Reflections of Nature in the Works of Four Nobel Prize Winning Nordic Authors:

Knut Hamsun, Haldor Laxness, Selma Lagerlof, and Johannes V. Jensen

By

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Honors Thesis
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PASS WITH DISTINCTION
TO THE UNIVERSITY HONORS COLLEGE:

As thesis advisor for Jeffrey Ramu,

I have read this paper and find it satisfactory.

Thesis Advisor
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Introduction

Differences in culture emanate from many sources. One of the greatest emulations of cultural disparity stems from the source itself, creation. Creation myths have historically been passed from one generation to the next, first through oral means, then through written language. These stories about the beginning, in terms of both the world and its inhabitants, in many ways define a culture's tendencies. As per example, the Judeo-Christian creation story of Genesis, God's six days of creation, and one day of rest, followed by Adam and Eve's fall from the earthly paradise of Eden, has left much of current western culture with an overbearing dominion-like approach to the natural world.

Knut Hamsun (1859-1952), Haldor Laxness (1902-1998), Selma Lagerlof (1858-1940), and Johannes V. Jensen (1873-1950) all stem from 'western' countries. Respectively, they come from Norway, Iceland, Sweden, and Denmark. However, they share an intrinsic association that causes deviation from the imperial 'command and conquer' the wilds mentality often associated with the western world. Perhaps this association is granted in part by the 'western' countries from which they originate. Or, perhaps the association is more greatly imbued by the common time period from which the authors blossomed.

Norway, Iceland, Sweden, and Denