things exist in one: the object *and* the place of worship. In making this point, Abbey hints at his argument that the apparatus of organized religion is distracting and wasteful.

Finally, Abbey complains that organized religion has removed people from the basic divinity that he has found in the earth. Abbey ridicules the "whimsical" rituals of religion: baptism for Baptists, prohibition for Mormons, circumcision for the Jewish, communion for Catholics, and the practice of Pranayama breath for Hindus. By laughing at these particular differences, Abbey suggests that all organized religion misses the obvious lesson that nature has taught him. In one example of this frustration, in the parable of Billy-Joe Husk (a boy who died in the desert), Abbey implies that Moses's burning bush in the Old Testament was just a common hallucination—a misguided attempt to find the Christian God in nature. In another example, as Abbey admires Cassiopeia, he ridicules 16th-century Christians (whom he calls "the swine") for seeing this constellation as an omen. Abbey, conversely, stands beneath a night sky with his binoculars, marveling at the "splendid sight" rather than trying to decode it. The difference Abbey wishes to draw is stark: Moses and Reformation-era Catholics obsessed over hidden meanings, pillaging the natural world for evidence of a Christian God. By contrast, Abbey's simple state of wonder is his own method of "pray[er]—in my fashion." While organized religion perverts nature for hidden meanings, Abbey argues, people ought to simply devote themselves to nature's obvious divinity.

LANGUAGE AND REALITY

Despite his disdain for academics, Edward Abbey trained in philosophy. In *Desert Solitaire*, his extended meditation on the desert, he ponders a classic philosophical question: whether an objective reality exists. Abbey can see and touch the surface of a rock, for instance, but how can he know the rock is really there? Though Abbey concludes that this question is unanswerable, he finds that his deep sensory experience of the desert gets him as close as humanly possible to this elusive reality, and he urges readers to try the same. But he warns readers of a common obstacle to this compromise: words. Words are artificial, so they distort the nature of reality and experience. By stressing the inaccuracies of language, Abbey argues that words ought to *reflect* the world, not try to describe it.

When Abbey arrives in the desert, he notes that the appearance of the world doesn't always equal reality. Colors, for instance, are not inherent qualities in things. Instead, Abbey sees that the desert's natural archways change color "with the time of day and the moods of the light, the weather, the sky." Similarly, clouds "have lost" shades of pink and can suddenly "become" violet. In many scenes, Abbey looks to trees or the sky for "a vision of truth" beneath their appearances. Every time, however, the tree gives him "no response" or the sun's "music is too high and pure for human ear." "The essence of the **juniper**," he laments after prolonged meditation, "continues to elude me." Instead of obsessing over the true nature of the arches or the clouds, Abbey contents himself with prolonged, sensory appreciation of them. Meditating on the magnificent Delicate Arch, Abbey says that "to see and touch and hear" the world around this monument is enough for him, even if it is impossible to access "things-in-themselves." This term comes from the philosopher Immanuel Kant, who argued that the objective existence of an object—the "thing-in-itself"—is impossible for humans to perceive beyond their five senses. Though Abbey can't refute Kant's logic, he insists that his own stance is "anti-Kantian." After repeated and profound experience of rock formations, he argues that if one threw at rock at a philosopher's head, they would instantly duck, thereby refuting the claim that humans can't access the real world. In other words, if stoning *feels* painful, then what is left to prove? Elsewhere, Abbey calls this discovery "the shock of the real." Abbey concludes proudly that "I know nothing whatever about underlying reality" but that "I am pleased enough with surfaces—in fact they alone seem to me to be of much importance." Though philosophers like Kant are unhappy about reality's elusiveness, Abbey admits that the sights, sounds, and feelings of nature are good enough for him.

Though contented with his sensory experience of nature, Abbey warns readers that language can make the problem of reality worse by misrepresenting experience. Writers tend to enjoy the "personification of the natural"—using similes and metaphors that give human qualities to nature. Throughout the book, however, in his search for "the bare bones of existence, the elemental and fundamental," Abbey stops himself when he lapses into that old habit. For instance, Abbey refuses to name some anonymous rock formations he comes across. Once an object or place acquires a name, he explains, the name can become more important than the thing itself, and "so in the end the world is lost again." Words are particularly useless, he says, when describing the desert. Abbey tries to define "wilderness," only to abandon the task because "something more [than words] is involved." His defeat here echoes Ludwig Wittgenstein's famous statement, which Abbey quotes in the original German: "what can't be spoken of must be passed over in silence." The fact that language (an artificial thing) cannot accurately describe nature (an organic thing) is a linguistic problem that mimics Abbey's own frustrated hunt for reality.

With this linguistic frustration in mind, Abbey urges that language be used poetically as a tool to *reflect* the world rather than to *describe* it. Since "you cannot get the desert into a book any more than a fisherman can haul up the sea with his nets," nature writing should "evoke" the desert, rather than simply describe it. To back up his theory, Abbey draws up a bibliography of prose narratives that fail to capture the desert accurately. In these books, the authors unnaturally force a "mirror" of themselves" onto a "picture of external reality." Words, by definition, say things, but "the desert says nothing." So traditional description is bound to fail. Instead of straightforward prose, Abbey offers one solution by quoting liberally from poets: Robinson Jeffers, Walt Whitman, William Wordsworth, and many others. By bringing his book into the company of poetry—a medium which mimics its subject matter with the sound of its words—Abbey suggests that effective language ought to follow the lead of poets. Dismayed with the "poor image" of his own prose, Abbey even inserts his own poem in an attempt to capture the shock of a flash flood. In the same way that Abbey settles for a deep sensory experience of the desert instead of obsessing over objective reality, Abbey argues that writers can at least be very strategic with how they describe the world around them. Nature is well worth experiencing firsthand, Abbey argues, so he urges that it's worth being strategic about how one communicates this experience. Even if objective reality is inaccessible, people can strive to avoid language that further separates them from an authentic experience.

HUMANITY, THE ENVIRONMENT, AND ARROGANCE

Many nature memoirs—especially of the 1960s activism era—show a deep affection for animals. This is no different in *Desert Solitaire*, Edward Abbey's memoir of a summer spent in Utah's deserts. As he mediates on Moab's many creatures, Abbey condemns humans for arrogantly

thinking they're at the top of the food chain. But Abbey goes one step further, illustrating his belief that humans are not only kin to animals—they are, in fact, equal in importance to plants and the landscape. This leads to two conclusions: first, that people should see themselves as merely one part of a greater environmental whole and, as a result, that their attitude toward both fellow human beings and non-human beings should be humbler.

Abbey begins by portraying animals as his equals, suggesting that humans are not the pinnacle of creation as they often arrogantly assume. When he arrives in the desert, he starts wearing a live gopher snake around his waist and lets it scare away the mice that annoy him. Abbey's cooperation and physical closeness with the snake suggest humans and animals are not incompatible and can, in fact, share common goals. Later, when trying to rescue a runaway horse named Moon-Eye, Abbey reasons with the rogue animal as if it were human. Containing some of the book's longest (one-sided) dialogue, this scene implicitly argues that even animals deserve the dignity of logic. Abbey also imagines animals' emotional lives: though reluctant to personify nature, since words can distort reality, he sees an owl poach a rabbit, listens to a chorus of frogs, and watches two snakes mate. He imagines the animals' "gratitude," "joy," and "love." These experiences lead Abbey to conclude that it's "a foolish, simple-minded rationalism which denies any form of emotion to animals," solidifying his argument that animals are just as nuanced and complex as human beings.

Abbey then moves on to plants and the inanimate landscape, creating an even deeper sense that human beings are equal to the natural world. Trees, especially, draw his attention on an almost human level: he and his favorite **juniper** are "Two living things on the same earth, respiring in a common medium." By cohabitating, they contact each other even "without direct communication." The endangered pinion pine, also, becomes a "victim"—a term of dignity usually reserved for suffering human beings. Furthermore, inanimate natural features—not just living plants—gain the same humanlike respect. The sound of Havasu Creek, for instance, contains "many voices, vague, distant, but astonishingly human." The Escalante River, too, prompts Abbey to think "river thoughts"—a figure of speech that suggests rivers have their own unique consciousness. Through this sense of reverence and respect for the landscape, Abbey argues that human beings are by no means the most superior beings in the natural order. Abbey feels so connected to the environment that he tries, in a "hard and brutal mysticism," to merge mentally with it. Beneath the night sky, he feels "nothing between me and the universe but my thoughts." Similarly, falling asleep outdoors, he "join[s] the night and the stars." For Abbey, only conscious thought separates human bodies from the planets and stars. When contemplating his rancher friend Roy Scobie's fearfulness or the dead photographer Abbey finds in a canyon, Abbey hopes he himself will die "in the open, under the sky," rather than in a sterile hospital. Once "transfigured" into food for a buzzard, maybe he will achieve his sought-after environmental unity. By the end, Abbey has of course failed to become literally one with the earth. But his repeated attempts prepare readers for his conviction that human beings, undeniably a piece of the environment, ought to regard themselves differently.

Because of his mystic unity with nature, Abbey concludes that human-centeredness is misguided. He invokes a famous literary view to support his case. Robinson Jeffers, inventor of "inhumanism" (the theory that human beings are not the center of the animal world), appears as a "clear-eyed" prophet in *Desert Solitaire*. Aside from quoting "Shine, Perishing Republic" (Jeffers's famous environmentalist attack on human arrogance) several times, Abbey builds on his idea of inhumanism by calling out "man-centeredness," or "anthropocentricity." Abbey's strongest statement against "anthropocentricity" comes in a disagreement with a man named J. Prometheus Birdsong whom he meets at Arches National Monument. His opponent's pseudonym—evoking the Greek hero who stole fire from heaven and was punished for his belief that human beings deserved it more than the gods—suggests Abbey's contrasting view, that human beings are not supreme in the natural order.

Finally, Abbey hints that human superiority is not only an illogical belief but a harmful one, often leading to social inequality. To deny "any form of emotions" to animals is the same as how Muslims (in Abbey's view) deny "souls to women." Whether or not readers agree, Abbey clearly thinks looking down on animals is similar to looking down on fellow human beings. Abbey's political thoughts also echo his fear of human arrogance. Abbey laments America's intervention in North Vietnam, where "we kill our buddies instead of our real enemies back home in the capital, the foul, diseased and hideous cities and towns we live in." By calling the North Vietnamese "our buddies" rather than conceiving of them as enemies, Abbey argues that all human beings are equal, even political rivals. The real enemy, he insists, is capitalist government, a force that ignores the equal importance of the environment, overdevelops the earth, and locks people in artificial "towns and cities." With political animosities like this, Abbey hints that when separated from the environment of which they are a natural part, people can fall into the mistaken belief that they are superior—not just to the natural world, but also to one another.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

JUNIPER TREE

Juniper trees represent Edward Abbey's attempt, as a human being, to grasp the mysteries of the desert, a nonhuman entity. The juniper plays a symbolic role in three of Abbey's central quests: to access the reality beneath visible appearances, to pay adequate tribute to nature's divinity, and to bond his body mystically with the landscape. Each of these projects boils down to Abbey's single, overarching wish to understand the landscape. In each experiment, Abbey uses juniper trees as a go-between, a symbolic portal between his humanity and the earth. First, in his wish to access the reality beneath visible things, Abbey immediately turns to the juniper by his trailer. He stares hard at it, meditating and trying to "make a connection through it" to the "essence" that lies beyond. He fails at first but returns to this particular juniper over and over, finally realizing, that the appearance of the tree is enough for him. The tree thus symbolizes humanity's inability to fully comprehend nature's mysterious "music."

Second, as Abbey discovers the holiness of nature, he starts burning juniper symbolically. Because juniper's pleasing odor is like Catholic incense, in Abbey's many juniper campfires throughout the book, he notes the smoke's "ritual," "propitiatory" (god-pleasing), or "ceremonial" aspect. In worshipping a deity (nature) by using a constituent element (the juniper) of that same deity, Abbey illustrates his important argument that nature is at the same time both God and church. Third, in Abbey's impossible desire to merge his body into the landscape, he calls the ancient juniper near his trailer a "grandmother" and imagines that it craves liberty. Later, reasoning verbally with Moon-Eye, a horse, Abbey does so from the shelter of a hollowed-out juniper trunk. And when a dead photographer is found under a juniper tree in the desert, Abbey envies the man's final connection to the physical landscape. In these cases, Abbey imagines that being physically near the juniper is a symbolic way of bringing oneself closer to the earth in each of its animal, vegetable, and mineral manifestations.

ROADS

Roads signify the choice between an authentic, liberated life and an artificial, oppressed life. Edward Abbey is careful to note whether each road he mentions in the memoir is a dirt road or a paved one. For Abbey, to drive on bumpy, uncomfortable, even dangerous dirt roads puts him in touch with reality, whereas paved roads and highways are for lazy, comfort-seeking tourists who can't be bothered to leave their air-conditioned cars or discover the earth. Abbey uses his preference for dirt over paved roads in order to illustrate two important arguments: that undefiled wilderness gives people a necessary sense of liberation, and that people should strive for the most direct, unmediated experience of reality. For Abbey, paved roads are a clear sign of the government's attempt to rob individuals of their liberty. When engineers appear at his trailer one day, staking out an enormous highway project, Abbey realizes that this will destroy the untamed nature of Arches National Monument. In this way, paved roads symbolize artificiality and the perils of industrial tourism.

In contrast to pavement, Abbey uses dirt roads to signal an embrace of the most authentic possible life. In calling for an end to paved roads, Abbey promises that tourists, "liberated" from their cars and forced to hike on dirt paths, will rediscover joy and improvisation. While driving to Tukuhnikivats Mountain, Abbey speeds in his truck through the thrilling obstacle course of his desert path: the rocks, potholes, and quicksand challenge his every "nerve and skill," providing brilliant scenery and empowering the driver. These feelings are echoed in Abbey's hazardous drive to The Maze with Bob Waterman. In passages like these, dirt roads put people in touch with the earth, with themselves, and with reality—a far cry from paved roads, which separate people from these things.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Touchstone edition of *Desert Solitaire* published in 1968.

Author's Introduction Quotes

❝ Since you cannot get the desert into a book any more than a fisherman can haul up the sea with his nets, I have tried to create a world of words in which the desert figures more as medium than as material. Not imitation but evocation has been the goal.

Related Characters: Edward Abbey (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: xxii

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from author Edward Abbey's introduction, where he lays out ground rules for the coming memoir. In this section of the book, he describes his political stance against corruption in the Parks Service, and he apologizes for focusing on the superficial appearance of the desert, rather than on the its underlying reality.

But before Abbey dives into those topics, the first thing he explains to readers, as this quote shows, is his desire to go use language to do more than describe life. By most

accounts, words describe things by communicating certain, definite facts. But Abbey's six months in the desert were a life-changing and unprecedented experience for him; to simply *say* how important his experiences were wouldn't do them justice at all. Instead, Abbey promises to use his words to "evoke" the desert. For Abbey, this is a totally different use from the straightforward, descriptive function of regular language. Like verse—which uses rhythm, rhyme, musicality to embody its subject matter—Abbey's language in the book will "evoke" the desert, not simply describe it. That way, people who haven't seen the desert firsthand will have some idea of its wonder. This is the reader's first clue—before the book has even really begun—that words play a crucial role in how people experience reality.

The First Morning Quotes

❝ Like a god, like an ogre? The personification of the natural is exactly the tendency I wish to suppress in myself, to eliminate for good. [...] I want to be able to look at and into a juniper tree, a piece of quartz, a vulture, a spider, and see it as it is in itself, devoid of all humanly ascribed qualities, anti-Kantian, even the categories of scientific description.

Related Characters: Edward Abbey (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs during Abbey's first morning in the desert. He's just emerged from his trailer to view the sunrise—a seminal moment in the book, where Abbey falls in love with the place at first sight. Shocked by the strange rock formations, he tries to describe them by calling them ogres or gods. But immediately, in this excerpt, he stops himself. Gods and ogres are human ideas, he thinks, but the desert is so obviously alien to human life. To apply such words to the desert—to "personify" such an inhuman place—would be to misrepresent it entirely.

Misusing language in this way, Abbey fears, would prevent him from achieving one of his main goals: to access the underlying reality of the desert, beyond the merely visible. So, first and foremost, he has to be careful about the words he chooses to communicate his experience. The philosopher Immanuel Kant believed that such an underlying reality was impossible for humans to access; Abbey, hoping to disprove him, embarks on an "anti-Kantian" endeavor. Language's perversion of reality is one of the central themes of the book, and Abbey includes his self-censorship here to illustrate how crucial language can be to human perception.

Solitaire Quotes

❝ The odor of burning juniper is the sweetest fragrance on the face of the earth, in my honest judgment; I doubt if all the smoking censers of Dante's paradise could equal it. One breath of juniper smoke, like the perfume of sagebrush after rain, evokes in magical catalysis, like certain music, the space and light and clarity and piercing strangeness of the American West.

Related Characters: Edward Abbey (speaker), Floyd Bence, Merle McRae

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

On Abbey's first full day in the desert, Merle McRae (the park superintendent) and Floyd Bence (the chief ranger) have just left him alone in his trailer. Twenty miles from the nearest human being, Abbey is struggling a bit with the solitude and silence, so he lights a bonfire of old juniper tree branches and discovers their sweet odor. He immediately compares it to a Catholic mass by references to Dante and censers. The Italian Renaissance poet Dante Alighieri's *Paradiso* (c. 1320) is a classic depiction of Christian Heaven, complete with "censers," or incense chambers. Dante is considered one of the world's greatest poets, so, on one hand, this is a highly poetic comparison that conveys near-religious reverence for nature—but on the other hand, the incense of *Paradiso* is imaginary. Instead of comparing his sweet juniper smoke to something real on Earth, something the reader might have experienced before, Abbey asks his readers to go beyond their words, beyond their lived experience, to complete his comparison. The realm of imagination, Abbey argues, is the only adequate way to capture both the smell of juniper and the odor's divine qualities.

The Serpents of Paradise Quotes

I suggest, however that it's a foolish, simple-minded rationalism which denies any form of emotion to all animals but man and his dog. This is no more justified than the Moslems are in denying souls to women.

Related Characters: Edward Abbey (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

Abbey has just been watching two snakes in their strange mating dance, imaging the love they must be feeling. Though he warns himself that personifying nature is inaccurate, here, with the comparison to the popular love of dogs, he admits that it's still foolish to deny any emotion to animals. Notably, he defines "rationalism"—the uniquely human capacity for reason—as the very instrument of humans' mistake. By blaming human logic for a serious misinterpretation of animal life, Abbey implies that human superiority is both wrongheaded and hard-wired into human thinking. It's all the more difficult, then, for people to escape this mindset and humble themselves. Abbey's comparison of this mistaken belief to the idea that Muslims deny souls to women is also important: whether or not readers agree with Abbey here, this part of his argument also implicates organized religion as en equally false expression of human superiority. This deepens his argument that Earth—rather than belief systems like Islam or Christianity—is the only deity.

Cliffrose and Bayonets Quotes

What the rabbit has lost in energy and spirit seems added, by processes too subtle to fathom, to my own soul. I try but cannot feel any sense of guilt. I examine my soul: white as snow. Check my hands: not a trace of blood. No longer do I feel so isolated from the sparse and furtive life around me, a stranger from another word. I have entered into this one.

Related Characters: Edward Abbey (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

Before this passage, Abbey has been building an argument about humans' rightful place in nature. Rather than being masters of Earth, free to develop and exploit it as they please, he believes that humans are equal to animals and have no more right to the earth than rabbits do. He decides to prove this point by killing a rabbit, and this excerpt comes from his afterthoughts on the act he's just committed. Killing a rabbit is a strange way to prove that he's equal to animals, but what Abbey wants readers to take away is how he has absorbed the creature's life force. The rabbit's "energy and spirit" —in his "lost"/"added" construction—transfer to Abbey's own body, enlivening him. He has "entered" the animal cycle of predation and death—a cycle that's exempt from the standard moral judgments ("another world") of human killing. Rather than guilt—the emotion that a human death would arouse—Abbey feels elation. This strange scene is proof of Abbey's desperate wish to adopt the values and ways of life of the natural world rather than falling into the mindset that being human makes him superior to other creatures.

For a few moments we discover that nothing can be taken for granted, for if this ring of stone is marvelous then all which shaped it is marvelous, and our journey here on earth, able to see and touch and hear in the midst of tangible and mysterious things-in-themselves, is the most strange and daring of all adventures.

Related Characters: Edward Abbey (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

Abbey is taking his daily rounds of the park and has stopped to admire the colossal Delicate Arch, an ancient rock bridge that appears different to everyone who sees it. Abbey's thoughts on the Arch touch on an important idea: that human beings' powers of perception are too weak to access the underlying reality beneath what's visible. After Abbey's repeated inability to see the desert beyond the visual, to see into a deeper realm of reality, this rock is the first thing to suggest that mere appearances are enough. He shows this discovery here with the phrase "things-in-themselves," a term belonging to the philosopher Immanuel Kant, who believed the "things" that underlay sensation existed but could never be accessed by humanity. Instead of obsessing over this elusive realm, Abbey is becoming content with the mere "tangible" experience of Delicate Arch: its sight, sensation, and sound. He calls these sensations "strange

and daring," indicating his delight in them.

Polemic Quotes

It will be objected that a constantly increasing population makes resistance and conservation a hopeless battle. This is true. Unless a way is found to stabilize the nation's population, the parks cannot be saved. Or anything else worth a damn. Wilderness preservation, like a hundred other good causes, will be forgotten under the overwhelming pressure of a struggle for mere survival and sanity in a completely urbanized, completely industrialized, ever more crowded environment.

Related Characters: Edward Abbey (speaker), The Engineers

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

Having just met a group of engineers plotting out an enormous highway, Abbey is horrified that industrial development will swallow up nature and destroy the sense of freedom he's been enjoying. In a long rant about how Industrial Tourism destroys nature, Abbey arrives at the conclusion—voiced in this excerpt—that the source of the problem is overpopulation. When populations expand unnaturally, roads must appear to transport these people, and industry must expand to house, feed, and employ them. The effect of this, as this quote shows, is twofold: on one hand, as Abbey argues throughout the book, if the parks disappear then so does the necessary feeling of liberty he's discovered in nature. But on the other hand, a smaller but still tragic effect is that "wilderness preservation" as a global concern—which was just gaining serious momentum in the 1960s—will itself be forgotten if population gets too big. Worse problems—starvation and disease, for instance—will outweigh the importance of nature and further lead to its demise.

No more new roads in national parks. […] Once people are liberated from the confines of automobiles there will be a greatly increased interest in hiking, exploring, and back-country packtrips.

Related Characters: Edward Abbey (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

Abbey has been unspooling a long rant against development in the national parks—a cycle he calls Industrial Tourism. In this quote, he's beginning to offer his own solutions to the problem of too many roads. His first idea, a ban on all new paved roads, draws urgent attention to the fragility of one's solitary experience in nature.

Abbey's chain of thinking—which originates here, in his insistence on foot travel and dirt paths—unfolds as follows: new roads bring more people to the wilderness, making it hard truly to escape in nature. If even the slightest trace of other people intrudes on one's solitary retreat (as Abbey laments elsewhere when picking up litter or admonishing graffiti), then the feeling that one is alone evaporates. Once solitude is gone, one can't feel the unique freedom and self reliance of the wilderness. And when that goes away, it's very hard to rejuvenate oneself and to return to society with fresh affection for other people. Bitterness, arrogance, and tyranny are the natural consequences of this inability to replenish social affection in nature. In this way, the simple symbol of paved roads—which most readers probably find harmless—are, in fact, the villain of Abbey's story. His urgent prescription in this quote draws this fact to the foreground.

Rocks Quotes

There was a bush. A bush growing out of the hard sun-baked mud. And the bush was alive, each of its many branches writhing in a sort of dance and all clothed in a luminous aura of smoky green, fiery blue, flame-like yellow. As he watched the bush become larger, more active, brighter and brighter. Suddenly it exploded into fire.

Related Characters: Edward Abbey (speaker), Alfred T. Husk, Billy-Joe Husk

Related Themes:

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears at the climax of the fictional story of

Billy-Joe Husk, a young Moabite boy who flees the scene of his father, Alfred T. Husk's murder in the Canyonlands, gets lost in nature, and discovers surprising spiritual truths before his tragic death. Though Abbey uses Husk's murder as a cautionary tale against greed, this quote provides a subtler lesson about the divine role of the earth. In this quote, Billy-Joe has just eaten a flower, which causes him to hallucinate a burning bush. This one of many of Abbey's attacks on organized religion: the Biblical burning bush, through which God spoke to Moses in the Book of Exodus, is one of the most famous scenes in the Old Testament. By implying that Moses's revelation was a simple hallucination, Abbey states his view that Earth—not the Bible—is sacred. Billy-Joe's bush could simply be a gas plant or euonymus whose bright-colored blooms appear fire-like. Abbey's aim is not to undo any religious connotations of nature; rather, he hopes to strip off the Biblical mythology and celebrate nature alone. This scene is the first real expression of Abbey's hope, and he will return to it throughout the book.

❝ The walls of the canyon towered over him, leaning in toward him then moving back, in and then back, but without sound. They were radiant, like heated iron. The moon had passed out of sight. He saw the stars caught in a dense sky like moths in a cobweb, alive, quivering, struggling to escape. He understood their fear, their desperation, and wept in sympathy with their helplessness.

Related Characters: Edward Abbey (speaker), Alfred T. Husk, Billy-Joe Husk

Related Themes:

Page Number: 76-77

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears in a fictional parable about Billy-Joe Husk, a young boy who flees the scene of his prospector father, Alfred T. Husk's, murder, gets lost in nature, and bonds with the earth before dying of exposure. Here, having eaten a strange flower, the boy hallucinates vibrations in the earth and emotions in the sky. Though Billy-Joe's conviction that the stars are "struggling to escape" is strange, Abbey wants readers to understand what this conviction reveals about humanity's relation to Earth. He compares this moment to his own earlier thoughts about the juniper tree by his trailer, which he similarly imagined to have craved "liberation." To feel imprisoned is a human (or at least an animal) quality.

That Billy-Joe and Abbey recognize this desire in inanimate stars and plants suggests two things: first, that these characters recognize in themselves an innate need for freedom, so strong that they see it in their environment. And second, the fact that these characters "understand" and feel a human level of "sympathy" for the inanimate earth—in Billy-Joe's case, as strong as tears—suggests that people can become so close to the earth that they share emotions with it. This second concept is a hallmark of Abbey's desert project, as he seeks to become physically and spiritually one with the wilderness during his time at Arches National Monument.

Cowboys and Indians Quotes

❝ I have a supply of classical philosophical lore ready to offer at the slightest provocation. Our life on earth is but the shadow of a higher life, I could tell him. Or, Life is but a dream. Or, Who wants to live forever? Vanity, vanity. Recall Sophocles, Roy: Lucky are those who die in infancy but best of all is never to have been born. You know.

All kinds of ideas spring to mind, but an instinctive prudence makes me hold my tongue. What right have I to interfere with an old man's antideath wish? He knows what he's doing; let him savor it to the full.

Related Characters: Edward Abbey (speaker), Roy Scobie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

Abbey is out riding with his middle-aged rancher friend, Roy Scobie. After Scobie opens up to Abbey about his phobia of death, the younger Abbey grows annoyed. In contrast to Scobie, Abbey accepts death as a natural phenomenon, and his instinct here is to comfort the terrified man by quoting some philosophers who have written on the subject. Both the kinds of philosophers that Abbey mentions and, as well as his choice not to quote them at all, are significant. The playwright Sophocles is the only explicit name here, but readers can deduce others. The "shadow" is a classic image of Plato, suggesting that the soul's afterlife is the only reality. The phrase "Life is but a dream" could be a reference to Plato too, or a host of ancient Stoic philosophers who believed that pain and sorrow—mental phenomena—had no basis in reality.

Additionally, "Vanity, vanity" mirrors the famous opening of Ecclesiastes, a biblical book that urges belief in the immaterial afterlife. Abbey's belief in these

philosophers—each of whom dismisses lived humanity's lived experience—is not sincere. He criticizes Plato regularly, along with other "idealists" who discount his conviction that Earth's visual appearance is real and complete. And throughout the book, he dismisses the Bible, a religious code that he believes distracts people from nature's simple, observable divinity. That Abbey rattles off beliefs he obviously doesn't share is clear evidence for his lack of faith in language to describe or assist with lived experience. He confirms this at the end of the quote, when he decides to leave Scobie alone with his "antideath wish."

Cowboys and Indians, Part II Quotes

❝ As for the "solitary confinement of the mind," my theory is that solipsism, like other absurdities of the professional philosopher, is a product of too much time wasted in library stacks between the covers of a book, in smoke-filled coffeehouses (bad for the brains) and conversation-clogged seminars. To refute the solipsist or the metaphysical idealist all that you have to do is take him out and throw a rock at his head: if he ducks he's a liar. His logic may be airtight but his argument, far from revealing the delusions of living experience, only exposes the limitations of logic.

Related Characters: Edward Abbey (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Abbey has been ruminating on the nature of reality. He's been struggling to come to terms with the fact that underlying reality—in the eyes of idealist philosophers—can't be accessed by human perception. To him, the visual and sensory appearance of the desert is as real as it gets. So here, although Abbey can't refute the way that these "idealists" argue, he attacks these thinkers' blindness to a world where rocks are hard and can cause pain. More than blindness, these philosophers seem to be lying if they claim that the real world doesn't exist—this is why Abbey playfully threatens to stone them, in order to get a confession out of them that appearances are good enough. It's an example that comes from his own experience in the desert, as he's spent countless hours meditating on rocks. Abbey's reference to books, libraries, seminars, and coffeehouses are also noteworthy—all of these are places where either written or verbal language can flourish. By damning these things, Abbey argues that words (artificial constructions) are responsible for the false claim that lived experience isn't real. This argument unites Abbey's disdain for inaccurate language to his conviction that the mere visible surfaces of life are good enough for people.

❝ Caught in a no-man's-land between two worlds the Navajo takes what advantage he can of the white man's system—the radio, the pickup truck, the welfare—while clinging to the liberty and dignity of his old way of life.

Related Characters: Edward Abbey (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears in Abbey's long rant about capitalism's destruction of authentic ways of life in the American West. Here, readers see that, alongside cowboys—and later, Mormons—the Navajo American Indians suffer from overpopulation, exhaustion of land resources, and cultural appropriation. What's worth noting in this quote are the terms "liberty" and "dignity," two concepts that will define Abbey's broader argument that nature is essential for democracy. Abbey has just shown how roads and tourism deplete the earth. As a result, the Navajo, who derive a feeling of liberty from their contact with this rapidly disappearing wilderness, can no longer achieve liberty.

Abbey has discovered in himself how the wilderness makes him feel liberated. Dignity—one's sense of self worth—is a feeling that he also finds in nature, as evidenced by his long, proud passages about hydrating himself and building shelter in a hostile climate. And here he argues, with the Navajo as his symbolic example, that freedom and dignity are related experiences and that Earth is uniquely capable of offering both. He will later make the third step of this argument: that the benefits of this dignity make people better citizens in democratic societies. (If everyone respects themselves, they can respect others.) But before developing that argument, here he points to the sad example of Navajo dispossession to establish the fact that dignity becomes much harder to find without the freedom that nature affords.

Surely it is no accident that the most thorough of tyrannies appeared in Europe's most thoroughly scientific and industrialized nation. If we allow our own country to become as densely populated, overdeveloped and technically unified as modern Germany we may face a similar fate.

Related Characters: Edward Abbey (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

Abbey has just been arguing that untouched wilderness would be the perfect place to stage a populist uprising against an authoritarian government. It's one of the more radical conclusions he draws from a broader argument about why preserving nature is a civic duty. This quote in particular helps illustrate Abbey's use of the paved road as a symbol of government oppression and trampled human rights. To connect development to tyranny, he invokes the greatest political calamity of the century (possibly of the millennium): the genocides of Nazi Germany. It's remarkable to Abbey that just before devolving into barbarism, Germany was the most "industrialized" and "scientific[ally]" advanced country in Europe. He hopes that readers will imagine the technological efficiency of concentration camps, the proliferation of radio to spread Hitler's message, and the rapid refinement of toxic chemicals. Abbey draws a causal link between Germany's industriousness and its ability to commit atrocities.

Then, Abbey argues more broadly that technological advancement anywhere can allow governments to dominate their citizens at any time. After planting this connection in his readers' mind, he imbues his highway metaphor with a similar sense of menace, suggesting that governments can use interstate systems to keep track of the population and assert tyrannical control. As a result, when Abbey portrays development in his book—such as the massive highway being planned in Arches National Monument, or the government damming of Glen Canyon—readers connect it to a systematic destruction of human rights and liberties.

There the dry lake beds between the parallel mountain ranges fill with planes of hot air which reflect sky and mountains in mirror fashion, creating the illusory lakes of blue water, the inverted mountains, the strange vision of men and animals walking through or upon water—Palestinian miracles

Related Characters: Edward Abbey (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

Having just finished a long rant about the government's destruction of nature, Abbey takes a rest by his trailer, watching the horizon in the hot summer sun. He observes atmospheric optical illusions, known as mirages, and takes note of them here. The language Abbey uses to illustrate the distortion of the desert is noteworthy, as is the phrase "Palestinian miracles." First, terms like "reflect," "mirror," "illusory," and "inverted" all contribute to the sense that reality is not what it seems. This is evidence for Abbey's ongoing claim that the underlying reality of visible things is impossible for human beings to grasp. If he can't see the landscape straight in broad daylight, how can he know what the it really looks like, or if it even exists at all? This uncertainty plagues Abbey throughout the book, and it accounts for his frustrations with language. Second, the "miracle" phrase implicates Jesus Christ's famous trick: his walk upon the water. By hinting that this miracle was a naturally occurring optical illusion, Abbey contributes to his argument that the history of Christianity is a mistaken worship of Earth.

The Heat of Noon Quotes

A man could be a lover and defender of the wilderness without ever in his lifetime leaving the boundaries of asphalt, powerlines, and right-angled surfaces. We need wilderness whether or not we ever set foot in it. We need a refuge even though we many never need to go there. I may never in my life get to Alaska, for example, but I'm grateful that it's there. We need the possibility of escape as surely as we need hope; without it the life of the cities would drive all men into crime or drugs or psychoanalysis.

Related Characters: Edward Abbey (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 129-130

Explanation and Analysis

Prior to this passage, Abbey has been sitting in the dreadful summer heat, daydreaming of the distant, snowy mountain

range. He's comforted by the idea of cold, wet snow, even if he's only imagining it. The idea, he argues, is enough for him. Now, in the present excerpt, he uses the same logic to make a much more important argument about the importance of wilderness to civilization. He believes that city life, with its unforgiving asphalt roads and ugly powerlines, is cramped and hardly bearable. The mere idea of an escape to the wilderness is enough to keep people trudging through this unhappy life.

Even if most people never set foot in the wild—just as Abbey may never see Alaska—the concept of wilderness becomes a symbol of relief. Importantly, Abbey's conditional language—words like "possibility" and "hope"—helps stress the sense that this kind of escape doesn't have to be real in order to help people. This scene illustrates not only the crucial argument that wilderness must be preserved for social reasons, but also Abbey's methodology throughout the book: by observing psychological evidence in himself, he can turn his view outward, toward humanity, and make wider political conclusions.

The Moon-Eyed Horse Quotes

❝ Once, twice, I thought I heard footsteps following me but when I looked back I saw nothing.

Related Characters: Edward Abbey (speaker), Moon-Eye

Related Themes:

Page Number: 150

Explanation and Analysis

This is the last line of Abbey's chapter on Moon-Eye, the rogue horse he has tracked down and tried to rescue from the Canyonlands. After a full day trying to reason with the horse, Abbey returns empty handed, looking behind him when he thinks he hears footsteps. This quote is significant in that it complicates Abbey's ongoing claim that isolation is preferable to society. It does so with an indirect allusion to Greek mythology: Abbey loves Ancient Greece, and here readers are reminded of the mythical poet Orpheus, who tried to rescue his lover, Eurydice, from the underworld. On his ascent back to Earth, Orpheus broke his deal with the gods by looking back to confirm that Eurydice was following him, thereby losing her forever. Thus, in looking back to catch a glimpse of the elusive horse, Abbey (himself a poet) confirms that, like Orpheus, he is desperate for company.

That Abbey's glances prove fruitless illustrates symbolically the unavoidable reality that the desert is a solitary place.

This scene is an unspoken but poignant reminder of Abbey's social conflict throughout the book—that human beings need both solitude and society. It's especially sad when readers consider that Abbey has been begging a horse to keep him company. In this way, this scene is the turning point in Abbey's mind—the moment at which he realizes that he needs other human beings.

Down the River Quotes

❝ In these hours and days of dual solitude on the river we hope to discover something quite different, to renew our affection for ourselves and the human kind in general by a temporary, legal separation from the mass. [...] Cutting the bloody cord, that's what we feel, the delirious exhilaration of independence, a rebirth backward in time and into primeval liberty, into freedom in the most simple, literal, primitive meaning of the world, the only meaning that really counts. I look at my old comrade Newcomb in a new light and feel a wave of love for him.

Related Characters: Edward Abbey (speaker), Ralph Newcomb

Related Themes:

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

Abbey and his friend Ralph Newcomb have just embarked on a weeklong trip down the Colorado River. Totally removed from society, Abbey begins to consider the social effects of his isolation. This quote is the most significant part of his river meditation and is perhaps the book's clearest expression of his argument that isolation in wilderness benefits society. Throughout the book, Abbey has been discovering his own private sense of freedom and self-empowerment. Importantly, this takes place away from others. But here, in Newcomb's company, Abbey states outright that "hours and days of [...] solitude" lead directly to "renew[ed] affection" for others. He discovers a new "love" for his friend, brought about only after a period of solitude. Furthermore, he now loves not only Newcomb but "human kind in general." By comparing his new love for Newcomb to a new love for the whole species, Abbey makes this scene a symbol of his argument that, in order for people to coexist happily in a functioning society, they need periodic escapes into nature.

Wilderness. The word itself is music.

Wilderness, wilderness....We scarcely know what we mean by the term, though the sound of it draws all whose nerves and emotions have not yet been irreparably stunned, deadened, numbed by the caterwauling of commerce, the sweating scramble for profit and domination.

Related Characters: Edward Abbey (speaker), Ralph Newcomb

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

Abbey is in the midst of his weeklong trip down the Colorado River with Ralph Newcomb. He's lost track of time, blissfully considering the rocks and trees as they float on. This quote, in which he tries to define the word "wilderness," is one of the chapter's many ruminations on the relationship between words and reality. But Abbey's struggle with definitions has two important functions here: first, by admitting that he's unable to define a word that most people assume to have a fairly good idea of, he confirms the uselessness of language in describing nature. This contributes to his ongoing frustration with straightforward prose. Second, the word "wilderness" evokes the Wilderness Preservation Act of 1964, the principal goal of which was to define exactly this term so that nature, once identified, could be protected. This Act, as Abbey proves elsewhere in the book, failed miserably, inviting developers to misuse its wording in defense of industrialization. So by referencing this Act in his private ruminations, Abbey argues that language is not only ineffective but dangerously so. Here, the problem of language becomes tied to what Abbey considers the national emergency of protecting the wilderness.

Havasu Quotes

I slipped by degrees into lunacy, me and the moon, and lost to a certain extent the power to distinguish between what was and what was not myself: looking at my hand I would see a leaf trembling on a branch. A *green* leaf.

Related Characters: Edward Abbey (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 200

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Abbey has found a remote hideaway in the Havasupai Canyon—a densely wooded area where he lives six weeks naked and alone, communing with nature. It's the sharpest example of Abbey's desire to bond with his environment and to understand it entirely. Several phrases illustrate this, the first of which is "me and the moon." Grammatically, this clause completes what is called an apposition, an equation of two nouns in the sentence. In this case, Abbey equates "me and the moon" with the pronoun "I": Abbey and the moon effectively become the same thing in this sentence. By subtly suggesting that "I" encompasses both himself and a celestial body, Abbey tricks readers into the same hallucination he felt in Havasu, in which he lost his ability to distinguish between himself and the natural world. He confirms this when he looks down at his hand and sees not skin but "a leaf." This indicates a total confusion of his body with nature—yet another sign that he is merging with his natural environment.

Tukuhnikivats Quotes

I strip and lie back in the sun, high on Tukuhnikivats, with nothing between me and the universe but my thoughts. Deliberately I compose my mind, quieting the febrile buzzing of the cells and circuits, and strive to open my consciousness directly, nakedly to the cosmos.

Related Characters: Edward Abbey (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 227

Explanation and Analysis

Abbey has just driven from the desert to the Tukuhnikivats Mountain for a snowy getaway. He's made it to the peak of the mountain, stripped naked, and now lies out in the sun, hoping to achieve a perfect harmony with the natural world. He gets as close as ever to doing so in this moment, as illustrated here by "nakedly" (a word recalling Adam's naked communion with God in the Bible) and also by the word "directly." But despite his wish, Abbey can't literally become selfsame with the cosmos. To learn why not, readers should recall an earlier passage in relation to his language here.

In this passage, Abbey's brain is "buzzing" with neurological electricity, which he must quiet if he wants to connect his mind to the atmosphere. This verb parallels his arrival to the mountain several pages earlier, where he parks, exits the "droning mechanical grind" of the truck, and must adjust his ears to the silence of the mountain air. In the earlier passage, upon his arrival, the loud truck engine symbolizes

industry, from which Abbey must separate himself in order to enter nature. But in the present quote, while he lies naked on the mountain peak, the "buzzing" is no longer the truck. Rather, it's his mind—the electricity ("febrile") and physical mechanism ("buzzing") of the human brain. By suggesting that the human body is a whirring piece of machinery, not unlike an engine, Abbey perfectly illustrates how, despite the spiritual sympathy he feels with nature, his material body gets in the way of literal, physical harmony.

Episodes and Visions Quotes

With his help I discovered that I was not opposed to mankind but only to mancenteredness, anthropocentricity, the opinion that the world exists solely for the sake of man [...]

Related Characters: Edward Abbey (speaker), J. Prometheus Birdsong

Related Themes:

Page Number: 244

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Abbey has been debating with a mysterious visitor at his campground. The man (later revealed as J. Prometheus Birdsong) brags about humanity's superiority and its triumphs in medicine, while Abbey voices his contradictory belief that humanity is arrogant. But, in this excerpt, with the man's help, Abbey qualifies his beliefs. He's doesn't hate humanity—what he hates is humanity's false superiority. Here, by opposing "anthropocentricity" (human superiority), Abbey articulates exactly the opinion that he opposes throughout *Desert Solitaire*: it's a special species-based arrogance that he blames for human beings' destruction of Earth, and for their subjection of each other. Also note the strange compound words here. These terms are unfamiliar to readers because the feeling they represent is so common that people don't bother to name it. Abbey didn't invent these words, but by drawing attention to this concept in such strange terms, he not only allows himself to refute this view—which he does on nearly every page of the book. He also implies that language—a flawed communication system to begin with—must expand in order to encompass the idea of humanity's species-based arrogance.

Heidegger was wrong, as usual; man is *not* the only living thing that *exists*. He might well have taken a tip from a fellow countryman: *Wovon man nicht sprachen Kann, darueber muss man schweigen.*

Related Characters: Edward Abbey (speaker), J. Prometheus Birdsong

Related Themes:

Page Number: 248

Explanation and Analysis

After a seminal debate with J. Prometheus Birdsong about humanity's rank in the natural order, Abbey stops to marvel at the nature around him. The sight of colorful flowers convinces him that nothing could be realer than the earth. In this quote, taken from Abbey's rumination on these flowers, he asserts two heavy arguments: first, that Earth is every bit as real and important as humanity is. Idealist philosophers like Martin Heidegger argue the opposite, that the world exists only in the perception of human beings, making their minds the only truly real things in the universe. Abbey's raw, sensory experience of the desert, on nearly every page of the book thus far, has convinced him that this view is nonsense. And in order to show this, Abbey has continuously pointed out how human language—an artificial system of meaning—tricks people into believing that the world itself is what's artificial. Abbey believes that as long as people use made-up words to comprehend the world, of course they will assume that this world is false.

Thus, in the present quote, Abbey kills two birds with one stone. He first refutes philosopher Martin Heidegger's view that only ideas exist, and he does so, second, by drawing attention to the inadequacy of language. To accomplish the second task, Abbey quotes a line in German, one of the most famous sayings in all of philosophy, from Ludwig Wittgenstein: "What can't be spoken of must be passed over in silence." Back in 1921, Wittgenstein was telling philosophers that certain ideas don't make logical sense, so they should stop making up names for them. And here, finally, Abbey enlists Wittgenstein to shut Heidegger up about his own illogical idea that the world doesn't exist. By using this German quote—a quote originally about the limits of words—Abbey shoots down the arrogant philosophical belief that the world isn't real, and he does so by venting his frustration with the falsest thing of all: language.

Terra Incognita Quotes

❝ Or perhaps, like a German poet, we cease to care, becoming more concerned with the naming than the things named; the former becomes more real than the latter. And so in the end the world is lost again. […]

Amazing, says Waterman, going to sleep.

Related Characters: Bob Waterman, Edward Abbey (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 257

Explanation and Analysis

Before a dangerous cliff descent into a canyon complex known as The Maze, Abbey and his friend Bob Waterman lie in their sleeping bags at the top of a ridge. They've been observing the land below, and Abbey wonders what they should name a cluster of rock formations. But Waterman finds naming to be a possessive impulse, and Abbey eventually agrees with him. This quote comes from his eloquent dismissal of naming as a greedy human action. But the irony and meaning of this scene have less to do with this speech and more to do with Waterman's response: the fact that he rolls over and ignores Abbey. By showing Waterman do this, Abbey implies readers that even if his words about language seem right, they're still words. As such, they're irrelevant to the men's experience in the desert, an adventure they end up sharing largely in silence. Abbey's mockery of himself—spouting words to discredit words—is one of the book's funniest and sharpest critiques of humanity's dependence upon language. It's a tendency that Abbey sets out, from the Author's Introduction to the memoir's final chapter, to break.

Bedrock and Paradox Quotes

❝ I have seen the place called Trinity, in New Mexico, where our wise men exploded the first atomic bomb and the heat of the blast fused sand into a greenish glass—already the grass has returned, and the cactus and the mesquite.

Related Characters: Edward Abbey (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 268

Explanation and Analysis

On Abbey's last day at Arches National Monument, as he packs up, he imagines that the desert is grateful to see another human being leave. He stops himself, however, reminding himself that Earth does not feel things like gratitude; rather, it's indifferent to humanity. In contemplating this indifference, Abbey ruminates about how the earth grew back after something as powerful as an atomic blast. Aside from being one of the book's most stylistically beautiful lines, this sentence is worth noting for its suggestion of humanity's smallness and for Abbey's dismissal of organized religion. First, Abbey suggests that Earth is greater than humanity's most powerful achievement, nuclear weaponry. The atomic bomb appears weak by contrast to the plants that regenerate in its wake—illustrating Abbey's belief that humanity ought to be humbler about their place on earth.

Second, Abbey's underhanded phrasing in describing "the place called Trinity" implies that the town didn't deserve to be named after the holy trinity, the Catholic symbol of redemption and peace. Knowing Abbey's hatred of war, readers see Abbey's biting sarcasm here, which highlights Americans' ability to associate such a sacred image with the most destructive technology in history. To clench the comparison, he calls the atomic scientists "our wise men." This is a sarcastic reference to the Biblical wise men who visit the baby Jesus. With this final irony, Abbey implies that today's three "wise men"—perhaps Enrico Fermi, Robert Oppenheimer, and Albert Einstein, who developed the bomb—rather than acknowledging a global symbol of peace (Christ), engineered the global symbol of war.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

Ten years prior to writing *Desert Solitaire*, Edward Abbey spent two summers as a park ranger at Arches National Monument near Moab, Utah. The time he spent alone as a ranger forms the subject of this book. The park, long since developed, was a "primitive place" back then. Because the tourist season was light, Abbey spent great stretches of time in solitude, keeping a journal.

Immediately, Abbey asserts the classic environmentalist argument that human beings defile nature. The word "primitive" indicates a state of moral purity, not a regression to living like cavemen. This distinction will propel the book's argument that wilderness is essential to civilized life.

In the following memoir, Abbey has tried to create a "world of words" that represents, rather than merely describes, the desert as he experienced it. Abbey apologizes for writing more about the appearances and "surfaces" of the things he saw in the desert, rather than their "true underlying reality." Abbey concludes that appearances are all human beings can truly experience, so they're good enough for him.

The phrase "world of words" strikes at the core of Abbey's frustration with language. Though words never perfectly succeed in communicating life, Abbey will repeatedly push his language to its limit—as poets do, by using rhyme and meter to supplement the definitional meaning of words. In doing so, Abbey will try to give readers the most accurate sense of his time in the desert. This is a lot like Abbey's opinion about reality: in trying to use superficial words to penetrate into a richer, lived reality, Abbey highlights a similar difference in the way people experience the world. The five senses only acquaint people with sensory "surfaces," but beneath these surfaces is an "underlying reality" which people can never know.

Though grateful for some of his fellow hard-working park rangers, Abbey warns readers that he will be harsh on the useless and business-minded people of the National Park Service for not doing enough to protect the desert from development since his time there. He urges readers who are inspired by his book to do more than mere tourism: to get lost in nature, away from their cars, society, and technology.

As well as lambasting arrogant bureaucrats in the National Park Service, Abbey also places the onus of respecting and protecting the environment on ordinary people. He points to a crucial act of protest that park visitors can engage in: simply leaving one's car and discovering the liberty of a life in the wild. The two forces Abbey points out here—financial greed and human freedom—will stand in stark opposition throughout the book.

Abbey includes a couplet from Pablo Neruda's "The Heights of Macchu Picchu" as an epigraph: "*Give me silence, water, hope / Give me struggle, iron, volcanoes.*"

Neruda's poem—a celebration of nature that centers on the Incan city of Machu Picchu—ends on this balance between two sides of nature: the calm and life-giving side versus the fierce and brutal one. By celebrating all of nature—both the sweet and the harsh—Neruda connects spiritually to the city's dead spirits and suggests that nature will outlast humanity. This spiritual connection to nature's infinitude is exactly what Abbey strives to convey in Desert Solitaire.

THE FIRST MORNING

Though everyone has his or her own ideal place of beauty on Earth, Abbey's is the desert of Utah. He decides this the day he arrives, after a long drive from Albuquerque to begin his summer job as a park ranger at Arches National Monument. He reaches the park headquarters in Moab after dark. After asking for directions, Abbey drives 20 miles of unpaved **road** past various wild animals, strange rock formations, and a warning sign for quicksand. Finally, he arrives at the remote trailer that will be his home for the next six months.

Here, Abbey introduces the ongoing symbol of roads. He's been driving on the highway from Albuquerque, but in order to reach his post in the desert, he drives the last bit on a bumpy, unpaved, potentially dangerous path. Here, the road's shift from paved to unpaved symbolizes Abbey's step into a more authentic realm than the city—a realm where one as get as close as possible to a sense of reality that's unmediated by the trappings of civilization.

After a cold, snowy night alone, Abbey inspects the trailer in at dawn. He has modern conveniences: a kitchenette with a refrigerator, a heater, a bathroom, and running water. It's more luxurious than how his mother lived before Americans fought Hitler and boosted the national economy. Abbey sees mouse droppings and notes that he's not alone in the trailer, as he seemingly shares the space with animals.

Abbey's cohabitation with mice introduces the idea that human beings and animals are equal creatures. This scene—soon to be followed up with Abbey's interactions with other creatures—is an important part of his argument that human beings are equal rather than superior to nature, and so they ought to be less arrogant.

Stepping out to survey the landscape, Abbey notes the wild colors and clouds of predawn. He see distant mountain peaks, which he names and situates geographically in relation to his 33,000-acre park. Addressing the name of Arches National Monument, which he thinks of as "Abbey's country," Abbey explains what the "Arches" are: natural formations in the rocky desert that take the shape of bridges. He describes the variety of shapes, sizes, and colors that these many arches can take.

Abbey's joking with his readers when he renames the desert after himself. But the joke still points to an important truth about how words distort the world: Abbey laments that since language is human-made, when people use it to describe or understand nature, they are in fact defeating nature's nonhuman essence. Words say more about the people who use them than about the reality these people want to describe—just like Abbey's mock-arrogant name for his summer home. In future scenes, Abbey will use the uniquely human problem of naming things to highlight language's shortcomings.

Abbey's thoughts on the vastness of the place make him greedy to possess the place. As he describes a particular arch in the distance, he catches himself comparing it to a god or an ogre. He promises to avoid the "personification of the natural," because he wishes to confront nature directly, with no mediator. He wishes to gaze at a **juniper** tree and see it "as it is in itself, […] anti-Kantian." The landscape is so powerful that Abbey aspires to a "brutal mysticism" in which he merges with nature, somehow surviving separate and intact as a human being.

Continuing from the last passage, Abbey delves deeper into language's problems. By using human-centric language ("personification") in reference to "natural" things, he will have a hard time penetrating into the nonhuman reality of the desert. His test subject here, the juniper, will remain an important symbol of his desire to see things as they really are, stripped of language. Abbey stresses this by opposing Immanuel Kant—a philosopher who believed that this reality was inaccessible to humanity. Through extended meditation, Abbey hopes to access this very layer of reality that Kant called inaccessible. A separate but related desire is Abbey's "brutal mysticism"—an ambitious hope to break down the barrier between human, animal, and landscape. Once freed of distracting, human-made language, Abbey hopes to become closer with the earth.

After Abbey carries in the rest of bags from his truck, gets situated, and begins breakfast, the sun rises. Abbey marvels at the "flaming globe" and drinks his coffee as he awaits his frying bacon. The sun and he "greet each other." He notes nearby ravens and imagines their delight at the sunrise. Wishing he knew their language, Abbey would rather speak with these birds than with aliens on another planet.

"Flaming globe" is classic poetic language—more like the Greek bard Homer than a modern-day nature writer. Abbey will use this type of language throughout the book in hopes of conveying the powerful experiences he's having. The verb "greet" is also significant, as it conveys the idea that the sun is a human shaking hands with Abbey. Language like this—in addition to Abbey's perception that ravens can feel the human emotion of delight—illustrates Abbey's belief that human beings are equal to nature.

SOLITAIRE

Merle McRae (the park's superintendent) and Floyd Bence (the chief ranger) bring Abbey supplies for his remote trailer—water, tools, first aid, and so on—and brief him on the rounds he's to take of the desert. McRae, a middle-aged man who's the son of a New Mexico rancher, strikes Abbey as kindhearted. Bence is gentle, too, despite his great size; he is an archeologist by training and, like McRae, greatly prefers outdoor fieldwork to administrative office work. The men ask jokingly if Abbey is lonesome, and Abbey says no.

Having spoken out against the National Park Service in his introduction, Abbey is quick to temper his stance by describing these particular rangers as friendly and effective. But there is a reason for Bence and McRae's goodness here: they both hate desk jobs and prefer the outdoors. This is a crucial clue to Abbey's belief that nature makes people feel liberated and, as a result, makes them kinder toward one another and more respectful of the environment.

The three men drive around and go over Abbey's various caretaking duties, as Abbey notes that the terrain—though unpaved and undeveloped—is certainly passable and difficult to get lost in. Abbey tries some non-potable desert water. After some time together, the sun sets. Abbey asks McRae and Bence to stay for dinner, but they must go, and he watches them drive off.

Again, the road is symbolically significant. It's bumpy and unpaved—a reminder that Abbey is in a categorically different territory from civilization, where roads are typically paved. Abbey is establishing that the revelations about reality he'll soon undergo are only attainable away from development.

In McRae and Bence's sudden absence, Abbey is struck by the desert's silence and emptiness. Looking down at his wrist, his watch now seems useless. After supper, he makes a fire of **juniper** wood and meditates on the surfaces of the distant rock formations, on their "unnamed unnamable" colors.

Abbey's tongue twister represents two truths about the desert: that it cannot be described in words ("unnamable") and that, even if it could be, this remote stretch of land has never been described in the first place ("unnamed"). This further establishes Abbey's frustrations with language and his overwhelming sense of wonder at the natural world.

By nightfall, Venus appears in the sky, and Abbey admires it along with the birdsong around him. The **juniper** smoke, a smell that captures the strange essence of the American West, is sweeter than the "smoking censors Dante's paradise." Contemplating his fire, Abbey quotes a couplet about incense travelling up from a hearth to appease the gods.

Abbey uses the ritual aspects of juniper trees to introduce the idea that nature is a sacred place. A "censer" is an incense vessel; the incense-filled Heaven described Dante Alighieri—one of the most celebrated poets in history—is surely one of the sweetest odors one could invoke in a work of literature. Thus, Abbey's opinion that his meager juniper bonfire smells even sweeter is an early clue that, in his mind, the real deity is not Christian but environmental. Adding to this, Abbey quotes from Henry David Thoreau's "Light-Winged Smoke," a poem that compares chimney smoke to Catholic incense.

As the fire dies, Abbey takes a nighttime walk. He notes the uselessness of his flashlight, an otherwise useful instrument—it separates human beings from their surroundings. By spotlighting only one section of Earth, the flashlight seems to isolate Abbey, so he prefers to walk in the moonlight. Back at the trailer, he writes a letter to himself by the electric light, but the noise and stench of the gas generator shut him out of the natural world. So does the "man-made shell" of the trailer. Disengaging the generator before bed, the night's tranquility returns as Abbey recalls that he is isolated from others by at least 20 miles.

The flashlight, artificially singling out small portions of the nighttime terrain, is a piece of technology that symbolizes a division between humanity and the earth. The stench and buzz of the generator, indeed the entire "man-made" trailer, serve to separate Abbey from the still and silent environment of the desert at night. By symbolically shutting off these things, then, Abbey rejects technology and instead embraces silence and solitude. By doing this, Abbey suggests the beginning stages of an important argument: that a temporary rejection of developed civilization is required for extended self-discovery and, subsequently, for coexistence with others.

THE SERPENTS OF PARADISE

April is an especially windy month in the desert. Dust storms constantly flare up and make the terrain feel uninhabitable. But after prolonged exposure, one learns to appreciate—and even to love—the harsh wind as part of a greater environmental whole.

That Abbey can learn to love even the miserable sandstorms is proof that he's beginning to find a holistic bond with nature. Like the Neruda epigraph at the beginning of the book, this bond must include both the sweet and the ugly parts of nature.

Each dawn—his favorite hour—Abbey admires the sunrise while seated on his trailer's stoop, his bare feet on the bare earth. The jays and ravens, he feels, agree that this is the best time of day. Taking in the birds' songs and aimless games, Abbey imagines what they might be saying to each other. He reminds himself that on one hand, it's foolish to personify animals—but the emotion in their chirping is undeniable.

The image of Abbey's bare feet in the sand, which will come up again, suggests Abbey's attempt to bond entirely with the landscape, sand to skin. This bond extends to animals, as well: by implying that birds play games and feel happy, just like human beings do, Abbey argues that they are no lesser than human beings.

Abbey doesn't often see the mice in his trailer, but the fact that they might attract rattlesnakes makes him uneasy. He confirms his fear one morning when he finds one such rattler sleeping beneath his stoop. After debating whether to shoot it, Abbey decides that it's his job, as a ranger, to protect it. Afraid to wake the snake with movement, Abbey sits still, studying its shape, and he describes the dangers this species of snake presents to human beings. As he carefully removes the rattler with a shovel, it awakens and tries to strike. Abbey warns the snake to stay away, under pain of death.

Abbey's interactions with this rattlesnake offer a concrete example of how he believes human beings and animals ought to coexist. Most people would kill a poisonous snake—and indeed, Abbey considers doing so—but the fact that he saves it indicates his willingness to coexist with all parts of nature, the good and the harmful. That he reasons with the rattlesnake—warning it to stay away—grants is a human-like dignity that furthers this argument.

The warning is useless, as Abbey soon discovers more rattlesnakes near his trailer. But at the same time, he also finds a harmless gopher snake nearby. He domesticates it in his trailer and trains it to eat the mice that attract the unwanted rattlers. Soon, the gopher snake is so well-trained that it's content to spend afternoons wrapped around Abbey's waist as he makes his ranger rounds, to the delight of tourists. A cold-blooded creature, the snake absorbs Abbey's body temperature; they are "compatible."

The gopher snake symbolizes Abbey's ability to coexist with animals. Just like Abbey sinking his bare feet in the sand, he bonds with the snake skin-to-skin in a way that suggests a kind of symbiotic connection. Their "compatibility" is compelling evidence against humanity's typical belief in its own superiority over other species—a central argument in Abbey's book.

Though the snake eventually leaves him, Abbey discovers it one last time a month later, engaged in what seems to be a mating dance with another snake. On all fours, Abbey sneaks up on the two "lovers," imagining the "passion" in their strange "ballet." They see Abbey and chase him off, and Abbey chides himself for intruding.

The snake's departure acknowledges the reality that animals and human beings aren't exactly the same creatures. But Abbey's words when he finds the snake again—imagining the creature's romantic emotion ("love" and "passion") and artistic cultivation ("ballet")—confirms that he sees aspects of himself in animals.

As Abbey ruminates on the "sympathy" and "mutual aid" of these snakes, he stops himself in the midst of his human-centric thinking. He reminds himself that the language of human beings cannot be applied to the natural world; human and animal realms are completely different. And yet, the snakes' emotions are obvious—Abbey thinks that to deny this is the same as a Muslim denying that women have souls. Coyotes, dolphins, and all animals on Earth have a mystic truth to their actions and language. Though inaccessible to Abbey, this language is nonetheless real. He quotes a couplet which praises animals for not complaining or "weep[ing] for their sins." Though human beings often claim equality only among one another, Abbey concludes that all living things on Earth are kindred.

Abbey's argument that human beings and animals are equals becomes more complicated in this scene, as the snakes probably don't have human feelings ("sympathy," "mutual aid"). To suggest that they do might be to distort reality, to tell lies about nature. Abbey warns, as he does elsewhere, about the power of language to misrepresent the world. In this way, language poses a paradoxical threat to Abbey's deep desire to bond with nature. By reading human emotions in nonhuman animals—even in pro-animal poetry like Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," quoted here—one inadvertently becomes even further removed from it.

CLIFFROSE AND BAYONETS

On May 1, Abbey admires a colorful sunrise and a wind storm. He pins a red bandana to the pole from which he's hung Chinese bells, and then he raises the American flag at the nearby entrance station he's supposed to man. He declares himself impartial and notes that he wishes either good fortune or damnation on both America and China, depending upon his mood.

Red symbolizes the People's Republic of China, a longstanding Cold War enemy of the U.S. By mixing a symbol of communism (the bandana) with the American flag, Abbey exempts himself from allegiance with either side. Instead, he stands apart from both, hinting that the tensions between them are arrogant, silly, and hopelessly irrelevant to a life in nature.

Abbey steps out around his trailer and surveys the plant life: first, he notes the cliffrose, a prickly shrub with yellow, rose-like blooms. Struck by them, he alters a couplet of A. E. Houseman to praise the plant. To justify doing so, he quotes Robinson Jeffers, who complained that "poets lie too much." Though the cliffrose flowers are pretty, Abbey thinks that the cactus blossom is the most beautiful in the desert because of its rarity and the contrasting harshness of the cactus's needles. Beauty is not a competition, however; all flowers are equal as long as they are wild rather than domesticated.

Here, Abbey addresses his outspoken preference for poetry but adds a cautionary note. By quoting A. E. Housman's poem on cherry trees, he suggests that poetry is an ideal expression of reality. But poets often fabricate truth—as Jeffers admits. So by altering Housman's poem so that it describes the cliffrose bush, Abbey implies that he's committed to the facts of his own experience. In this way, Abbey straddles two seemingly conflicted modes of language: evocative communication and factual reporting.

Next, Abbey thinks that the yucca—a "solitaire" native to New Mexico and the Grand Canyon—is worth noting for the dangerous bayonet quality of its leaves and the dramatic appearance of its tall flower. It's a special blossom because it's pollinated by moth. The desert is especially wondrous because its plants are spaced so far apart, giving the impression of infinite vastness. Abbey studies more flowers on his belly, in the sand, "as a snake." Walking back to the trailer, he passes a colony of ants, selfish little creatures which he hates.

The world "solitaire" is telling here: originally French for "solitary," when used as a noun in English the word becomes "loner." As the title of his book, the term "desert solitaire" describes Abbey himself—a loner in the wilderness. So, by using this same word to describe the spiky yucca, Abbey connects himself to this plant, suggesting that they share something in common. This sly wordplay contributes to the sense that Abbey is deepening his bond to nature—not just to animals (Abbey crawls "like a snake" here) but to plants and the landscape as well. (Though a yucca is a succulent, not a cactus, its spikiness makes it worth noting that Abbey's friends in real life called him "Cactus Ed," an homage to his temper and political outrage.)

A 300-year-old **juniper** near Abbey's trailer, an "ancient grandmother," is his favorite. Abbey has been watching it for a month, hoping—though failing—to connect to the tree's essence, to "whatever falls beyond." He and the tree are "[t]wo living things on the same earth," and they contact each other without language. Its unchanging posture frustrates Abbey, who thinks it might be insane and desperate for liberation.

Here, Abbey singles out the juniper tree, his foremost symbol in the book: first he humanizes it, calling it a grandmother and suggesting that he and it are just "two living things" coexisting and communicating. In this way, the juniper—like the yucca just before it—illustrates that human beings are equal to their environment. In another way, by trying to use the tree as a portal to the "beyond," Abbey illustrates his hopeless desire to penetrate the surfaces of lived experience into an underlying reality. It's also significant that the tree seems to want liberation. Abbey's attunement here to imagined feelings in the earth suggests that human beings—also in need of liberation—are inseparable from their environment.

The sand sage is also nearby, and the pinion pine, a victim of porcupine infestation. Abbey lists a variety of thistles and shrubs and notes the datura flower, in which Native Americans have discovered a hallucinatory chemical, a discovery that leads Abbey to conclude that modern science is inferior to "empirical logic."

The phrase "empirical logic" means basic, everyday observation. Abbey's preference for this method over science as a means to learn about the world echoes the conclusion that he'll soon reach about reality: although one can't access a deeper realm than sight and touch, the five senses are a good enough measure of the world.

After his breakfast of bacon and eggs, Abbey begins his ranger duties. No tourists show up during his shift at the welcome station, so he embarks on his daily rounds, beginning with Balanced Rock, a huge, dangling, 3,500-ton formation that may fall onto the **road** at any time. Passing deer tracks, Abbey laments the fact that human endangerment of the deer's natural predators has allowed the deer population to multiply unnaturally. While cleaning public bathrooms at the Double Arch campground, Abbey notes black widow spiders and other lethal creatures. The spiders and deer prompt his reflections on the benefits of natural predators. He concludes that humanity needs more coyotes and mountain lions, not more domesticated cattle. A fawn appears during these thoughts; Abbey demands to "talk" with it, but it runs away.

Abbey's first encounter with the area's famous rock formations is impressive. Three thousand five hundred tons is unimaginably heavy—a fact that's meant to instill readers with a sense of awe. It's this feeling of wonder that will soon lead Abbey—and, he hopes, his readers as well—into the belief that nature is worth worshipping. Additionally, Abbey's desire to "talk" to the deer is a comically useless engagement between a human and an animal, but "talk" is nonetheless a word that suggests Abbey's deep desire to commune with his environment.


While returning to the campground, Abbey spots a hare. In an experiment, he hurls a rock at it. To his astonishment, his aim is true, and the "little bastard" lies dead. Abbey ruminates on what he's done, deciding that killing a rabbit mean's he's no longer isolated from nature. Having participated in the desert's unforgiving cycle of life and death, he now feels "kindred" with the animals around him. He continues on, feeling overjoyed with himself and innocent of wrongdoing.

By entering the timeless animal cycle of life and death, Abbey argues here that he's won a deeper connection to the environment—though killing a rabbit (and especially calling it a "little bastard") is certainly an odd way to prove it. Whether or not readers are convinced, Abbey feels an undeniable transference of energy from his victim to himself. The deed paradoxically confirms his feeling that animals are his "kindred"—a word he uses elsewhere to express the same concept.

The next stop on his rounds is Turnbow Cabin, the former hideaway of a consumptive outcast from the city. The cabin, long out of use, is a strange human ruin in an otherwise unpopulated landscape, now infested with black widows. Abbey examines its crude construction: uneven **juniper** logs, wide foundation cracks, and a sagging thatch roof.

Turnbow's cabin introduces the idea of city dwellers becoming refugees with the desert. Although Abbey sympathizes with Turnbow's instinct, the ruined cabin strikes him as totally out of place in nature. For Abbey, any human-made structure in the wilderness is a form of development, even if it's made of his beloved juniper—he believes that the wilderness ought to stay untouched. In building even a modest cabin, Turnbow brought with him a vestige of the very city he sought to escape.


After Turnbow Cabin, Abbey drives on to Delicate Arch, an impressive rock formation that attracts many tourists. The pathway to the Arch is noticeably worn by foot traffic. Once he arrives at the formation, he ruminates on the various ways one can look at it: the rock itself looks like a pair of cowboy chaps, or a fish's fin, or an engagement ring. More than appearing differently, it will hold different significance for different people: Midwesterners find God in it, while geologists see only nature's uniformity. For Abbey personally, Delicate Arch is important for its startling rarity—a monument as strange and huge as this must awaken one's sense of wonder. It reminds him that "*out there* is a different world," and that to admire "things-in-themselves" is a marvelous and adventurous activity.

As with the juniper, the strangeness of the rock arches lead Abbey into a conflict about the nature of reality. On one hand, the fact that Delicate Arch appears different to everyone proves that its objective appearance (i.e., what the rock really *looks like) is impossible to discover. On the other hand, the rock's obvious strangeness and majesty suggest to Abbey that one might be able to access this "*out there*" reality through prolonged meditation. "Things-in-themselves" is a term from the philosopher Immanuel Kant, who believed that people can only see the surfaces of things, not the essence of things themselves. Abbey uses this term to suggest that even if we can't access this elusive, underlying reality, the surfaces of things like Delicate Arch are wonderful enough.*

Abbey continues on his rounds to less impressive features: Salt Valley, the sculptural Devil's Garden, and Skyline Arch, a massive hole in a rock wall. In 1940, a chunk fell out, creating the current formation—though only animals were around to witness the event. Abbey removes some litter, laments some graffiti on a stone wall, and reminds himself that he has been entirely alone today. Back at the trailer, he watches colors change in the sky at dusk and notes his "private" **juniper** standing alone. The yucca's bayonet leaves change color and lose definition. Checking wind gauges at the weather station, Abbey realizes that the harsh wind is dying down, a sure sign of summer.

The fact that colors change so quickly in the desert light—changing the appearances of rocks and plants in minutes—is another piece of evidence that the underlying reality behind the visible realm is difficult—maybe impossible—to access. The graffiti is a symbol for the presence of others, though the artists may be long gone. The sight of graffiti makes Abbey both lonesome and frustrated with people's desire to vandalize. This is an early sign that extended isolation makes people contend with conflicting feelings toward humanity.

POLEMIC: INDUSTRIAL TOURISM AND THE NATIONAL PARKS

Recalling the benefits of nature and his decent pay, Abbey declares that he likes his job. Best of all is the kind of self-discovery that comes with remoteness, a feeling that is impossible to name. He notes his simple ranger duties, his easy schedule (having days off in the middle of the week), and his predictable banter with the few tourists that show up. He especially likes Monday, a day that promises no tourists and plenty of solitude.

Abbey enjoys what he learns about himself in solitude, and he especially enjoys it when others aren't around to bug him. By placing the ideas of self-discovery and isolation from people side by side, Abbey suggests that they go together: to discover oneself, one needs to distance oneself from others.

On Abbey's two days off, he goes into town for food and recreation. Compared to the silent desert, the tiny town of Moab (population 5,500) seems bustling and impressive to him. He tends to meet friendly uranium miners in Moab's bars, not depressed businessmen like one would meet in bars in big cities. The locals here are friendly for several reasons: physical labor makes people happier, mining pays well and requires self-confidence, the alcohol in Utah is too weak to allow drunken fighting, and solitary work makes people more eager for company on their days off. Abbey sometimes plays pool with Viviano Jacquez, a cowboy.

Immediately after insulting tourists, Abbey stresses that he does *need others' company. But he's careful to stress the necessary ratio of isolation to company: five days alone, two days with others. It's a ratio that more or less holds up as he polishes this into a political argument about the social benefit of wilderness. It's also notable that the Moabites are easier to get along with than city dwellers, which Abbey attributes to the hard work and self-reliance inherent to solitary life in the desert.*

One could live this way forever, but something threatens this happy routine of desert solitude and occasional socializing: progress. Though the unpaved **roads** have kept the desert serene until now, as Merle McRae and Floyd Bence warned, development is coming. One evening, while watching the dusk from his stoop and enjoying a "ritual" **juniper** fire, Abbey watches a jeep pull up to his trailer. Excited to fine for unauthorized motoring, Abbey is dismayed to learn the passengers are engineers with the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads. They approach him for fresh water and describe the new road to the Arches they've been hired to survey. It might cost a million dollars, enough to fund 10 park rangers for 10 years. To Abbey's horror, the men assure him the new road could increase tourism thirtyfold.

This passage is the fateful encounter with industrial development that was foreshadowed in Abbey's introduction. The instrument of the engineer's disruption is a paved highway, Abbey's symbol of artificial, lazy, capitalist America. It's also significant that the exact moment when these men intrudes upon Abbey's peace—during his "ritual" burning of juniper. Here, the juniper tree continues to help Abbey illustrate nature's religious aspect. This symbol also clashes significantly with the road's symbolism. The fact that capitalism (the highway) interrupts a sacred religious rite (the juniper) shows Abbey's belief that the only proper way to worship nature's divinity is to do so in isolation. Roads, built to make transportation easy for large groups of people, will make such rituals impossible.

Abbey jumps ahead in time, 10 years after these events, to confirm that the planned **road** indeed appeared and overpopulated the desert with tourists. Cars, motorcycles, house trailers, pavement, and electricity are now regular staples of the Arches National Monument. Obsessed with electric toothbrushes, Coke machines, and modern bathrooms, the hordes of new tourists comprise a wave of "Industrial Tourism."

Throughout the book, the 1967 Abbey is able to make political arguments based on both the experiences of 1956 Abbey and on the sad development that's occurred in the intervening decade. Because the 1956 Abbey learned so much about himself in isolation, the 1967 Abbey feels justified in protesting Industrial Tourism, which he believes is the strongest threat to future generations' experience of this solitary introspection.

The industrial development of Arches is only one example of a larger disappearance of America's national parks. For instance, the major natural attractions of Canyonlands National Park are accessible by foot, but the Park Service plans to connect them with paved highways. The rim of the Grand Canyon has been defaced with asphalt parking lots. At Navajo National Monument, the "old magic" has been destroyed by pavement. Zion and Capitol National Parks and Lee's Ferry, where tourists are "herded" into asphalt campgrounds, have all suffered new highways, **roads**, and industrial development. The Wilderness Preservation Act, enacted to prevent this damage, has done nothing to stop the spoilage of these natural landscapes. Only citizens, through protest, can halt the progress of industry.

The loss of "old magic" furthers Abbey's argument that industrialization and overpopulation threaten the religious experience of nature. Each of these cases of park spoilage involves pavement, Abbey's symbolic enemy. Since pavement's purpose is to transport people, it spoils humanity's chance at solitary escape, thereby crowding them together and depriving them of their liberties. Abbey's specific complaint about the Wilderness Preservation Act (1964), signed by President Johnson, is also significant. The pedantic debates of government officials, as Abbey will soon point out, have neutered the act's wording—yet another way in which language has separated people from nature.

Though some may argue that accessibility increases the value of national parks, Abbey thinks that untouched natural wilderness is actually more important to civilization. He believes that it's a government duty to preserve what's left. Though Park Service vows to "provide for the enjoyment" and leave nature "unimpaired for future generations," it's comprised of two main factions: Developers (those who want to add highways and electricity to the parks) and Preservers (those who argue that nature can only be enjoyed away from modern technology). Developers (the majority) focus on the "enjoyment" part of the Park Service's vow, while the minority Preservers fixate on the "unimpaired" part.

Abbey explicates the exact wording of the doomed Wilderness Preservation Act. Opposing governmental factions—environmentalists on one side, and capitalists on the other—quibble over exactly what the document says. A word as harmless as "enjoyment" is gravely abused by capitalists (Developers) in order to abuse the parks and make quick money. Though the act (which Abbey quotes, for proof) is famously clear-worded, language fails to communicate its meaning even here. This brings Abbey's personal struggle with words into a broader political context.

The major contention between the two factions is accessibility: **roads**, highways, and so on. Developers say that roads will ensure future enjoyment, while Preservers argue that cars ruin the effect of untouched nature. Plenty of monuments—even Mt. Everest—are perfectly accessible by foot or horse, so more roads aren't needed in the parks.

Abbey sides decisively with the Preservers, believing that if one is determined enough, roads are irrelevant to transportation. Earlier, with the rangers Merle McRae and Floyd Bence, Abbey made a point of noting that the dirt paths of Arches were passable. Here, by defeating the Developers' argument with his comparison to Everest, Abbey further highlights their abuse of the Wilderness Preservation Act's simple wording.

But this logic doesn't work in real life, as Abbey notes that most tourists are too lazy to leave their cars. This laziness allows Industrial Tourism to prey on their dependence: because tourists think they need cars, people will say that parks need **roads**. And because roads require lots of money, commerce, in turn, thrives on the exploitation of parks. Developing a park generates so much money that the government protects the urge to develop more than it protects the wilderness itself. At the end of this chain, the Park Service—though it exists to protect wilderness—allows industry to ravage its own land under the false impression that roads will improve tourists' experience and generate attendance.

In keeping with the symbol of roads as an irrelevant excess, Abbey turns to cars. From this scene, cars will function as a kind of bubble—a miniature replica of industrialized society that separates people from nature. In attacking cars, Abbey argues that it's not good enough to drive to the parks. One must get out, hike, and feel the elements. Only then can one feel the true isolation that he deems necessary to society.

Abbey believes that the tourists themselves are complicit in this tragedy, working hard to endure traffic jams, parking fees, discomfort in their sweaty cars, maintenance fees, and unimaginable crowds. Abbey thinks that the solution to the tragedy of park development is to start at the beginning of this chain: to separate tourists from their beloved automobiles. Only then they will discover the actual value of "Mother Earth."

Pushing this comparison of cars with industrialized society, Abbey highlights the many difficulties that come with driving a car cross-country to see the parks. Nature, the obvious choice, is removed from annoyances like parking tickets and traffic. His use of the phrase "Mother Earth," a classic term of the Hippie era, stresses the life-giving and religious aspects of nature.


Population growth, which leads to increased tourism, is the major, long-term obstacle to this goal. Aside from solving this, Abbey lists three short-term solutions: first, ban cars in national parks. Since cars aren't allowed into cathedrals, art museums, and other protected locations, why are they allowed in the "holy places" of parks? Instead, the Park Service should build parking lots on the outskirts of natural wilderness, where tourists will be made to leave their vehicles. From there, have them hike, bicycle, or ride horseback into nature, while government shuttles transport their stuff. As for children, the elderly, and the disabled: let them take the baggage shuttles. On foot, tourists will see and feel more in one mile than a driver can in a hundred.

Abbey continues the conflict of capitalism and religion into his proposed solutions to the problem of park development. In his view, the automobile, which separates humanity from nature even if the vehicle is driven into a park, and he urges mandatory hiking in the parks to combat this separation. He also believes that the holiness of nature is endangered by roads, cars, and the crowds they bring. To stress the urgency of protecting nature, Abbey compares the desert to a cathedral, to the typical "holy places" recognized by society. If people wouldn't drive cars there, Abbey reasons, why would they drive cars in a sacred desert?


Second, Abbey believes there should be no new construction of highways into national parks. The Park Service should repurpose existing paved **roads** for the proposed bicycles and preserve the unpaved roads for hikers. If needed, install emergency shelters and water supplies along these paths. Once "liberated" from cars and uncrowded, tourists will feel that the parks are larger than they really are. This is one cheap and easy way for the government to maximize the size of its wilderness.

This is Abbey's strongest argument about human rights, and "liberated" is the key verb. Cars—like cities and all industrialized societies—separate people from nature and ultimately oppress them. To renounce cities—even temporarily—restores a fundamental sense of freedom. This renunciation, represented symbolically by a tourist stepping out of a car and into the park, is a crucial step in Abbey's broader argument that nature's liberating qualities are essential to society.

Third, Abbey thinks that the Park Service should employ more rangers in the field. Once freed from indoor desk work, rangers will become happier, be less jealous of each other, and be kinder to their bosses. With the proposed ban on cars, tourists on foot will need more leaders in the wilderness—a job for which rangers should be fully qualified.

Just as Abbey's hypothetical tourists become liberated once they leave their cars, these imaginary rangers find a new kindness toward one another once they're forced out of their sterile offices into the sun. This imaginary transformation brings home the idea that solitary time in nature makes people fundamentally better in society.

Some will argue that it's too late to divorce Americans from their commercial lifestyles, but Abbey questions how can they be sure unless they try. Millions of Americans secretly want such an adventure, and the money saved on **roads** could finance this. Since banning cars would violently clash with the current addiction to technology and commerce, why not erect an enormous neon Smokey the Bear billboard at the entrance to each park? Such signs would could feature fireworks, Byzantine phallic symbols, and prayer wheels, announcing the new prohibition on cars.

Abbey's goofy imagination is on full display with this cartoon billboard. But the religious icons—the Tibetan Buddhist prayer wheel and what is likely the Christogram (an early Byzantine cross)—bring a real-life element of inclusion to Abbey's parody. By welcoming all human beings from every culture to his utopian dream park, Abbey stresses that his prescriptions against cars and technology are global, not necessarily limited to Utah or America. This makes his argument against roads a more urgently political matter.


Jumping back in time to the thirsty engineers, Abbey contemplates whether human beings are "herd animal[s]." He refuses to believe it. He wishes that modern people respected space as much as time, musing that people ought to build their houses as far apart as they can reasonably travel. Abbey quotes a Proverb on keeping distance from one's neighbor, "lest he grow weary of thee." Turning back to the quiet evening and the full moon, he describes the distant rocks with a quote from Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*: "pinnacled dim in the intense inane." After a while, Abbey retraces the path of the departed jeep, pulling up and hiding the surveyors' stakes as he goes.

"Herd animals" is a phrase worth noting: Abbey uses it to argue that human beings, unlike cattle, need solitude from one another in order to thrive. He's just argued how capitalism threatens this solitude, and here he drives it home by concluding the chapter with his quiet moment in the desert. Despite his disdain for Christianity, Abbey opens this argument to all humanity—not just like-minded environmentalists—by quoting the Bible. The Shelley quote comes from a play about Prometheus, the Greek hero who stole fire from the gods, which deals with the conflicting forces of pride and freedom. Those two ideas that through Abbey's contemplation here, on the arrogance of developers and the sense of individual empowerment they seek to destroy. Prometheus will appear again in Abbey's book, in a later commentary on human arrogance.


ROCKS

Abbey catalogs some of the rocks of his area, delighting in their strange scientific names. He thinks that Chalcedony and quartzite are especially beautiful. Native American arrowheads lie around too—evidence of ancient civilization. Every rock in a national park is protected by law; tourists can't remove them. Abbey thinks this is fair, since rocks were placed both by "God himself" and by "the economy of Nature." Petrified wood, also beautiful, fills the nearby reserves and the Petrified Forest National Park. Essentially "desert jewelry," the wood in the park has been pressurized into rainbow-colored rock. This pressurization takes such a long time that one is reminded that the earth will outlast human beings.

Specific mineralogical names in this section fascinate Abbey, who's always concerned with accurate language. These minerals also help illustrate the desert's divinity. Two phrases reveal this: "God himself" clearly suggests that a supreme being has planned the desert to its liking. But "the economy of nature" helps specify exactly what kind of supreme being this might be. "Economy," in this case, connotates careful management rather than a financial market. So the idea that the earth (an inanimate force) can arrange itself autonomously (almost as a sentient being) illustrates Abbey's opinion of nature as a supreme, perfect, and self-governing entity. As with Benjamin Franklin's "Nature's God" in the Declaration of Independence—a political work that Abbey greatly admires—this crafty phrasing suggests that the natural order of the universe is more complete, awe-inspiring, and morally worthy than the Christian belief system. Abbey echoes this expression of divinity when he gawks at the delightful wood "jewelry"—a symbol of the earth's god-like longevity and unfathomable power.

The most important rock deposit is uranium: in the 1940s, after America's nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Atomic Energy Commission began offering rewards for the discovery of uranium deposits. Some people became rich this way. For example, Charles Steen made one such fortune with a mine in Colorado after great effort. And Vernon Pick, after nearly dying in the attempt, made his fortune too. But the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), a powerful group, made the largest discoveries by itself, often outpacing independent prospectors.

In stark contrast to the awe-inspiring minerals above, uranium—while inherently interesting—has a sad, capitalistic fate thanks to the military-industrial complex . Though Abbey never comes down firm on a moral judgment of the horrific nuclear bombings of Japan (a technology made possible by Utah's uranium) readers are aware that he despises state sponsored war. Thus, the implication here is that both the 1945 bombings and the desire to mine uranium stem from the same basic human arrogance.

The Atomic Energy Commission did not deter everyone, however, as they upped their reward to $10,000, prompting wild and dangerous explorations for uranium. Once, two prospectors nearly drowned in the uncharted Cataract Canyon and nearly died trying to return to civilization from their botched mission. A page from the explorer John Wesley Powell's diary illustrates how dangerous Cataract is: in 1869, Powell describes enormous whirlpools and rapids from a viewpoint in the neighboring canyon. Even at night, the white rapids are so high—15 feet—as to create their own source of light. The unfortunate uranium prospectors after Powell begged that the area be closed to human access.

Abbey introduces his hero John Wesley Powell here, a historical figure who will reappear throughout the book as a guardian angel of Abbey's desert explorations. Many of the Powell excerpts Abbey includes focus on humanity's weakness in the face of nature—a theme that helps drive Abbey's arguments that nature inspires a religious awe and that it commands human beings to be humbler. The humbling aspects of Earth's power and danger are also on full display here; Powell's description serves as a retrospective warning against the greed of uranium prospectors.

However, the most infamous prospector in Moab was Alfred T. Husk of Texas—though he may be a myth. Years ago, Husk allegedly uprooted his family and mortgaged his farm to try his luck with AEC's uranium scheme in Utah. Setting up his trailer home in Moab, he immediately goes into town and meets Charles Graham, a businessman who impresses him with his pilot's license.

Here, Abbey inserts a strange and likely fictional account in the middle of his factual memoir. Husk will serve a simple cautionary role against humanity's desire to pillage and develop the earth for financial gain. The reader already sees the corrosive effects of development here, with the villain Graham, who flashes a symbol of technology in order to lure Husk into trusting him. Like road-builders and car-drivers, in Abbey's opinion, Graham's license is a red flag of greed and arrogance.

After a talk about Husk's ambitions, Graham sells him a share of some promising territory he owns in the distant canyons surrounding the San Rafael River. Excited by their partnership, Husk brings Graham home, introducing him to his young wife and his children. After the two men survey the land from the air, Husk, eager to make his fortune, immediately takes his 11-year-old son Billy-Joe out for his first exploratory expedition of the territory in question.

It's important that Abbey includes Billy-Joe here: he doesn't have a speaking role, but the details that surround him are significant. He will become a counterbalance to his father's greed, arriving at his own, contrasting conclusions about the power of nature.

In Husk's absence, Graham visits his trailer, spies on the half-dressed Mrs. Husk, and waits to meet her. Meanwhile, Husk and Billy-Joe spend the whole summer probing the San Rafael Swell for uranium. Finding shade under **junipers** as they toil along beneath the boiling summer sun, they collect rock specimens to be tested back in Moab. Every two weeks, they return to Moab for supplies and for encouragement from Graham. Though the rock samples mostly test negative, Graham promises Husk that he'll soon be driving a Cadillac. As Husk's uranium obsession takes over his life, his wife grows distant from him during his visits home.

Husk's extended absences in the Canyonlands invite several misfortunes—each, in Abbey's eyes, the just consequence of greed. Here, Abbey shows readers the first result: the loss of his wife's love. He implies that Graham swoops in to steal the young Mrs. Husk while her husband frantically searches for the lucrative ore. The basic lesson from Graham's predation is that mistreating the earth will alienate people from one another. In Husk's case, his extended absence is what separates him from his wife. Unlike Abbey, who escapes into the wilderness temporarily, in order to learn how to better orient himself in society, Husk enters nature for the exact opposite reasons—for pure greed—and is paying for it.

One afternoon, after examining his pistol in his office, Graham pockets the gun and takes a helicopter into the wilds to find Husk. He chances upon Husk and Billy-Joe huddled around a **juniper** fire on a ridge. As the helicopter lands, the wind it generates coats their dinner in sand and blows off Billy-Joe's straw hat. After stepping off the helicopter, Graham offers Husk a flask of whiskey as they engage in a conversation that begins peacefully but soon escalates. Billy-Joe doesn't understand the details, but he hears Graham say something about Mrs. Husk. Husk becomes enraged and attacks him, jumping through the flames of the juniper fire. Graham draws his pistol and shoots Husk in the stomach.

The villainous Graham, who once brandished a pilot's license, now handles a gun. For Abbey, the difference between the two objects—symbolically, between technology and violence—is not vast. Readers have seen this equation earlier, when Abbey compared paved roads to governmental tyranny. Billy-Joe's straw hat is also significant—Abbey will echo the garment later to draw character parallels to himself. The way in which Abbey tells the story of this altercation, through the naïve eyes of the young boy, is also noteworthy: suddenly, Billy-Joe is the subject of the story. The fact that the men's fight is told from his perspective—with a child's weak grasp on the concept of infidelity—is a hint that his story will become the important one.

Terrified, Billy-Joe flees down into the canyon, pursued by Graham until the boy trips and rolls out of sight, breaking a shoulder. Having lost Billy-Joe, Graham returns to Husk at the top of the cliff and kills him. In an attempt to hide the evidence, Graham opens the door to Husk's truck and loads Husk's corpse inside. Graham starts to push it off the canyon cliff, but as speed picks up, he gets himself locked in the cab of the truck. Unable to brake and trapped inside, Graham sails off the cliff along with the dead Husk. As the truck spins through the air, Graham sees the stars and "tranquil moon" come into view.

Abbey's moral about greed—at first applying only to the overzealous Husk—now comes full-circle for Graham, who was equally greedy. Capitalist exploitation of the earth, Abbey concludes, is arrogant and harmful to everyone involved. Imbedded in this moral is a note about the undeniable wonder of nature and the universe. Even as the villain plunges to his death, the moon's tranquility is unavoidable. This suggests Abbey's view that the universe, an infinite and awe-inspiring presence, will outlast humanity.


In the morning, ravaged and ill, Billy-Joe rouses and attempts the long descent back to civilization. He fashions a shred of shirt into a sling. When a willow snags him, he removes the rest of shirt to "free" himself. Following deer prints, he finds a patch of mud, wades through it on his belly, and drinks. Stopping to eat berries and white flowers, he becomes dizzy and begins to hallucinate. The sand suddenly seems alive, and the rock walls surrounding him begin to breathe and glow. A nearby bush seems to catch fire. Though afraid at first, Billy-Joe feels the pain leave his body instantly. Suddenly it's night, and when the stars come out they seem to be "struggling to escape." He passes the destroyed truck at the foot of the cliff, with his father and Graham's charred corpses, but he doesn't notice them. The ravens watch him with satisfaction.

Here, readers leave the morality tale of humanity's greed versus Earth's power, entering a more nuanced one about wilderness and personal discovery. The burning bush is the most important image here, as it references Moses's revelation in the Old Testament. By suggesting this miraculous phenomenon is actually a naturally occurring hallucination, Abbey argues controversially that Christians mistake the environment for evidence of a false supernatural being. Second, the fact that Billy-Joe removes his shirt and craves "free[dom]" echoes the behavior of Abbey, who writes passionately of liberty and likes to be naked in nature. Third, when the boy sees the stars "struggling to escape," readers recall Abbey's earlier suggestion that his favorite juniper yearns for freedom. With these small parallels, Abbey suggests that anyone, even an uneducated and unspeaking child, can arrive at his own discoveries in the book: the liberating, divine, and sentient qualities of Earth.



After another night in the wilderness, Billy-Joe continues on toward a canyon stream. He crawls into the pleasant cavity of a cottonwood tree trunk. Its roots are exposed, and Billy-Joe lets his feet dangle among them in the cooling water. But a dramatic and colorful flash flood suddenly uproots the tree—with a half-conscious Billy-Joe inside—and sends it afloat down the canyon. He clings, "leeched," to the tree.

By mingling his feet with the tree's roots—reviving himself as a plant does—Billy-Joe illustrates a perfect harmony of humanity with plant life. That the boy is "leeched" to the tree—more like a bug than a human—suggests a similar kinship between human beings and insects. This all contributes to Abbey's argument that human beings are one with the earth, equal—not superior—to plants or animals. The boy's refuge in a tree trunk, and the insect language, will reappear with Abbey later, cementing the two characters as parallel.

Since the barely-conscious Billy-Joe can't account for time, the days in the tree trunk begin to pass as if in a dream. The tree becomes the only thing he knows: he lies cradled in it, bobbing in the widening stream, gradually starving and slipping in and out of consciousness. Finally, the sun bakes almost to death, and a ferryman discovers his body, too far gone to be resuscitated at the hospital.

Just as Abbey's watch became useless when he arrived at Arches, so too does Billy-Joe lose the human conception of time. Further, the tree occupies the boy's every thought, suggesting an intense and complete mental or spiritual bond. These details suggest a total absorption into the natural world, the kind of "brutal mysticism" that Abbey has been desperately trying to achieve.

Mrs. Husk, deprived of her husband, her son, and her lover, moves back to Texas. A year later, a lawyer tracks her down to buy Husk's share of the land he was surveying, a land ownership that has now fallen to Mrs. Husk. The land has been found to be rich in uranium. He is reluctant to negotiate, offering only $4,500, and reveals that he works for the United States Air Force. Obstinate and cynical, however, Mrs. Husk only increases her demands, eventually settling at $100,000.

Mrs. Husk's sudden fortune suggests an ironic, real-life truth about money: that its rewards can be bestowed randomly, unpredictably, and without equitable reward for hard work. In short, devoting one's life for financial gain, as Alfred Husk did, can totally backfire. By contrasts, Billy-Joe's spiritual rewards (though short-lived and tragic), were spiritual and nonmaterial, and so entirely his own. The difference here—between material and spiritual rewards—reflects Abbey's fierce preference for personal growth and freedom over wealth or status.

COWBOYS AND INDIANS

In the hot and "holy" light of June, Abbey spends a day helping a local rancher Roy Scobie round up his cows. Scobie is a gentle old man but has a strong fear of dying of a heart attack out on the range. Though Abbey is too young to know much about this fear, he feels that dying in nature is much better than dying in a sterilized hospital.

The "holy" sunlight is a clear indication of nature's divinity, which Abbey extends to his thoughts on death. To die outside, for Abbey, would be a direct and beautiful confrontation of nature—a spiritual experience in a realm where human beings naturally belong. Scobie's fear of dying, by contrast, fails to recognize this truth, further highlighting Abbey's view that human obsessions (like mortality) stem from a misplaced sense of superiority.

Along with the Basque cowherd, Viviano Jacquez, Scobie and Abbey set out in the morning on horseback and start wrangling cattle. Since the ground is too hard for fences, the men start wrangling all cattle in sight; they intend to divvy them up later by their brands, ranchers' unique signatures. The lack of fences means that ranchers must cooperate and use the honor system.

The cow branding symbolizes desert ranchers' cooperative instincts. Because the earth is so unforgiving here—too hard to accept fence posts—ranchers must use a mutual honor system to make their living. This is a perfect example of the generosity and effectiveness that comes from living off the earth, supporting Abbey's argument that a life in nature ultimately improves democratic societies.

As the men ride along and swat at flies, Abbey considers Jacquez, an immigrant from Spain whose limited English consists mainly of swear words. Though a capable cowboy who enjoys his work, he is lazy, has no sense of time, and complains to everyone who will listen. Worst of all is the prejudice he suffers from local Moabites: though Jacquez is European, he's the victim of racism when he goes to town. This causes him to resent not only the minority groups with which the locals confuse him (Mexican, Native American, and African American) but also to resent his own heritage.

Though Abbey thinks highly of the locals, their racism toward Jacquez contrasts sharply with Abbey's humbling experiences in the desert, which have led him to the conclusion that everyone (and everything) is equal. Jacquez's self-resentment is a sad side effect of this broader human arrogance, and the secondary hatred of African Americans would have been an especially poignant illustration at the time Abbey was writing—in the wake of the Civil Rights Act and mere months before Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination, both of which prompted global awareness of black rights.

As the sun grows hotter into the afternoon, Abbey grows weak, hungry, and thirsty. The other men, however, seem unfazed as they ride on. Stopping at a nearby patch of shade, Scobie opens up about his fear of death, a neighbor near his age having suddenly died of cardiac arrest while picking peaches. Scobie drifts into thought. He seems troubled beyond the simple fear of death: once, while staying at his ranch, Abbey caught him sleepwalking with a revolver in his hand, claiming to be protecting his chickens (an animal he didn't even own). Furthermore, Scobie is stingy, using half-broken equipment and grossly underpaying and underfeeding his employees in the attempt to save money. Abbey could help relieve his fear by quoting philosophers, like Sophocles, who claim that earthly life is a mere shadow, but he decides that this would be worthless and lets Scobie live his own life.

Scobie's obsession with money is just as bad as his fear of mortality. This obsession is a casualty of capitalist development, as readers will soon see, and is yet another sad effect of human arrogance. Abbey's attitude toward Scobie—first frustration, then resignation—says a lot for Abbey's attitude toward language. Trained in philosophy, Abbey has an arsenal of writers (mainly Ancient Greeks) who once hoped to dispel the fear of death as irrational. But that Abbey gives up on these writers before even trying to comfort Scobie speaks to the ultimate uselessness of this philosophy: words, it turns out, are no match for human pain. This sad recognition contributes to Abbey's broader argument about the uselessness of his own prose in trying to capture the desert.

Breaking their silent contemplation, Scobie urges the group forward. They saddle back up and ride on through more hot canyons, in search of cattle. As Abbey kicks a stubborn cow into action, he contemplates the "slow, ponderous dirge" of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony. Eventually, the men come across a patch of quicksand. They shuttle one cow across safely, but the next one gets stuck. The men dismount, rope the cow's neck, and attempt to pull her out with their horses. Finally, the cow breaks free and is visibly terrified, her eyes protruding and tongue discolored. Scobie remarks on the cow's monetary value while Jacquez curses at the animal.

Here, Abbey introduces music to his desert ruminations. Beethoven's "slow, ponderous dirge" is the perfect match for the interminable desert heat. This scene arrives right after Abbey's dismissal of philosophers; by showing how evocative music can be, in contrast to the useless words of Sophocles, Abbey makes a strong case against language. Abbey will return to music throughout the book in his quest to describe the desert with accuracy.

After this close call, the men catch their breath and ride on with their herd. Exhausted and thirsty, Abbey lags behind Scobie and Jacquez. He stops to admire a clear stream and to refresh himself, and after the last, hot stretch, the men shuttle their cows across the highway to Scobie's truck. As the men dismount their horses, Abbey watches the horses gallop around in relief and roll on the floor. He knows how they feel. After loading up the cows, the men reward themselves with beer at the local bar, but Scobie soon grows pensive again. This frustrates Abbey, who wants Scobie to stop thinking and to accept the "wild beautiful utterly useless truth." Jacquez slips on his way to the bathroom and seems embarrassed, though the others don't acknowledge this.

Abbey's sympathy with Scobie's horses, his conviction that he can read and share their feelings, is an example of his bond with the animal kingdom. From this scene on, horses will become an important way for Abbey to illustrate this bond. The emotion he recognizes here is joy—a distinctly human trait that Abbey likes to identify in other species as evidence for his unlikely kinship. In contrast to the horses' joy, Scobie's blindness to the "wild beautiful utterly useless truth" of the natural order seems especially foolish. This memorable compound phrase captures Abbey's overwhelming sense of wonder, a feeling which the money-driven Scobie can't reach.

Jumping ahead in time, Abbey returns to Moab years later and asks about Scobie and Jacquez. He learns that in the years since his departure, Jacquez married and moved back to Spain, and Scobie died of a heart attack while hanging a picture in his new jewelry store.

Like the conclusion of the Alfred T. Husk's saga, in which Husk's unloving widow reaps the rewards of his work, Scobie's demise is an ironic reminder that death can occur at any moment. To worry about it, Abbey argues, is a useless and even capitalistic fixation on the material realm. To confront the realities of the universe—as Abbey has been doing—is a much more rewarding use of time.

COWBOYS AND INDIANS, PART II

There are times when Abbey gets lonesome in the desert, when "solitaire becomes solitary" like prison. To escape this feeling, Abbey spends more time outside his trailer than inside. This alleviates his loneliness because the trailer, the smell of butane, and the electric lights—all human-made things—remind him of Albuquerque and of other people. Avoiding these appliances altogether helps Abbey focus on himself.

Paradoxically, here Abbey compares himself to the tourists he hates so much. Stuck in their campers and RVs, they can't achieve the feeling of liberation he advocates. But, like them, Abbey is reminded of other human beings and becomes entrapped by loneliness when he's stuck in his steel government trailer. By leaving the trailer and confronting solitude in the sand, Abbey comforts himself and tells readers that a total *separation from society and industry is required in order to reap nature's rewards.*

Abbey likes to dig his toes in the sand during these moments and to contemplate "a far larger world" as the **juniper** fire burns. This gives him calmness and a sense that all of humanity blends with the distant mountains. Focusing on nature also convinces Abbey that an external world probably exists, despite the good arguments of idealist philosophers. If he threw a rock at these philosophers' heads, they would duck, proving that to feel the world is a convincing enough experience.

As before, Abbey's skin-to-sand contact with the earth reminds him of his bond with the environment. And his ritual juniper fire reminds him of the world "far larger" than his own small plot, the infinitude of nature that makes him regularly feel wonder and divinity. He's so satisfied by the world around him that he's also resolving one of his main philosophical conundrums: the "idealist" problem that true reality is inaccessible beyond the five senses. Abbey reasons here that if sight and pain seem real enough, then why worry about it? This compromise will guide his thinking about reality as the book progresses.

As the sun sets, the noise of an owl draws Abbey's attention. It's a hunting call, and Abbey tries to interpret it. The predator must feel "affection" and "fondness" for its prey, and probably vice versa—by being eaten, rabbits and mice take part in a greater cycle of nature. As Abbey imagines the emotion in the owl's call, he notices Venus in the dusk sky and quotes four lines of verse about it, which ask that it "[s]mile on our loves." Abbey notes that every last aspect of the landscape—from grass blades to flowers to mountains—forms a "unity" with him and his solitude.

This passage brings Abbey's kinship with animals to the foreground, as he imagines the intricate emotions of the creatures around him. This leads him to deeper meditation on the night sky and the inanimate earth. All three elements—cosmos, vegetable, and animal—"unit[e]" with him, suggesting that humanity is an essential and equal part of the natural world. The verse from William Blake's semi-religious ode, "To the Evening Star," contributes to the sense that nature is all-powerful and divine.

Changing the subject, Abbey contemplates Native Americans: one can find evidence of their ancient culture in this landscape and in petroglyphs (rock drawings), but the people are mostly gone. Their drawing style is remarkably in line with contemporary Western taste. The mystifying men on horseback and animal figures are hard to interpret: possibly doodles, or community notices, or religious rituals. Whatever they once meant, they now attest to the undeniable existence of the pre-Columbian indigenous people.

Native American rock drawings contribute to the sense of Earth's longevity and mystery—both essentially divine qualities for Abbey. Just as the sublime and inexplicable rock formations provoke religious sentiments in Abbey, these indecipherable but mesmerizing pieces of antiquity add to Abbey's sense that the earth is greater than human beings can reasonably comprehend.

Owing to advancements in medicine, for the first time in centuries, the Native American population is back on the rise. But this is bad for them: for instance, the Navajos are 10 times more populous than they were a century ago, meaning that they're not only disenfranchised but also overcrowded on their reservations. Abbey thinks that they are the "Negroes of the Southwest," constantly downtrodden by white culture. Their lack of English or capitalist instincts sink them deeper into poverty, demoralization, alcoholism, and "various forms of mental illness, including evangelical Protestantism."

By invoking a long history of segregation and the recent civil rights movement, Abbey draws urgent attention to the injustices of capitalist overreach in the desert, an otherwise forgotten part of the country. Abbey's comparison of Christianity with "mental illness" is also notable—though this comparison may offend some readers, this phrasing serves as an obvious sign that Abbey has other spiritual priorities and that he respects indigenous religious beliefs a great deal more than Christianity.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs (B.I.A.) has helped some Native communities, but the effect of this government assistance has been to whitewash indigenous ways of life and to overpopulate Native communities by improving medicine. Overpopulation is the greatest source of the Navajo's troubles, as it has exhausted the land on their small reservations.

In this political argument, overpopulation becomes a serious enemy to Native American communities and to humanity in general. This is a vital piece of evidence for Abbey's wider argument that people require distance in order to feel empowered and to coexist peacefully. Crammed into cities and exhausted reservations, this vital social process becomes impossible.

While their population skyrockets, capitalism forces the overcrowded and desperate Navajo to participate in middle-class America, a mode that is alien to "the liberty and dignity of his old way of life." The Navajo are individual human beings, not group "personnel," and the Navajos who do wish to join American capitalism have difficulty getting ahead in industry because the idea of private property is foreign to their culture. Their society rewards "sharing and mutual aid," not the "private interest" required by capitalism.

Here, Abbey returns to his argument that capitalist development squashes people's instinctive sympathy and democracy. Navajos perfectly illustrate the social life that Abbey aspires to: a life based on "liberty and dignity" produces an effective government of "sharing and mutual aid." This comes only from the Navajo's close relation to the earth. By emulating this harmony with nature in his own desert life, Abbey is gradually finding the same communal instincts and affections in himself. His discoveries will develop throughout the book into a broader social argument about the democratic need for solitude and nature. But the point in this scene is that capitalistic overpopulation, by destroying personal liberty, prevents a harmonious society.

However, some Navajos do benefit from the influx of money brought by industrial park tourism. But more **highways**—however lucrative they may be—ultimately demean the people further, forcing Navajos to perform for the hordes of white tourists passing through their reservations. Not all Navajos submit to this performance, however, as Abbey recalls one Navajo elder spitting at a couple of tourists who were trying to photograph him.

Roads, again, are a symbolic warning sign of capitalism's infringement on human rights. By transporting people to otherwise remote reservations, these roads spoil the organic sparseness of the Navajo reservations, depriving the inhabitants of the freedom and self-sufficiency they need in order to govern themselves.

Abbey thinks that the only way to end this vicious cycle of overpopulation, poverty, and cultural destruction is to make birth control mandatory in America. This is difficult for many readers to agree with, but all political revolutions require radical means. Until this is done, Navajos will have to forget their native culture—bringing their traditions out only for the amusement of tourists—and to absorb American crew cuts and industrial economy. This can be potentially disastrous, as with the two young Native Americans north of Moab who recently drunk-drove a Plymouth full of American commodities straight into the ditch.

Abbey's highly controversial argument for mandatory birth control is essential to understanding his view that a dense population destroys individual freedom and rights. Only through extended isolation can people feel empowered, self-reliant, and liberated in a way that will allow them to cope with others in society—and untouched wilderness is the perfect venue for this self-discovery. But if roads, cities, and industry (the result of population growth) spoil this venue, then the sense of personal freedom that supports society dies, too. The plight of the Navajos is the perfect symbol for what Abbey fears could happen to human rights on a national scale. So to mandate birth control would stifle this chain of events at its source, weakening the prime mover of the development that destroys nature.

According to Abbey, cowboys are a similar victim of industrialization in the West. Since cattle farming is largely mechanized now, what's left of their self-sufficient way of life has been commoditized by tourist culture. Most authentic cowboys have given up herding cattle. Abbey's cowboy friend Ralph Newcomb, for instance, now studies Sri Aurobindo. Leslie McKee, a rancher like Roy Scobie, had to start a makeshift bus service and act as an extra in cowboy movies. Others have sunken into poverty like the Navajos. In their place, fake cowboys now strut all over the country in the signature costume. Cowboy hats and boots once signified a real and thriving way of life, but they're now barely kept alive by people like Scobie and Viviano Jacquez. To lament this loss, Abbey quotes a song about "little rains" weeping. Cowboys and Indians, once legendary enemies, are now equally endangered by industry.

Abbey connects the Navajos' plight to his friend Roy Scobie. In the context of Abbey's argument about development, Scobie's stinginess and phobia of death seems less like silly obsessions and more like tragic casualties of industrial development. In this scene, Scobie's character becomes a victim of developers' arrogance. Rather than trying to capture this unique sadness in prose, Abbey quotes an old cowboy folk song, "The Colorado Trail," an elegy for a dead girl. By quoting verse, Abbey combines his frustration with prose with his lamentation for the loss of human freedom.

WATER

The dryness of Arches National Monument leads tourists to complain to Abbey on his ranger rounds. Abbey jokes to them that he's glad the heat keeps them away; and they, in turn, joke that they don't have to live here. The climate is so dry that Abbey has difficulty with everyday tasks like shaving. Rain comes occasionally, but the moisture evaporates either immediately upon contact with the earth, or worse, before it even hits the ground.

The dreadful dryness of the desert stresses how difficult it is to live out here. In the chapter to come—prefaced here by the comic difficulty of shaving—Abbey will prove that it takes courage and resourcefulness to survive in the desert. But these skills make people self-reliant, a necessary step to achieving the personal freedom that Abbey argues is essential to a functioning democracy.

Springs are one way to find water in the hot desert, but as most of the water is underground, one has to know how and where to look. Green plant life is a good sign, but to dig for it is usually a waste of effort and will dehydrate anyone before rewarding them. It's best to carry a gallon of water whenever entering the desert, to guard against having to search for it, as neither blood nor urine will hydrate, despite popular belief. Sometimes, the water in a car's radiator can help. But if one is stranded in the desert, death is the likeliest outcome—one must write one's will in the sand, so that the wind can blow it across the desert.

Abbey further emphasizes the desert's difficulties here, by stressing the futility of digging for water and by advocating that people drink from car radiators. If surviving in the desert is that hard, then living here must demand an amazing resourcefulness that leads to a strong sense of empowerment. The will in the sand is also significant: in society, final wishes are committed to complex legal documents, drawn up by lawyer. Instead, this passage is Abbey's ironic reminder that human beings, with all their nervous concerns and beliefs, ultimately belong to the inanimate landscape.


Abbey himself has nearly died of dehydration at Havasupai Canyon, where he leapt deliriously into a stream at first sight of it, and once in the Needles canyon above the Colorado River, where he had to wait three hours for a dripping spring to fill his canteen. Many springs, however, are full of poisonous selenium thanks to the region's uranium deposits. These springs look harmless, indeed crystal-clear, but they'll kill anyone who drinks from them; a lack of algae or insects is a clear warning sign of such springs. If absolutely desperate, one can filter such water with campfire charcoal, but sickness will soon follow.

Abbey enters into a kind of instructional manual for how to survive in the desert. On one hand, these instructions are an informative diversion from his main themes, but on the other hand, they are a practical preparation for readers who might want to try the desert for themselves. By teaching such readers how to avoid poisoned water, Abbey is setting them up for the first stage of his isolation regime, the end result of which is a sense of freedom that enriches social life.

A common rumor is that cactus pulp can save one from dehydration, but this sounds dubious and difficult to extract. Instead of wasting time attempting this, one ought to accept one's fate of being eaten by buzzards and becoming transformed into animal consciousness. Abbey thinks that this is, in fact, a promotion from human life—and, for some, an ideal.

In the midst of his instructions for finding clean water, Abbey notes that such a deep engagement with the wild brings people into an essential bond with nature. To support this, his joke about being changed into buzzard consciousness is partly sincere: since human beings are equal to animals and the environment, the death of a human would be a simple transferal of energy from one part of nature to another.

July and August can often bring a thunderstorm without warning, a "special creation" that comes on suddenly. In such moments, clouds form quickly, like mashed potatoes, whipped cream, or a fleet of ships. Lightning booms like gunfire, and the wind picks up speed while droplets appear like a beaded curtain. The clouds appear dense as wool and roar like cannonballs down a staircase as the deluge comes on, plastering Abbey's clothing to his body. The soaked rock formations around him glisten in an "unholy" light, "the light that never was." And just as quickly, the storm subsides, leaving a rainbow.

Abbey imports foreign images and sounds (cannonballs, mashed potatoes, whipped cream, a naval armada) in his attempt to evoke (rather than to merely describe) this unprecedented sight. Note "the light that never was": an inversion of "and there was light," from the Old Testament. This creative rephrasing, combined with "unholy," suggests that the striking sight of gleaming rocks in the desert is of Biblical proportions and, at the same time, is greater than the description of any sacred text. This is a perfect example of Abbey's balance between worshipping nature and avoiding traditional forms of worship like Christianity.


Though less symphonic, flash floods inspire even more awe. Once, a flood took Abbey by complete surprise in the canyon he happened to be in. At first, a quivering sound appeared, and then a wall of water was upon him, carrying with it uprooted plants and small trees. Abbey thinks that a wall is a poor image for this—it's more like gravy, tomato soup, or blood. Abbey inserts a poem about the phenomenon, from the point of view of an ant, which describes a "brown / spongy smothering liquid avalanche."

Abbey's disagreement with himself over the "wall" image, his continued poetic language, and especially his lapse from prose to verse all highlight the uselessness of prose language in the face of something as breathtaking as a desert flash flood. Here, perhaps more than anywhere in the book, Abbey is frustrated with words. The ant's point of view in the poem, consumed by the "spongy smothering" flood, embodies Abbey's wish to experience the desert as an animal might.

Quicksand is another aquatic phenomenon worth noting: despite its menacing and lethal portrayal in movies, quicksand is merely sand mixed with water. People can usually walk across it, but it can absorb one's feet if one stops midway—an entanglement that only worsens when one begins to struggle. Once, Abbey's disabled friend Ralph Newcomb got stuck in quicksand as he and Abbey traversed Glen Canyon. Abbey had been walking ahead, and he heard a cry; he doubled back to find Newcomb calmly sinking up to his knees as he lights his pipe. After some jokes, Abbey pulled Newcomb out, and the quicksand regained its placid appearance, like pudding. Though quicksand endangers cattle, no human that Abbey knows of has died in it.

Dispelling rumors about the desert—such as quicksand fatalities—is part of Abbey's ongoing acquaintance with the earth, his attempt to understand and to bond with the environment. This is helped along by Newcomb, whose calm and stoic nature gives him an enviable harmony with nature. Consumed by quicksand, Newcomb merely lights his pipe, as if in perfect confidence that the earth won't harm him. Abbey will rely on this early description of his friend when he later takes a seminal trip with Newcomb, relying on Newcomb's calmness to deepen his own relationship with the earth.

Natural water basins or tubs are another place where one can find water in the desert. These tubs attract doves and deer but also smaller amphibians like toads. After an incubation period, tadpoles rise to the muddy surface of these tubs and seem to wait patiently for the sound of rainwater. The "counterpoint" croaking of adult toads can fill the night air. What does their song mean? Though bleak and desolate sounding to human ears, these toads might be singing for joy at the mere fact of their existence. Abbey thinks that joy is essential to all life, for it allows courage. These toads, therefore, have a terrific survival instinct, singing on even when human beings do not. This joy then passes on from the toad to the animal that eats it.

Again, here Abbey reverts to music to describe the indescribable. The toads' song is so strange that Abbey can only describe it in music terms—"counterpoint" being an especially strange and dissonant tonal system in modern classical composition. The music also prompts Abbey to imagine the emotions of these animals—by now a familiar activity that helps him feel closer to the desert landscape. It's worth noting that Abbey imagines the toads' joy specifically—a distinctly human emotion that people wouldn't normally attribute to amphibians. As with an owl in a previous chapter, this personification suggests that animals and human beings are kindred.

One human contribution to the desert's waterworks is the drilled well and its accompanying windmill—a sculptural thing of beauty alongside the **juniper** and cacti. Though Developers claim that the desert lacks water, there is, in fact, water everywhere. Developers scheme all kinds of water transportation in hopes of attracting more tourists and industry in the West. But Abbey thinks that these obsessive people fail to see that industrial growth inflates populations beyond what humanity can naturally support. Though protest might be futile against this rapid industrialization, time will eventually erode cities such as Phoenix and Albuquerque, leaving nature to take over once again.

Here, Abbey shows that the popular (Developers') misunderstanding that the desert lacks water helps them justify their exploitation of the earth for profit. But for Abbey, the misunderstanding is easily fixed: following the guidelines for desert hydration he's just laid out, people should discover that the wilderness is in fact quite habitable. From there, people will discover both their own innate abilities and the uselessness of industrial development. This would help give people a sense of freedom and help curb humanity's rampant arrogance.

THE HEAT OF NOON: ROCK AND TREE AND CLOUD

By July, the desert heat is overwhelming. Despite the temperature, 110°F, and constant dehydration, Abbey weathers the discomfort by sitting under the **juniper** outside his trailer. He sticks his feet in the sand, achieving a relaxed, "animal" satisfaction. The sight of the distant mountains comforts him, as they remind him that he can escape the heat if he wanted, by taking refuge of their cold peaks. The mere knowledge that he can escape helps him go on.

As usual, Abbey's favorite juniper helps him achieve an "animal" connection to the earth that would otherwise be unavailable to human beings. With the sight of a distant mountain, he introduces another important idea: that certain ideas (such as this snowy mountain's mere existence) can have a material psychological relief from hardship (in Abbey's case, heat and dehydration).


More broadly, all of America's wilderness serves the same purpose for the country's civilization as these mountains do for Abbey. Just to know that nature exists provides city dwellers with the hope they need to live their lives. For this reason, the wilderness must be preserved for the good of civilization.

By comparing a personal idea (a cold mountain refuge) to a universal idea (human hope), Abbey reveals a critical logical maneuver in his coming argument about democracy and wilderness. His example shows that people can make justifiable conclusions about all of humanity based on their private experiences. Just as Abbey feels relieved by the mere existence of a mountain, so, too, can all of humanity find hope in nature.

Abbey argues that there is another reason to preserve nature: in case American citizens need to escape an authoritarian government takeover, wild parks like Grand Canyon and Yellowstone are the perfect places to flee and stage a rebellion. Americans should take this warning seriously, as the whole world is slowly drifting toward totalitarianism. It's no coincidence that tyranny thrives in the most industrialized societies—such as modern Germany—where governments can easily control their citizens. By contrast, rural insurrections in Cuba and Vietnam have recently been successful in fighting totalitarianism.

Aside from the conceptual benefit that nature affords to city dwellers, the possibility that wilderness could sustain populist rebellions against the government gives an immediate, global urgency to Abbey's argument throughout the book that being in nature makes people feel free. In the face of tyranny, such as Hitler's, this feeling of liberation—only achievable in nature—might very well be humanity's only hope. From this perspective, preserving wilderness becomes an urgent civic duty. By invoking the Vietnam War—which was taking place when Desert Solitaire *was published—Abbey strikes a nationwide nerve in his call to protect the country's parks.*

In order to overpower its citizens and become a dictatorship, America would need to accomplish eight things: pack people into cities, mechanize agriculture, restrict gun ownership, encourage population growth, continue the draft, wage war overseas to distract from conflicts at home, erect **highways** to connect the country, and destroy wilderness. These developments are already occurring. It may, in fact, be too late. Abbey quotes a Robinson Jeffers poem: "Shine, perishing republic."

The poet Abbey quotes, Robinson Jeffers, is a formative influence on Abbey's environmentalist thinking. The poem in question, "Shine, Perishing Republic," posits that once America collapses in its own corruption, it will disperse back into the earth and regenerate. Though Abbey calls for protest against development, his tone in this scene, like the resigned sadness of Jeffers's poem, takes some comfort in hope that Earth will outlive human corruption—a parallel to Abbey's mystic bond with nature.

Despite these thoughts on "my all-too-perishable republic," Abbey's solitude helps him cope as the sun "reigns" in his boiling summer landscape. Like him, the lizards and snakes seek shade to conserve energy. Even flowers and plants curl up in defense. Birds are scarce. Insects disappear—though the crickets, like a Bach partita, chirp their sad music. Rather than following these restful survival tactics, however, human beings are unique in that they slave away at work during such miserable heat, "chained" to the clock and denying the "elemental fire."

By repurposing Jeffers's line here, Abbey takes further comfort in Earth's longevity. The Bach allusion furthers Abbeys preference for musical and poetic descriptions over straightforward prose. In admiring nature's ability to cope with the heat, Abbey notes humanity's defiance of the elements. The language he uses to illustrate this—"chained" and "elemental fire"—recalls the Greek hero Prometheus, who was chained to a rock in punishment for stealing fire from the gods. A convenient symbol of humanity's arrogance, this is neither Abbey's first nor last use of the mythological figure.

Abbey watches the circling buzzards against the "blue dome of heaven," imagining that they dream of their former lives as other animals. In the powerful sunlight, the horizon shimmers and refracts as if viewed through a veil of water. Balanced Rock seems to bend in the heat, while the **junipers** and pines seem to wave. Though rare, mirages can occur in California, where optical illusions trick people into seeing lakes on the horizon—"Palestinian miracles."

Having railed against humanity's arrogance, Abbey turns back to Earth's holiness. Nodding to the divinity of the afternoon clarity ("blue dome of heaven"), Abbey mediates on the sun's visual tricks. Abbey blames this illusory water effect for the "Palestinian miracle," the New Testament claim that Christ walked on water. By meditating on the shifting nature of objective reality, Abbey renews his argument that Earth—not the Bible—is divine.

In the bright sun, every detail of the landscape appears so clear that Abbey thinks there cannot be another realm beyond reality. He stares at the half-dead **juniper** and prays for a vision of truth, but he gets no response. He listens intently for sun signals, but its music is too pure for human ears. Abbey scrapes his feet against the sandy rock and feels comforted by its solidity.

Abbey is more intent than ever to find an underlying reality beneath the sensory realm. Despite his failure, it's important to note that here—unlike previous scenes, where he was frustrated by his limited senses—he is finally okay with the merely visible. He's arriving at his conclusion—voiced in the Introduction—that "surfaces" are all that human beings can know.

THE MOON-EYED HORSE

Herding cattle one afternoon up by Salt Creek with Mackie, another of Roy Scobie's cowhands, Abbey notices the tracks of a wild horse. Mackie tells him that they belong to Moon-Eye, a rogue mare that once belonged to Scobie but has been missing for 10 years. Inspired by the idea of a wild horse, Abbey decides that he wants to capture Moon-Eye, and he begs Mackie for the animal's story.

Abbey's obsession with the idea of a rogue horse in the wild isn't a passing interest—he's determined to find it. This gives readers a hint that Abbey's interest in the animal world is as great (or greater) than his interest in the human world—and it also suggests that Abbey sees something of himself in this horse. Both facts further Abbey's sense of belonging in nature.

In Scobie's possession, Moon-Eye had had an eye problem called "moonblindness," which made him irritable. Castration and overuse only worsened Moon-Eye's mood: though he seemed placid, one day in the Arches he lost his temper and bucked the tourist who had rented him. Viviano Jacquez beat Moon-Eye for this, but the horse escaped into the canyons. Scobie and Jacquez searched for two weeks, giving up after finding his saddle. Since then, Moon-Eye has only rarely been seen, drinking from the creek.

Jacquez's violence toward Moon-Eye is noteworthy. Given that Jacquez is a Spanish immigrant who's been poisoned into self-hatred by his neighbors' racism, it seems that his own belittlement leads him to needlessly beat an animal. Abbey uses this injustice to connect human beings' false superiority one another to a damaging sense of superiority over animals.

Stopping for water and shade, Abbey grills Mackie about Moon-Eye's motives and daily life. Mackie finds the question ridiculous, figuring that the horse only eats and sleeps. Abbey isn't satisfied—the horse, a "herd animal" like humans, does not live alone. He must know what Moon-Eye is up to, and he vows to find the horse so he can ask him himself.

Once again, Abbey uses the phrase "herd animal." Earlier, Abbey used this terms negatively, to assert humanity's need for solitude. Here, he's changed his tune, believing that human beings, like horses, need others to survive. This "paradox"—as Abbey likes to call his contradictions—helps illustrate his view that solitude and society are equally important for people.

As the men ride on to wrangle more calves, Abbey contemplates his own sweat-soaked, dusty, and bloodied appearance, boasting that he does this kind of work for fun. Mackie, however, says he would rather be rich. When Abbey asks why, Mackie admits that he'd just buy some cows of his own.

Mackie's ironic role—a blue-collar worker who's sick of the grind but who wouldn't leave it if he could—illustrates the fact that hard work in nature gives people undeniable freedom and self-reliance.

A month later, despite the oppressive heat, Abbey returns to Salt Creek to find Moon-Eye. After drinking heartily at the stream and apologizing to his own horse, he decides to approach Moon-Eye with "sympathy and understanding," rather than brute force, hiding a bridle in his shirt.

Before he even finds Moon-Eye, Abbey's apology to his own horse illustrates the "sympathy and understanding" he will exercise with him. This is yet another sign that Abbey believes animals deserve human dignity.

As Abbey tethers his horse and traverses the canyon, he hears only silence and begins to chide himself for his poor search tactics. But soon, he hears breathing— gradually, he makes out the figure of a horse behind a tree. Abbey asks for the animal's name, and as he inches forward, noticing the horse's signature milky eye, he asks the animal why he's out here all alone. Moon-Eye stares stock-still, as Abbey asks the "old man" how he'd like to come back home. Twenty feet away, pausing at every step, Abbey tempts him by describing tasty bran, grass, and alfalfa. Soon, only the branches of a **juniper** separate him from the horse, who stands so still and silent he could be a scarecrow. They watch each other, the horse from his "boiled egg" eye, until Moon-Eye suddenly jumps back and charges Abbey.

This is the crucial scene for Abbey's argument that animals and human beings are equal. In Desert Solitaire, *readers see Abbey engaging in a variety of conversations, but never is he so forthright, talkative, and eager as with Moon-Eye, a creature incapable of language. Though it's silly to reason with a horse, Abbey's point here is that people should at least think of animals as deserving of logic. That way, people will have a better sense of how their own species is just one element of a wider natural order. Notably, "old man" is a phrase that stresses this equality, and "boiled egg" is a poetically outlandish phrase that captures the strangeness of this animal's appearance.*


Unhurt, Abbey sits in wait as Moon-Eye resumes his position. An hour passes in perfect stillness. Abbey tries again to reason with Moon-Eye, finally getting back up and walking more directly. The horse trots slowly away as Abbey explains to him that a grown man can outrun a horse, but that they really shouldn't make fools of themselves by putting it to the test. When this doesn't work, Abbey starts insulting the stationary horse, warning that he'll die alone and be eaten by buzzards. Moon-Eye is clearly listening as Abbey goes on to describe the coyotes that will slowly circle then lunge at his corpse. Last, the insects will finish him off, and only the universe will remember him.

Abbey takes his reasoning powers further here—not only tempting Moon-Eye to come with him but introducing the horse to one of his key beliefs, that for a creature to die in nature is merely a recirculation of the same energy. It's an argument Abbey made earlier with respect to Roy Scobie, and the fact that he makes it now to a horse indicates the close relationship Abbey believes to exist among the human beings, horses, coyotes, and insects of the earth.

Like a Giacometti sculpture, Moon-Eye still hasn't moved. Emaciated, he looks like the idea of a horse rather than a real-life one. Abbey, also utterly exhausted, can't fathom the walk back down to his own steed, a journey he has no interest in anyway; his brain aches in the sunlight, and he's able to breathe only with conscious effort. He crawls into the rotted trunk of a **juniper** and waits. Abbey and Moon-Eye keep staring in silence, with Abbey speaking a sentence every 10 minutes.

As with Abbey's earlier use of Bach and Beethoven, the reference to Giacometti here (a modern Italian sculptor famous for his spindly, elongated human figures) gives Abbey yet another escape from straightforward prose description. The juniper is an ongoing symbol of a deeper connection to the earth, so the fact that Abbey crawls inside one for relief is important. In the most literal sense, it conveys the that humanity belongs inside of nature. Additionally, it's a character parallel to Billy-Joe Husk, who earlier crawled into a cottonwood trunk after bonding with nature.


As the oppressive sun finally sets, with Abbey and Moon-Eye still deadlocked, Abbey finds some relief. He exits the tree trunk and tries again to reason with the horse, but he's so parched that he can't speak. After throwing the harness at Moon-Eye in desperation, Abbey gives up, draining his canteen and begin his walk back down the canyon. Several times, he thinks he hears footsteps, but he sees nothing.

Though Abbey's dialogue in this chapter has narrowed the difference between human and horse, the fact that words finally fail the exhausted Abbey proves that language rarely accomplishes what it hopes to, and that despite Abbey's connection to nature, there is a fundamental difference between human beings and animals. This second point suggests Abbey's need for human society, which he addresses in the following chapter.


DOWN THE RIVER

To Abbey's great anger, the government has dammed the Colorado River and thereby flooded Glen Canyon. The damn serves no purpose but to generate money through electricity. Abbey thinks that the resulting body of water, Lake Powell, is an insult to its namesake, John Wesley Powell, the first American to explore the dangerous area. A decade ago, however, one could walk through the beautiful Canyon, an Eden, as Abbey did. Now, it's as if Chartres Cathedral or the Taj Mahal were covered in mud.

In the Christian belief system, Eden is regarded as the garden where the first human beings communed with God; it was lost forever after Adam and Eve's disobedience. Abbey's phrasing suggests that in real life Glen Canyon was just as divine a place as Eden and was equally wasted by human disobedience (by the dam). Additionally, by invoking references to two of the world's most famous temples (in France and India, respectively), Abbey implies that Glen Canyon was not only sacred but also a place where people could gather to worship its divinity.

Years ago, Abbey and Ralph Newcomb took a trip to Glen Canyon to see it before it was spoiled. They spend half a day by the Colorado River bank, packing supplies and preparing their inadequate rubber rafts, having forgotten their life jackets. Though disabled in one leg, Newcomb is calm as he smokes his pipe—unshakeable as the river itself and tranquil as the sky. He's brought fishing wire and a camera.

Readers have seen Newcomb calmly handle quicksand, and here, with similes to the river and sky, Abbey explicitly spells out Newcomb's harmonious attitude with nature. Newcomb's stoic harmony is an essential part of Abbey's subsequent discoveries that humanity and nature are compatible.

Abbey and Newcomb set off in their rafts, though Abbey finds his unstable. As they drift, they soon learn to stay latched together and to make conversation. Abbey's anxiety is replaced by a sense of safety, as if he were back in the womb. The feel of the water on his finger transports him to a childhood desire to float down the river like Mark Twain or Major Powell.

The manner of the men's boat launch is symbolic: floating separately at first, they soon latch their rafts together, which enables conversation and gives Abbey a sense of comfort. This convergence represents a larger theme Abbey has been exploring about solitude and society: that being alone in the wilderness ultimately brings people together.

A man appears on the shore, yelling something at them which they can't hear, and they pass away from him gladly. Abbey quotes couplets from Shakespeare, Raleigh, and Jeffers about hating the human race. But what Abbey feels now isn't exactly misanthropy—it's just a necessary separation from humanity in order to restore his affection, first for himself, and second for other human beings.

Here, Abbey finally states the social benefit of solitude. Humanity is ugly—as these poets have attested throughout history—but by taking periodic breaks from others, one can learn to live with them. After months alone, this is an idea Abbey hopes to test out with Newcomb, his first proper companion thus far.


Abbey thinks that to get lost in nature is to find independence, a primitive feeling. Out here, one could do anything—Newcomb could murder Abbey, and no one would ever know. But it's love, not murderousness, that wells up in Abbey. Nature gives the two men this sense of moral freedom to do whatever they please. It exhilarates them and inspires them with love as they float along—simply because it removes them from technology and traffic and cities. Abbey thinks it's no wonder that the government wants people locked away in cities: this joy makes one reject the trappings of capitalist culture.

Abbey dissects his claim that isolation ultimately brings people together. Isolation gives two essential feelings: first is liberty, as in the wilderness, one feels free to do whatever one wants. Newcomb could even kill Abbey if he wished. But, second, because being away from technology inspires joy, people discover that they don't want to do things like committing murder. The exhilaration of nature turns people's moral freedom into goodwill. By examining his feelings here, Abbey adds a necessary ingredient—joy—to his wider argument that freedom fosters peaceful coexistence among people. This explains why, earlier, he imagined that frogs, horses, and owls felt joy.


As the current picks up, Newcomb notes it calmly while Abbey starts to worry, pulling out his useless map. They hit rapids, which slam their boats together and nearly overturn them. They survive it with a thrill, and soon the river "obliges" them with another set of rapids.

Of course, a river can't really "oblige" anything. But here, as in other passages throughout the memoir, Abbey projects human feelings onto the body of water to stress his and Newcomb's harmony with nature.

As the water calms down, Abbey admires the birdsong—like the sound of a glockenspiel, or like lorelei. Basking in the sight of the trees and birds, Abbey asks Newcomb if he believes in God. "Who?" Newcomb asks, to which Abbey agrees.

Though a glockenspiel is a typical Western instrument, the lorelei are mythical sirens on the banks of the Rhine River in Germany. Like Abbey's earlier comparison of juniper to the incense of Dante's fictional poetry, this reference suggests that nature can only accurately be communicated imaginatively and sensorially. This feeling contributes to Abbey's belief that nature is otherworldly or beyond ordinary human comprehension—a belief that Newcomb confirms when he pretends not to recognize the human-made idea of a monotheistic natural order.

Eventually, Abbey and Newcomb pull off on the beach for the night. Feeling joy, Abbey quotes a line about a "beauteous evening." They start a fire, an offering to the gods of the river and canyon, and cook corned beef. For entertainment, they listen to the river and the cicadas and watch the nighthawks. Abbey asks Newcomb sarcastically if it's fair that they must risk their lives given the city comforts of Albuquerque, and Newcomb says yes. As it gets late, Abbey carves a spot in the sand and starts thinking "river thoughts" before "joining" the night sky.

The "beauteous evening" quote comes from a William Wordsworth sonnet which argues that loving nature is the same as loving God. This substitution of nature for God is exactly what Abbey's been arguing throughout the book. Here, in Glen Canyon, he feels it in full force. Note that Abbey thinks "river thoughts"— earlier, he gave human qualities to the water, but now he gives river qualities to human beings. This cycle suggests that he and the earth are "joining" a reciprocal relationship.

After breakfast, Abbey washes dishes in the Colorado River, reasoning that it has no false pride. Taking off again, as they drift deeper into Eden, Abbey wants to live like this forever. There are no concert halls or museums or cathedrals, but nature contains everything one actually needs physically and spiritually. He and Newcomb both agree that they could live here, away from civilization. The silence is the only problem—it might drive them crazy. They joke that they're both doomed.

By repeating "Eden" here, Abbey further stresses the idea that wilderness is the place where human beings, like Adam and Eve in the Bible, can commune with God. He takes this further with his cathedral comparison, suggesting that one doesn't need a traditional church to worship the deity of nature; nature itself is a sufficient temple.

Drifting peacefully toward the Gulf of California, as if in a dream, it seems foolish to exert any effort. The river takes over for Abbey and Newcomb, sending them down its current. The canyon rim overhead is as big as Hollywood Bowl, fit to house God's orchestra. Pulling over to take their lunch, they realize they are blissfully free of human pollution, with the nearest town 100 miles away. Dwelling on the radium content of the river, Abbey quotes Thomas Jefferson on killing tyrants to water "the tree of liberty" and on the necessity of creating a new, better country from an old and useless one.

The "dream" simile helps connect Abbey to Billy-Joe Husk, who lost track of time, entered a dreamlike state, and perceived earthly signals not far from where Abbey is now. Recalling young Billy-Joe, readers infer that Abbey is finding a similar harmony with nature. Returning to his argument about the liberating aspects of nature, Abbey's quote from Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, connects Abbey's private experience of freedom to the broader social need for democracy.

Overwhelmed by nature, Abbey demands of Newcomb where human beings come from and where they are going. Newcomb replies with a short, "Who cares." Words fail the two men, so Abbey pulls out a harmonica and blows a Christian hymn: "We shall gather by the river / That flows from the throne of the Lord." Evening falls again, so they pull over for supper and camp. After dinner, Abbey wanders in the blackness.

A writer by trade, Abbey can't help but voice his wonder in prose—an instinct that Newcomb shoots down with a curt, "Who cares," confirming Abbey's suspicion that language is ultimately useless. Abbey's harmonica song, a hymn that echoes their moment "by the river," both invokes a sense of nature's divinity and asserts Abbey idea that music can communicate more accurately than words.

At breakfast, the sand in the air bonds with Abbey and Newcomb's food and with their bodies; dealing with the grit in the air becomes as easy as breathing. Drifting down the river again, they pass tall canyons and listen to their voices echo. The beauty of these colorful canyons overwhelms Abbey, who is heartbroken that they will soon be flooded and hidden for centuries. Secretly, Abbey and Newcomb hope that the government will change its mind and preserve the area. But Abbey knows this to be untrue, disdaining humanity by quoting a line about its "damned, wicked deeds" in nature. The ravens mock Abbey and Newcomb as the men contemplate their distance from the nearest person.

Notably, both Abbey and Billy-Joe Husk endured sand in their food and understood the mockery of nearby ravens. Abbey's constant comparisons of himself with Billy-Joe suggest that humanity's oneness with nature can be discovered by anyone—by children as well as professional writers with environmentalist agendas. Abbey quotes Thomas Lovell Beddoes here, a suicidal Victorian dramatist who, like Abbey, promoted democracy and believed the human soul (on scientific, not religious grounds) was everlasting.

Abbey tries to define the word "wilderness," but something more than words is required. Part of wilderness involves nostalgia, both for the womb and for the early founding of America. To love the wilderness is to be loyal to the earth, an entity that created and sustains humanity. The only original sin, therefore, is to destroy Earth's paradise. This paradise is not the unchanging Heaven of the saints; Abbey thinks that it's better and more complex than this, full of earthquakes and floods and disease. Aristotle and the Church Fathers believed that another world lay beyond this one, but Abbey believes that in reality, the only real and praiseworthy realm is the "dogmatically real" Earth.

Abbey's thoughts on nature's motherly and paradisiacal qualities further his belief that nature is divine. But rather than simply comparing Glen Canyon to the Christian heaven, Abbey argues that the paradise of Earth is much more complex, as it contains both disaster and beauty. His total embrace of these conflicting elements also leads him to embrace Earth's "dogmatically real" appearance. By claiming that Earth is the only reality, Abbey dismisses not only a supernatural afterlife but also the philosophical objection that reality is inaccessible beyond what's superficially visible. Abbey's adverb "dogmatically" asserts that the superficial visible realm is a perfectly good dogma, or belief system, in itself.

Plenty of great explorers have come before Abbey and Newcomb—mainly John Wesley Powell, the Civil War veteran who first charted Glen Canyon in a three-month journey. Though the journey was dangerous and rough, Wesley described the area's beauty, its unity of "form, color and sound." He called it the most beautiful place aside from heaven.

Abbey reasons that if Wesley—a missionary advocate who was named after the founder of Methodism, John Wesley—compared Glen Canyon to the Christian heaven, then surely Abbey is right in believing that this place is divine. Powell's fixation on the visible and audible echoes Abbey's ruminations on the conflict between reality and appearances in nature.

Abbey thinks that if population and industry continue to increase, humanity will create a kind of synthetic prison for themselves, cut off from this natural beauty. Once exiled from the earth and numbed of feeling, people will finally realize this tragedy. As Abbey and Newcomb pass by a 50-mile-long ridge of warped sandstone, they imagine it littered with paved **roads**, Coke machines, and modern bathrooms.

Abbey returns to his political argument against paved roads, the symbolic destruction of nature and, consequently, of personal freedom. His prison imagery—echoed elsewhere by cars, his trailer, and other artificial enclosures—further develops the contrast between nature and human arrogance.

Abbey and Newcomb pull over for a rest, and while Newcomb naps, Abbey explores the abandoned ruin of an old mining camp. Picking through rusty machinery, he contemplates God and human ambition. From his vantage point, the canyon could contain all of Manhattan, and yet Abbey sees not a trace of human or animal life. He thinks it's odd that the closer one gets to a river out West, the fewer human settlements there are. The same of human life is true of plant life: vegetation thrives only on mountains and buttes. This is because the river's gorge is too recessed below ground level to support life.

The abandoned mine, like a Roman ruin, becomes a small symbol of Earth's longevity and triumph over humanity. This illustrates Earth as an infinite and awe-inspiring place—echoed by Abbey's thoughts here on canyon, so vast that New York City (a symbol of industrial growth) could fit inside. It's also worth noting that the river can't support much life: though Abbey advocates isolation, this reminds him that he also needs Newcomb to help him survive—a reflection of humanity's need for society.

Back in the boat, Newcomb and Abbey have abandoned all maps and wish to explore with no guidance. As the sun sets, they dock by a cave and explore it. Abbey sleeps fitfully but is comforted by the sound of a horned owl. For breakfast, they finish all their provisions and must now catch all their own food. As the Colorado River meets the larger Escalante, they drift along into it. Stopping for lunch, Newcomb casts a line into the water. When Abbey asks him for his fishing license, Newcomb thrusts a middle finger skyward, toward the Deity. Very soon, he catches a huge catfish, provided by God.

The uselessness of maps—like Abbey's watch when he first arrives at Arches—illustrates that the isolation Abbey advocates is so complete that human ideas of time and geography become irrelevant. Newcomb's middle-finger gesture is a further rejection of society's ideas, like government-granted permission to catch fish. That Newcomb catches one so easily illustrates both his easy harmony with nature and nature's ability to support human life.

Leaving Newcomb to fry the fish, Abbey climbs the nearby ridge, removing his boots to cross quicksand and replenishing himself in a dripping spring. Standing barefoot under a "wine-dark" sky, he watches the sunlight change colors on the twists and turns of the canyon below. He wonders if this place, big enough to contain the whole world's cathedrals and Hindu divinities, is the *locus Dei*.

"Wine-dark" is a classic phrase from Ancient Greek bard Homer. Abbey is inserting deliberately poetic language into his prose to capture nature. He also invokes both Western and Eastern religious language to suggest that nature's divinity applies to everyone, not just Christians.

Abbey notices petroglyphs of the Anasazi on a nearby mural wall, leading him to wonder about pre-Columbian life. Enough is known about their diet and crafts, but what of their emotions? Were they governed by fear? Beset by their enemy tribes, was it difficult for them to raise children? Surely any child raised in this area would have learned fear and survival at an early age. Walking down, Abbey passes a plunge pool that's been worn down from thousands of years of dripping water. Night falls, and as he walks, the Escalante below is no longer inviting, as it was earlier—it is strange, menacing, and endless. He finally makes it down to Newcomb, and they fry up fish until dawn, as the wind blows as if through a sacred cathedral.

Ancient Navajo rock drawings again lead Abbey to contemplate the infinitude and wonder of nature—essentially religious feelings. He supports this with yet more cathedral imagery. Meanwhile, after nightfall, the river changes from inviting to menacing. This illustrates the subjective, ever-changing nature of the world—a truth that makes the idea of a fixed, unchanging reality even more elusive. Abbey symbolically escapes this feeling of menace by joining Newcomb—yet another instance of Abbey's awakening to social life.

In the morning, as Abbey and Newcomb float naked in the river, they debate whether they ought to return to civilization at all. Newcomb questions which civilization Abbey means, and Abbey agrees with the implications of this rhetorical question. They decide to return when they realize they're low on bacon grease. They float on, passing rock formations like hamburgers and pies, eroded over maybe 500,000 years. Abbey praises the river for maintaining a moving life force through such ancient stone, and he quotes an Irishman's line about loving "all things which flow."

The quoted Irishman is James Joyce, who invented a completely new language in his book Finnegans Wake, *in order to capture the essence of the Liffey River. Abbey nods to him in order to highlight his own inability to use traditional language to describe the Colorado River. Abbey's frustration with words merges here with his and Newcomb's rejection of civilization, the entity that is responsible for artificial things like language and paved roads.*

Abbey and Newcomb camp for the night at Hole in the Rock, a former Mormon settlement established in 1880 that's now abandoned. They worked exceptionally hard to forge a path through the canyon while scouting for land. Abbey retraces their path while Newcomb catches fish. Squeezing past rocks, Abbey becomes so thirsty that he sucks handfuls of sand. He reaches a lookout point so high up that the desert silence deepens to make him wonder—while he quotes Honoré de Balzac on this subject—that God must exist here. Abbey questions the existence of God: since nothing exists up here but Abbey, the stone, and the yuccas, Abbey rejects God. He is not an atheist but an "earthiest."

Here, Abbey gives a crucial distinction in his religious beliefs: though he often invokes God, or gods, or tradition Christian divinity, he does not believe in a monotheistic universe. Since all he can discern in reality are sensory things—visible, audible, and so on—Abbey commits his worship to exactly this realm: the earth and nothing more. His wordplay on "atheist" gives readers a handy reference for his adoration of the natural, rather than the supernatural.

Though T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* captures some of this desert emptiness, Abbey dislikes this poem. He thinks words are a veil of ideas that gets between human beings and the world, obscuring their vision, like the Eastern concept of Maya. The river and Newcomb's fishing is where God can really be found. When Abbey returns from his meditation, he and Newcomb communicate less in words and more in gestures. Their molecules seem to merge with the environment: their skin seems the color of the river, their eyeballs coral pink as the dunes, and their clothing muddy. They have forgotten how many days they've been gone.

Abbey continues connecting his disdain for words to his disdain for anything artificial that separates him from nature. Though Eliot's poem evokes the desert's bleakness, the mere fact that it's composed of words—a human invention—disqualifies it from describing the earth, a defiantly inhuman entity. By invoking the Hindi idea of Maya—the superficial visible realm that prevents humanity from seeing the world as it really is—Abbey argues that the problem of language has spiritual as well as philosophical significance.

Taking off again, Abbey and Newcomb pass a feature that Wesley called Music Temple on his expedition, a cave that's full of delightful resounding noises. Abbey quotes a paragraph of Wesley's diary about the mysterious chamber, in which Powell names the vast cave after its peculiar echoes and reasons that a "storm-born architect" created the place. Continuing on, Abbey and Newcomb pass through an obscure rock tunnel, full of multi-colored lichen. Abbey realizes that the tunnel may never have been entered or named before.

Again, Abbey enlists his hero Powell, a staunch Christian, to argue that anyone in their right mind would find this place sacred. Powell's idea that the cave is a temple, and his suggestion that an "architect" created it, are Christian in their native context. But in Abbey's hands, this quote serves the more modern, environmentalist argument that Earth is both a deity and a church in itself.

With the climactic Rainbow Bridge as their destination, Abbey and Newcomb continue on, stopping occasionally to admire the canyon. On one such stop, Abbey accidentally sets a willow thicket ablaze and barely escapes in the boat with Newcomb, who scarcely acknowledges the event and lights a match for the terrified Abbey. When they pull over for the night, the wind is howling, battering the tarps Abbey and Newcomb set up and threatening rain—a welcome prospect to the overheated men.

Newcomb's behavior, again, suggests that he's channeling Earth's calmness and impartiality. Fires happen, Newcomb seems to imply, echoing the indifference of nature. As with his previous entrapment in quicksand, Newcomb's instrument is tobacco: instead of stoking Abbey's terror at the fire, he simply lights a match. The fact that fire (on shore) can terrify Abbey while pacifying Newcomb (in his hand) suggests that Abbey's emotions have contorted reality, yet another example of humanity's separation from Earth.

After a bright red dawn, Abbey and Newcomb continue through Navajo Point and spot telltale signs of tourists: trash and discarded clothes. Having expected this, the men aren't too disappointed. They set up camp at the bank beneath Rainbow Bridge, hopeful that the tourists don't have the energy to make the hike to the Bridge. Newcomb stays behind to fish, while Abbey treks up a trail of hanging mosses, ferns, and wildflowers. The clouds appear to be in perfect unison with the fish in the stream below.

The tourists' litter reminds readers of Abbey's previous argument against Industrial Tourism and warns of the inevitable development of this area. The fact that the clouds harmonize with the fish—two totally unrelated entities—illustrates Abbey's belief that animals (human beings included) are unified with their natural environment.

Having followed human footprints down an unmarked fork in the canyon path, Abbey stops to analyze the strange fear that people tend to have of the desert. The desert is not just foreign and mysterious to people; it is indifferent to them. For this reason, many want to overcome the desert, to develop and turn it into something human.

Here, Abbey articulates an important fact about nature: despite his personification of it, Earth is basically indifferent to people. This helps explain why Newcomb's own indifference—shown in his response to the fire Abbey just started—gives him an enviable harmony with the natural world.

Rounding the next bend in the path, Abbey finally spots Rainbow Bridge. Abbey has long anticipated the formation, and it neither surpasses nor disappoints his expectations. He does feel guilty about Newcomb's inability to come with him due to his disability; Abbey daydreams about hauling his friend up the path to the monument and leaving him to the happy fate of perishing beneath "God's window." Abbey signs the visitor's register and laments that those who see the Bridge after the dam floods will regard it as a motorboat excursion—they won't realize that half its beauty lies in its inaccessibility.

Abbey's guilt about leaving Newcomb is further evidence that nature has reawakened his love for humanity. "God's window" is a telling sign that the place is divine, as is Abbey's insistence here that to die in such a place would be ideal. For Abbey, a death in nature is the best way to recirculate one's energy into the earth, its native habitat.

Abbey scales a nearby ridge and views the Bridge—now diminished—from a great height. It seems timeless and unreal, so to test reality, Abbey kicks a stone over the edge, listening to its crash at the bottom. The earth will certainly outlast humanity; unlike what Plato and Hegel think, man is the dream, while rock is the only reality. As whirlwinds dance below, in the "dogmatic clarity" of sunlight, Abbey wonders what the world before him could possibly mean. It means nothing, he concludes.

Rainbow Bridge further confirms Abbey's belief that the physical Earth is all that exists—not the supernatural afterlife of religion or the underlying reality that idealist philosophers like Plato and Hegel claimed could not be accessed. The phrase "dogmatic clarity" suggests that people's sensory experience of Earth is physically "clear" enough to inspire belief. Meanwhile, when Abbey kicks the stone, he reenacts a famous action of the 18th-century critic Samuel Johnson, who kicked a stone to refute another idealist philosopher, Bishop Berkeley.

On the last day of their "dreamlike voyage," Abbey and Newcomb take photos, light their pipes, and become lost in thought as they glide through the Escalante. They come across the first billboard erected in the region, in which the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation forbids boats in the upcoming construction zone.

The repetition of "dreamlike" connects Abbey to the character Billy-Joe Husk, who also bonded with the earth by forgetting time and entering a dream state. This childlike state of innocence, which highlights Abbey and Newcomb's connection to nature, conflicts sharply with the sign's warning of industrial development, a change that will forever remove the men's sense of freedom from the area.

HAVASU

One summer 15 years ago, on the way to Los Angeles, Abbey abandoned his travel companions to explore Havasu, a remote branch of the Grand Canyon. It's difficult to reach, and on the 14-mile hike, one passes through the Havasupai Indian village. After stocking up on supplies there and renting a horse, Abbey rides past cornfields and pastures to an old abandoned mine where he decides to stay for the next 35 days. He craves solitude, and although there's nothing wrong with the neighboring Native Americans, Abbey doesn't want to be interrogated about his language or religion.

By stressing a removal from other human beings and especially by stressing the unpaved nature of his hike (in contrast to the book's symbolically corrosive paved highways), Abbey indicates that Havasu is the prime example of the isolation he's been advocating throughout the book.

Once alone, Abbey strips naked and smacks the horse, sending it back to the village. He swims in the waterfall and, after sunset, watches bats hunt fireflies. The next five weeks in "Eden" pass by without Abbey doing a thing. He catches fish, receives occasional food deliveries, and meets a few friendly locals. In the village, he races horses with them (even though he's cheated out of a victory) and joins their annual Friendship Dance, where musicians and a medicine man preside. To Abbey's great admiration, the Natives have denied a lucrative offer from the Bureau of Indian Affairs to blast a **highway** into their village.

As in the previous chapter, Abbey's comparison to Eden establishes this part of nature as a divine place. Havasu's removal from society makes it especially similar to Eden, where, before Eve arrived, a naked Adam communed with God. (Abbey's nudity is a further a parallel to Adam in the Bible.) Readers get the sense that this extreme isolation is what leads to Abbey's harmony with the Natives, despite the fact that they cheat him out of a victory.

Abbey explores the abandoned silver mine and listens to the "astonishingly human" voices of Havasu Creek. He dreams away his days there, stark naked as Adam, wondering about butterflies' dreams. He slowly loses the difference between himself and nature: Abbey befriends a snake, and soon his own hand seems to be a trembling leaf on a branch.

Abbey cements the religious comparison to Eden by invoking Adam's name. His observations here—the "human" voices of the creek and the butterflies' subconscious—suggest his deep attention to the ways in which human and nonhuman beings share certain qualities.

Abbey does most of his wandering alone, and this can sometimes be dangerous. Once, while traversing Havasu Canyon, Abbey becomes stranded in a deeply recessed pool. Trying to find a way out, he only descends deeper down the rock face until he realizes there is no way back up a sheer 80-foot drop. In panic, he imagines his bones rotting in this location for the amusement of future travelers.

For once, Abbey finds himself in a potentially fatal situation. Readers recall Billy-Joe Husk, whose retreat into nature cost him his life. Because Billy-Joe's predicament, however tragic, led him into a brief and perfect harmony with nature, readers get the feeling the same might happen for Abbey (though, of course, Abbey survived to write this memoir).

Abbey collects himself and tries to find a way out. He could tear his clothing—a T-shirt, some jeans, and an old straw hat—but the strips would never make a long enough escape rope. There is no way to make a signal fire and no one around to see the smoke anyway, so he sits down and cries in desperation. But he soon wonders if he could put some weight on his walking stick while nudging up the rock wall. Like a slug, he oozes his way up the slick sandstone. Halfway up, he makes it to a ledge and gives up. Once more, however, after noticing an angled rock that might support his weight, he continues inching his way up until he can swing himself back onto ground level. On solid earth, he bursts into tears of joy, and the clouds thunder in response.

Again, Abbey continues to compare himself to Billy-Joe Husk, who wore a straw hat like Abbey and who tore his shirt, as Abbey considers doing here. The comparison to a "slug" also brings the child to mind, who was symbolically "leeched" to a cottonwood trunk during a flood—suggesting the kind of primal, animalistic relation to the earth that Abbey craves. Not just insects but the inanimate landscape, too, connect mystically to Abbey in this moment—notably, he perceives the clouds responding to his joy, as human beings might.

Hiking back to his hut in Havasu, Abbey bellows "Ode to Joy." When the rain starts to pour, he ducks out of the storm under an overhang and strikes a fire with twigs and coyote droppings. He spends a cold, wet, hungry night in this coyote den—one of the happiest nights of his life.

Reminding readers of his preference for music over prose, Abbey cites Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, the famously jubilant "Ode to Joy," rather than spending endless words on an indescribable sense of relief.

THE DEAD MAN AT GRANDVIEW POINT

Presently, with a great heaviness in the air, the tourists creep wearily through Arches National Park. One would have to be crazy to come to the desert in this heat—both the tourists *and* Abbey himself. Clouds form by noon, bringing some rain in a gravelly consistency like tomato soup or blood. After this, thunderstorms kick up tumbleweeds.

Tomato soup, gravel, and blood are classic examples of Abbey's poetic language. They are unlikely comparisons to rain, but they nonetheless succeed in conveying the strangeness of a desert storm.

Evening brings nighthawks, who circle the air and dive to earth suddenly. The noise of their wings is a distant roar. Sleeping outside, Abbey is kept up by their screeches, and he watches the peculiar horizon lighting between dusk and dawn. Coyotes sing strange, unearthly songs, too. They sound like an electronic instrument, like a *cithara* or *Onde Martinote*.

Again, Abbey uses music, not words to capture the desert. It's safe to assume readers have never heard a cithara *(an ancient stringed lyre) or an* Ondes Marenot *(an early electronic keyboard) in real life. The outlandishness of these comparisons communicates the strangeness of the coyotes' song in a way that verbal description never could.*

In the morning, Abbey is called on a manhunt for a missing tourist across Dead Horse Mesa. He meets his brother Johnny (also spending the summer as a ranger), Merle McRae, Floyd Bence, and some policemen, to search for the man: a photographer who left his car on the **road** three days ago. Though the man's nephew describes him with hope, everyone else is sure he's dead by now, as an airplane search has proved useless.

Given Abbey's ongoing critique of cars in national parks, it's significant that the photographer has left his car on the paved highway. Any true entrance into the wilderness, Abbey suggests, must take place apart from automobiles or pavement. His coming thoughts on how death in nature recirculates human beings' energy to the landscape will hinge on this abandonment of technology.

For four hours, the party trudges, checking the usual places of shade: trees, cliffs, and gullies. Staring down one such cliff, with its alluring beauty and power, Abbey quotes a warning against gazing into the abyss, "lest the abyss gaze into you." He spots far-off features, including a rock maze.

This quote from the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche gives readers the sense that this cliff is such a powerful sight for Abbey that the rock itself has a sentient ability to look back. The resulting image—of Abbey and the canyon staring eye-to-eye—is an ironic illustration of Abbey's desire to commune with the earth.

Coming upon a sickened-looking Johnny, Abbey realizes that his brother has found the corpse. A mile from the **road**, under the cover of a **juniper** on a ridge, the dead photographer is bloated like a balloon. When the others arrive, the two brothers try to trace the man's path to the tree, discovering by his tracks where he grew confused and doubled back.

The fact that the photographer died under a juniper—Abbey's symbol of closeness to the desert—illustrates the man's bond to nature in his final moments. Before Abbey ruminates on this, he allows readers to recall the juniper's key role in his own quest for environmental unity, especially when he climbed inside one while reasoning with Moon-Eye the horse.

Abbey admires the steep drop-off and the land below, noting the seldom traversed labyrinth of canyons known as The Maze. Abbey wants to congratulate the dead photographer on his noble death—it was good luck to die out in the open, alone, instead of under the "leech and priest." Though Abbey can't speak for the man, it's easy to imagine how his fear soon abated as his life waned, leaving him to dream of soaring out into space.

Abbey's envy at a death in nature is key here. Notably, the man dies away from "leech and priest," symbols of modern medicine and religion, respectively—two things that, in Abbey's view, equally distract people from the spiritual depth of nature.

The party loads the corpse into the body bag and onto the stretcher, and begins the walk back. They all joke the whole way back about how heavy and leaky the corpse is, and how hungry and tired they are. If they'd known the photographer, maybe they could be reverent—but they didn't, so they don't care. It's not that Abbey wants others dead; it's just that the departure of a middle-aged man makes room for the young and will keep the circle of life going. It's a ruthless cycle, but a clean and beautiful one.

Here, Abbey strikes at the heart of his calm acceptance of death, an acceptance that pervades this chapter as well as his previous recollections of the paranoid cattle rancher Roy Scobie. By making room for new generations, death is a clean and efficient system—a natural "economy," as he previously described, that connects and equalizes all life on Earth.

Some days later—how many Abbey can't say, as calendars have become meaningless—Abbey stands one evening watching Venus low on the horizon. He sees hawks in the sky and imagines the dead photographer from that perspective: he sees himself through the birds' cruel eyes. While fantasizing from the bird's perspective, Abbey feels himself sink into the desert's infinitely large landscape. His perspective zooms out from himself, to the surrounding canyons, out to Utah and Colorado, the Rockies and the Sierra Nevada, the Pacific Ocean, to the edges of the Earth and outer space—a realm that human beings can't discover.

The telescoping view in this scene—from Abbey himself all the way out to the Earth's atmosphere—is a perfect summary of Abbey's thoughts on death in this chapter. One human being (for example, Abbey) is so small, in the grand scheme of Earth, that the only reasonable conclusion is that humanity is a part of nature. So the death of one tiny element of this picture (Abbey, or any other individual) hardly makes a difference to the whole.

TUKUHNIKIVATS, THE ISLAND IN THE DESERT

By late August, the urge to explore the distant mountains—with its water and copious trees—takes over. Abbey packs his truck, tells the **juniper** goodbye, and asks the buzzard to watch over his trailer. He takes the rough and unpaved wagon **road**—loved by him, hated by tourists—out to the highway. The road requires skill and attention, as many rocks and animals lie in Abbey's path.

Two symbols, the juniper tree and the road, come into play here. When Abbey speaks to the juniper, he appears to be able to communicate to Earth—if only in his mind. And the unpaved desert road, by engaging his full attention, confirms that he's in perfect touch with Earth's every contour and obstacle. The takeaway for the reader is that, months into his stay, Abbey has achieved perfect unity with his environment.

Once at the **road**, Abbey speeds past a favorite hiding spot of the highway patrolman. A billboard once stood there, welcoming tourists to Moab, until Abbey sawed it down. As far as Abbey is concerned, tourists should be left to gas themselves to death in their cars en route to big cities—so long as they avoid his precious Moab.

By contrast to the unpaved desert path that puts him in touch with the earth, when Abbey turns onto the paved highway, he's immediately reminded of tourists in their cars—an image that illustrates society's arrogant and industrial alienation from nature.

As the roadside cafés and shops grow sparser, Abbey passes familiar **roads** and turnoffs into dense woods by the foot of the mountain. In the dusk, the light looks pink, and Abbey watches the "alpenglow" in the mountainous distance. By nightfall, he's made it up the mountain, and he pulls off to set up camp. As Abbey's ears and nerves recover from the drive, he hears leaves falling and water running in the cold mountainside. Laying out his desert-warmed sleeping bag, he rejoices in his wine, dinner, and cigar before sleep.

The word "alpenglow" (the pinkish light on a mountain at sunset) is both poetically evocative and scientifically accurate—a perfect compromise between Abbey's hatred for inaccurate description and his quest for creative expression. It's also noteworthy that his audible environment—things as quiet as leaves and water—awakens him from the buzz of his engine on the highway. This gives a sense of how Abbey's perceptive mind can merge with nature.

A squirrel's screech, like a hatchet, wakes Abbey in the morning. He washes in the cold stream and makes bacon and eggs. He considers the aspen trees around him, the lack of birds or animals, and the profusion of toxic larkspur flowers. He ascends the "Hudsonian" mountain of Tukuhnikivats, the trees behind him growing smaller as he climbs. The climb becomes daunting, as there is no clear path to the summit. One doesn't climb here, in fact; one must scramble. But this distinction don't matter—the spiders, pikas (hare-like mammals) and buttercups Abbey passes are more interesting. Buttercups are said to foretell one's love of butter, but all alone, Abbey can't try the experiment.

Again, Abbey stretches language to its poetic limit. "Hatchet" is the unlikeliest word for a squirrel, and yet it captures their particular call. "Hudsonian," while technically a geographical term for the mountain range in Canada, also invokes the highly Romantic Hudson River School of painters. These turns of phrase—along with Abbey's dismissal of the distinction between the verbs "climb" and "scramble"—illustrate the irrelevance of language to Abbey's mountain experience.

Exhausted, but hesitant to stop, Abbey arrives at a snowfield and drinks from a delicious chilly spring. As the snowy climb becomes more vertical, Abbey considers why he's doing this: simply because someone must, he concludes. If he doesn't, someone else will. After a brief sleet storm, the terrain evens out, and Abbey eats lunch under a brilliant sky. He surveys the desert landscape far below him, inventing the names of geographical features to amuse himself, such as "Mollie's Nipple, The Bishop's Prick, [and] Queen Anne's Bottom." The town of Moab is named from the Bible's Book of Kings.

Abbey ruminates further on the uselessness of language, a frustration that takes a comic turn in his long list of imaginary names for the terrain below. By giving rock features sexual names, Abbey point to the arbitrary nature of how geographical features are named. This clashes comically with the Biblical name "Moab," even further heightening the artificial nature of language.

When the wind dies down, Abbey strips naked and sunbathes, leaving nothing between him and the universe but his thoughts. He tries to open his consciousness into unity with the cosmos, but he ends up "earthbound." Then, he starts his descent back to the bottom. The mountain took two hours to climb, but it seems he can make it back down the snow in much less. He kicks down a slab of rock, watching it crash, and figures that by using his boot heel as a brake, he can sled down the mountain with the same method. He climbs aboard a slab and launches down, gathering speed until he and the rock separate. He rolls out of the way to avoid granite at the bottom of the hill, skidding to a stop in time to catch his walking stick.

This scene is the height of Abbey's extended comparison to Adam and the biblical Garden of Eden. By stripping nude (not for the first time), Abbey imitates Adam's nudity before he and Eve lost their paradise. And by trying to contact the cosmos, Abbey nods to Adam's communication with God in Eden. These correspondences to the Bible suggest that the mountainous Tukuhnikivats—just like the desert Arches or the wooded Havasu—are places where human beings can contact the divine. All that's needed in these places, as Abbey shows readers here, is isolation and meditation.

Continuing on foot, Abbey's boots flap apart and expose his frostbitten toes. He'll have to replace them as soon as possible. Abbey carves a memorial to a girl he knows in a nearby aspen. Fifty years from now, the carving in the bark will have enlarged as the tree grows. Abbey's love for the girl, the aspen, the mountain, and the sky will never die.

By committing his love to the tree bark, Abbey is essentially saying that his body and Earth's vegetation are so unified that his feelings might as well be felt by a tree. Just as immaterial thoughts populate material, human brains, Abbey suggests that his immaterial emotions belong to the aspen's bark as much as to his own neurological equipment.

Back at camp, nature is silent except for aspen leaves, running water, and one bird whose lentissimo song Abbey charts out in a bar of musical notation. The bird is a Townsend Solitaire. Few wild animals are around, because the mountain summer—too beautiful to last long—is too short to support them. Abbey walks to a nearby cow pasture to watch the sunset. Tomorrow, he'll walk to another summit, and afterward, head back to Moab for his final month.

Frustrated with language, Abbey has been using music throughout the book as a more accurate desert expression. Here, by printing a bar of notated music, Abbey goes one step further, using music itself (not just a verbal description of music) as a substitute for prose.

EPISODES AND VISIONS

Labor Day brings the final tourist rush of the year in Moab. They enter the desert, trapped in their metallic shells like mollusks. Abbey badly wants to demand that they get out of their cars: take off their sunglasses, look around, and dig their toes in the sand. He wants them to take their bras and shirts off, get hurt, explore, leave their cars behind, and go for a walk in nature.

Abbey renews his anger at modern innovations that separate people from a direct connection with nature: cars and clothing. Throughout the book, he's been sinking his bare feet in the sand to remind him of his innate connection to the earth, and here he states explicitly that this feeling of liberation can't be won without a similar skin-to-skin contact.

Instead, these tourists pummel Abbey with complaints about the lack of Coke machines and questions about how Abbey can live out here without a TV. Abbey answers each with sarcasm, suggesting to them that tourists are the most dangerous animal in the wild. If he tells the truth, they assume he's joking and laugh with him—but by evening, Abbey feels guilty for mocking them. They're largely nice people, and he does enjoy talking with them. He's an exile from the new industrialized America of concrete and iron, and so he looks for sympathetic people to talk to.

Though he's been harsh on tourists before, for their addiction to devices that remove them from nature, here Abbey admits that he likes and sometimes needs these people. His status as an "exile" from modern society means that he needs the company of others. This is an important admission that solitude can't be permanent—people need social life too. This is part of the difficult balance Abbey's been trying to calculate between isolated liberty and social democracy.

Mormons are a major tourist group at Arches. Most of Abbey's friends regard them as foolish political reactionaries—a view supported by the fact that Mormons deny church membership to black people. But Abbey thinks that other religions are just as ridiculous: Baptists insist on baptism for salvation, Jews demand circumcision, Catholics believe Mary was physically sent from Earth to Heaven, and Hindus regard the act of blowing one's nose as sacred.

Before making an important point about Mormons, here Abbey renews his well-established dismissal of organized religion. In this catalog of what Abbey believes are errors in world religions, it's notable that Mormonism's particular flaw is intolerance. Like his tale of the self hating Spaniard Viviano Jacquez, this is evidence of Abbey's wider belief that humanity's arrogance (such as racism) stems out of a disconnection from the earth.

Though equally silly in doctrine, Abbey thinks that Mormons deserve respect for settling the untamed Western frontier with their sheer hard work. They emphasized mutual aid and cooperation in their early communities, something unknown to other parts of America. They wove this belief into all aspects of their society—from irrigation to fencing—and kept their towns small enough to make every member vital.

In Abbey's view, one thing saves Mormons from total ridicule: their work ethic. Because they've lived in a hostile environment for so long, and because their population is relatively low, their self-reliance has allowed them to nurture a compassionate, democratic community. This is vital evidence for Abbey's political argument that finding freedom in nature makes people better citizens.

These early communities have been destroyed by new American industry, though some of their nice, hard-earned architecture remains. But the Mormons who remain, though old-fashioned, are self-reliant and friendly. One Mormon Abbey knows, Leslie McKee's wife, is so hospitable to Abbey that she has ritualistically bound his soul to hers. In doing so, she believes that he will follow her to Heaven when she dies. But if she predeceases him, will he be suddenly robbed of his life? It's not worth the worry, as Abbey, quoting a hymn, is already "marching to Zion."

Once again, as with cowboys and the Navajo, readers see that development—bringing an influx of people to remote parts of the world—has spoiled a hard-working, environmentalist lifestyle. Overpopulation, then, emerges here as the enemy of solitude and personal freedom. Abbey's use of Christian song instead of prose is significant, as it's not so different from his harmonica playing in Glen Canyon. Music further heightens his antipathy toward straightforward expression.


The distant mountains are nice, with their snowcaps like strawberry ice cream cones, but Abbey prefers the desert. It's very hard to say why—it's just more baffling than the mountains or the ocean. From Homer to Melville, many great writers have felt called to write about the ocean. The same goes for mountains, which inspired Rousseau and the Romantic writers. But few write of the desert. Mary Austin, John Van Dyke, and Joseph Wood have produced recent books on the desert, and some novelists have described it in passing. Historical studies from Wallace Stegner and Everett Reuss (who was so allured that one day, he disappeared into the desert forever) are good too. But none address the problem Abbey wishes to address: what is the exact and unique spiritual appeal of the desert?

Here, Abbey strikes at the heart of his frustration with language. The mountains have been accurately captured in literature throughout history—as expressed by Abbey's poetic comparison to strawberry ice cream cones. But the desert's alien strangeness is too elusive for language—it can't be put into words, nor can the difficulty of verbalizing it be put into words. This passage elaborates on Abbey's note in the introduction: that he will try to evoke (not merely describe) the landscape by using a "world of words."

Abbey thinks that the mountains illustrate the brute power of the earth, and the sea hides a hidden world of life under its surface. But the desert, by contrast, says nothing. It is a skeleton of "Being," sparse and austere. On top of its simplicity, however, is a veil of mystery: it asks to be interpreted but never offers answers.

The sea is a useful contrast for Abbey's argument about reality. Its surface obviously conceals a vast underwater world beyond one's sight. But the desert, despite beckoning people to believe in a similar underlying reality, contains only exactly what one sees—an exposed "skeleton" of its own structure. This unshakeable truth prompts Abbey throughout the book to accept mere appearances.

At sea, the journey from one place to another is really the whole point. Similarly, in the mountains, one climbs to the top then must climb back down. The desert, however, is wide open and just inviting enough to support habitation, while still hostile enough to discourage people. This mystery both repels artists and writers from attempt the subject, while drawing people like Everett Reuss deeper and deeper into the landscape. This mysterious search is always futile, as the desert has no treasure or heart. It is a riddle without an answer. This doesn't stop Abbey, however: one whiff of **juniper** smoke, one poem like *The Waste Land*, and he's dying to seek the desert's truths.

Abbey's point about sea travel shines some light on his road metaphor: the open sea can only be a path from one place to the next. But the desert, once entered, serves no purpose other than to be lived in or to be left. As such, roads are irrelevant to its purpose. Further, all the development, industry, and tourism that accompany roads are irrelevant as well—deepening Abbey's argument that the wilderness must remain untouched.


In an argument with a park visitor one night, Abbey is accused of hating humanity. Abbey takes issue with this, and he has to articulate to the man that what he hates is not people but anthropocentricity, the belief that human beings are superior to the earth. This man brags about science and champions the medical prolongation of life.

Abbey finally gives a name to the human arrogance he hates so much: anthropocentricity—the belief that human beings (anthropo-) are at the center (-centricity) of the natural order. Rejecting this ideology, Abbey instead aligns himself with the theory of Robinson Jeffers, whom he's quoted earlier. "Inhumanism" is Jeffers's belief that human beings are no better than animals and the earth.

Abbey and the man agree that culture and civilization are two different things: culture includes collective institutions like religion and economy, while civilization, a byproduct of culture, is a more intangible network of ideas created by individual thinkers. Thousands of such thinkers—from Socrates and Jesus, to Jefferson and Paine, to Twain and Nietzsche—give human life its sense of adventure. Civilization is superior to culture but depends upon culture for its existence, as a brain to a body. Civilization is the vital force; culture the inert mass of institutions. Civilization is mutual aid and self-defense; culture is law and order. Civilization is rebellion; culture is state-sponsored war. Civilization is the angry youth; culture is the cop who guns him down.

Each of these oppositions between "civilization" and "culture" have one major difference: civilization comes from intellectuals, and culture comes from the government. Culture is the enemy for Abbey, who throughout the book has opposed both government infringement on personal liberty and the destruction of the natural parks that inspire such liberty. It's important that Abbey again notes Jefferson, the definer of America's founding freedoms, as Jefferson helps cement Abbey's view that free thought is essential to a functioning society.

After a long debate stretching into the morning, the Abbey and the man go to sleep. Abbey is alone when he wakes. He checks the park's registration book and finds the man's fake name: J. Prometheus Birdsong. Like Christ before him, Birdsong has failed to convert Abbey.

Abbey has already alluded to Prometheus, the Greek hero who was punished for stealing fire for humanity. The fact that this man takes the hero's name suggests he has a similar ambition to achieve more than human beings are naturally capable of. Satisfied with a humbler life in nature, Abbey thinks that Birdsong's Promethean love of science is not only arrogant but harmful—as evidenced by the ravage of Navajo communities by improved medicine and unnatural overpopulation.

Abbey urges the reader to imagine a new scheme to develop the national parks: pave all the **roads** and flatlands in the name of democratic parking, charge huge admission fees, advertise everywhere, replace rangers with pretty girls in costume, drench the desert in electric light, install gas grills everywhere, remove campgrounds to keep people from overstaying. He thinks this is only a slight exaggeration. But once Labor Day is over, as Abbey cleans up the tourists' trash, the former stillness returns, and he can focus on the blooming asters. Their purple flowers are undoubtedly an existential statement. Abbey refutes Heidegger's idea that only human beings truly exist.

By this point, readers are aware of Abbey's antipathy to development—but after such a long section on personal freedom, the road symbol now emerges as a personal enemy to functioning democracies. Here, Abbey links the road symbol to electric lights, advertisement, and immediacy—all hallmarks of modern commercial society. Like roads, each of these things are means to an end (money), and they each threaten nature's status as an end in itself.

In late summer, even the night sky is different. Stoking a campfire for "liturgical requirements," Abbey spots constellations, including Cassiopeia, a big "W." In 1572, Christians interpreted this constellation as a punishment for their persecution of church reformers. Seventeen years before, they'd executed two Bishops at Oxford. Two years later, some 277 more were killed, followed by more over the years until the St. Bartholomew's Massacre in 1572. The cause of all this killing was a small disagreement about transubstantiation (the belief that bread can be transformed into Christ's body and wine into Christ's blood). Abbey admires Cassiopeia and other constellations, and he wonders whether intelligent life exists on Earth. Today, a letter from Abbey's friend Bob Waterman arrived, confirming their upcoming trip into The Maze.

Having just critiqued humanity's arrogance and false superiority, Abbey turns these sentiments toward organized religion. In Abbey's view, Christians tend to interpret the world as evidence for a supernatural deity. Readers have seen Abbey refute miracles—such as when Billy-Joe Husk hallucinates a burning bush—and here, he pokes fun at Reformation-era Christians for a similar misinterpretation. By contrast, Abbey's simple wonder at the stars is his own private act of worship.


TERRA INCOGNITA: INTO THE MAZE

After gathering supplies for their trip, Abbey and Bob Waterman visit Bundy, a garage mechanic, to get directions to The Maze. In their jeep, they follow Bundy's directions, turning off the highway onto a dirt **road** and camping overnight in the Green River Desert. The next day, admiring the distant La Sal Mountains, they bounce down the path past red dunes and clusters of sunflower.

Like Abbey's arrival at Arches, the men's journey to The Maze reiterates the unpaved road as a symbol for personal discovery and spiritual exploration. Because they've turned off the paved highway, readers can expect examples of the freedom and divinity of nature once Abbey and Waterman reach their destination.


As the terrain slowly rises, it starts looking like the Grand Canyon. **Junipers** appear, first as individuals then in small clusters. The females grow berries that taste of gin. At a fork in the **road**, Abbey and Waterman take the older path, figuring that the newer is an oil exploration road. Stopping to explore an abandoned granary, Abbey spies a pornographic photo on the wall of the cabin next door.

Abbey's detail about juniper berries being used to flavor gin adds to the symbol's religious function. Just as wine is used in Catholic communion, the fact that the juniper, Abbey's devotional incense of choice, can also make alcohol highlights its religious role in the book.

At another fork near the Flint Trail, the path becomes more drastically disused. It was once a horse trail, later enlarged by uranium prospectors. Now, all the soil has eroded, exposing bare rock. Not worrying about how to drive back up such an obstacle, Abbey and Waterman push onward, excited to get to The Maze. Finally, Abbey gladly leaves their gasoline-reeking jeep to lead on foot while Waterman slowly drives behind. Descending the four-mile slope, Abbey clears brush for the jeep.

Abbey pushes his road metaphor even further by choosing the overgrown side of the fork—the path less travelled—hinting to readers that the men's experience will provide an authentic connection to the earth. The fact that Abbey this difficult path—the more engaging mode of transport—while Waterman drives highlights Abbey's role as the principal seeker of this connection.

Abbey and Waterman stop to admire some petrified wood and the musical sound of the trees' leaves overhead. Music is an apt descriptor for the desert: if Bach is the sea, Debussy the forest, and Beethoven the mountains, then which composer captures the desert? Abbey thinks that Mozart is too agreeable, and that jazz is too reminiscent of indoor clubs. Instead, the bleak work of Berg, Webern, and Schoenberg fit nicely. These composers are atonal, emotionless, and inhuman—like the desert.

Elsewhere, Abbey has shown his preference for music over words—but here, he delves into exactly why *music suits his subject matter. By choosing the sparsest, bleakest classical music available, Abbey asks readers to imagine that the desert is strange and mysterious beyond what words could convey.*

Like Ralph Newman back in Glen Canyon, Waterman confesses that he doesn't want to return to civilization. America is engaged in another war—Abbey forgets exactly where—and Waterman has been drafted. Abbey encourages him to stay and hide out—he'll bring him supplies and news regularly.

Earlier, Abbey advocated wilderness as a refuge from government tyranny—the most radical means to individual liberty. Here, he shows that refuge in action. As the Vietnam draft protests raged at the time of Desert Solitaire*'s publication, Abbey likely expected a loud outcry of support for Waterman's political retreat into nature.*

Abbey and Waterman drive on along a ridge, peering at their destination: the tangled Maze of rock canyons below. The sandstone is striped like Neapolitan ice cream. Building a **juniper** fire at sundown, the men watch the colors change on the canyon walls and on the four distant spires on the horizon. Abbey asks what they should name these formations, but Waterman protests that they need no name—to name things is a greedy thing to do. Abbey agrees but wonders, like Rainer Maria Rilke, whether things can truly exist for people unless they are named. As Abbey ruminates on the relationship of reality to language, Waterman drifts off to sleep.

In his mountain excursion, Abbey gave comic sexual names to various canyons below. But here, he explains why arbitrary naming of the earth (which he believes all naming to be) is not only silly but arrogant. The universal urge to name things, as Rilke believed, comes from humanity's quest to understand the world. Abbey finds this reasonable. But Waterman's objection—that to name something is a possessive impulse—wins out in this scene. This is yet another reason for Abbey to disdain the artificiality of language.

After readying their supplies in the morning, Abbey and Waterman hook up their rope and rappel down a steep rock face to the first canyon entrance of The Maze. Abbey is scared the rope will snap, but Waterman reassures him. After a three-hour descent, they both make it down safely. They must find water before they do anything else, so they hike toward the Colorado River. Soon spotting some trees and wild cane, Abbey digs and finds drinkable water. Hydrated and relieved, Abbey sings a verse of Burns about green rashes. Then, he whittles a reed into a flute, which he plays in a strange scale that he thinks has never been heard before.

This scene combines Abbey's suspicion of language with his advocacy of the freedom that nature gives people. Abbey devoted a whole previous chapter to finding water in the desert, but only here does he really show his skills in action. The empowerment he gains by being able to hydrate himself in the wild leads to his overwhelming relief—a feeling that, as readers have seen, defies standard prose. Thus, Abbey reverts to poetry in order to express it. Additionally, his makeshift flute communicates exactly what's so strange about the desert in a way that words never could.


As Waterman naps, Abbey explores the labyrinth of canyons and bathes in a refreshing pool. Waterman finds him, and they explore a ledge together. When dusk comes, they decide to leave The Maze in order to return tomorrow. They spot a Native American petroglyph on a canyon wall, concluding that, other than this relic, the place has been completely untouched. But they have yet to reach the heart of The Maze, where they'll find out for sure.

The petroglyph here—though a sign of other human beings—is so old that it indicates this place's immense solitude. In this image, the theme of nature's ancientness (a divine quality) combines with the theme of freedom arising from solitude.


In the morning, the sky seems to forecast rain or even snow—an uncommon but not impossible phenomenon in the desert. Abbey panics, since the rocky path they took to get here will become impassable if wet. Since they both have to return in a day—Abbey to his ranger duties, Waterman to Colorado University—they agree to abandon their exploration after a hearty breakfast. After packing their things, they hike back to the jeep, and Abbey daydreams of festooning one of the lonely **junipers** in Christmas tree ornaments.

Abbey panics when the wet road threatens to trap them in. In this passage, roads—a symbol for an authentic connection with nature—take on a surprisingly threatening quality. Abbey illustrates this in order to show that the kind of solitude he advocates doesn't come without risk. Risk in nature, however, leads to the worthwhile rewards of personal empowerment and freedom.


Luckily, they make it back up the Flint Trail before the snow picks up. They stop at the park "shrine" to sign the register. Abbey scribbles a plea to leave the land alone, "for God's sake," signing his name. Waterman writes the same plea but "for Abbey's sake," signing it "God." They race back through the 40 miles of unpaved desert **road** to the highway, which they follow back to Arches National Monument in time for cocktails.

"Shrine" is Abbey's joke—the visitor's register is hardly an altar. But calling it one helps illustrate how he interprets nature as sacred, even when Park Service tourist features threaten the purity of this nature. Waterman's inversion of Abbey's "God's sake" message is a comic illustration of Abbey's belief that humanity and Earth should have a reciprocal relationship.


BEDROCK AND PARADOX

The tourists have left the desert, packing into their awful cars to repopulate their cities, leaving Abbey to enjoy his last day in the desert, where all the most important things happen. Tonight, he must board a plane to Denver, then on New York—but he will return next year. Unhappy and bitter, Abbey shaves his beard off. Looking like a bank clerk, he tries on a white collared shirt and a "garrote" tie in the mirror.

Equating his necktie with a "garrote" (a noose) symbolizes Abbey's reluctance to return to society. Clearly, comparing city clothing to an execution or suicide shows the ultimate contrast between the freedom he's been enjoying in nature and the cramped oppression he expects in New York.

Abbey thinks that the secret to living both city and desert life is balance. Thoreau insisted on a full retreat into the wilderness, but this is inadvisable. After six months in the desert, Abbey longs to see people's faces on 42nd Street and Atlantic Avenue. He's sick of keeping himself company, and he wants to talk to train conductors, cab drivers, cops, and the millions of other New Yorkers.

Despite his noose imagery above, this scene marks perhaps the book's strongest moral: that the wilderness can't be a permanent escape from society. Echoing his realizations with Ralph Newcomb in Glen Canyon, Abbey argues that people need one another. By calling out Henry David Thoreau—whose Walden advocates a permanent retreat into wilderness—Abbey distinguishes his argument about freedom and society from an important literary predecessor.

The desert has driven Abbey crazy, though he doesn't mind. The desert invites crazies, such as a recent German visitor to his campsite, a toolmaker who drove a Porsche. Spotting Abbey's trailer, the man invited himself over and started defending Hitler's actions in World War II. America should have sided with the Germans, the Nazi says. Defending America—something he rarely does—Abbey grows angry enough to want to kill the man. But when he considers that the man hasn't seen the Arches or the Grand Canyon, he wishes him well and lets him leave.

Violence is a good illustration of Abbey's belief in the socially restorative powers of nature. Abbey acknowledges humanity's total moral freedom in the wilderness, hearkening back to his river trip with Newcomb. As Abbey pointed out in that chapter, Newcomb could have murdered Abbey if he'd wanted. And here, Abbey could easily kill the Nazi. But in each case, because the exhilaration of the river prevented Newcomb and because the beauty of the Arches now prevents Abbey, readers see how prolonged contact with nature converts the moral freedom of the wilderness into an affection for mankind. The Nazi altercation encapsulates how nature can help people in society overcome grave differences.


In October, there's lots of tumbleweed and aspen at Arches National Monument. The sunsets are so colorful that they are hard to believe—they are improvisatory, like God's pizza pies. Abbey makes a final tour of the park, stopping at all the major rock formations: his children, his possessions by right of love—by divine right.

"God's pizza" is one final poetic image—suggesting both vigorous twirling and assorted colors—for an indescribable phenomenon. The idea of possession "by right of love" is also notable: unlike industrialized society's arrogant exploitation of nature for profit, Abbey claims that pure, emotional connection grants him ownership. This demonstrates the harmony that Abbey has established with his environment over the summer. That he qualifies this love as divine shows that, for him, his ongoing act of worshipping nature is reciprocal—Earth repays his worship by admitting him as an equal owner.


The desert will be grateful for Abbey's departure. But isn't gratitude a human emotion that deserts can't feel? The desert doesn't feel one way or the other toward Abbey; it's indifferent. Whether or not humanity extinguishes itself with nuclear weapons, people are equally irrelevant to the landscape. That might even be a good thing, allowing living things to start again from scratch. This is Abbey's faith.

Despite his thoughts above on the sacred, reciprocal relationship between nature and humanity, here Abbey stops himself—as he's done throughout the book—from treating Earth like just another human. Nature's indifference makes it all-powerful and indifferent—like a deistic god in which Abbey has "faith." Abbey's line about nuclear suicide echoes Robinson Jeffers's idea that corrupt civilizations inevitably destroy themselves and start anew. By referring to this view, Abbey concludes his anger toward human arrogance and development on a hopeful (though dark) note.


Abbey gathers all his spare **juniper** trunks into a bonfire—a signal to the world that goes unheeded. It doesn't matter; all things are in motion, from the distant tumbleweeds to Abbey himself. After cleaning out the trailer, Abbey suddenly feels the urge to leave at once. He abandons his plan to give a ceremonial goodbye to the juniper by his trailer.

The famous juniper by his trailer stands in for Abbey's closeness to the desert. By not saying goodbye, Abbey illustrates how emotionally difficult it would be to do so—like lovers parting at the end of a romantic story. This almost human relationship gives readers a clear sense of the deep spiritual connection Abbey has discovered for the earth.

At the ranger station, Abbey learns that his flight to Denver has been cancelled. A new ranger, Bob Ferris, drives him there instead. As they speed on the **highway**, the sight of the huge amber sunset possesses Abbey. He demands that Ferris turn the car around, but Ferris refuses, pressing on the gas—Abbey has a plane to catch. Calming down, Abbey consents, and the two men light cigars. The desert will still be the same when Abbey returns. But will he himself be the same?

Bob Ferris a minor yet important character in Abbey's memoir. Just as Ralph Newcomb's pipe-smoking calmness echoed Earth's indifference in "Down the River," here Ferris's refusal to turn around (and his foot on the gas) symbolically represent Abbey's immovable commitment to civilization. Though Abbey begs him for a moment, Ferris's insistence wins out—suggesting that all human beings, no matter how devoted to nature, must bring the lessons they've learned in the wilderness back and apply them to the greater good of society. The appearance of the highway here—an ongoing symbol of industry and capitalism—suggests that Abbey must make a compromise. Because his obligations demand his return to living among other people, he must also find a way—as everyone must—to come to terms with their arrogance.


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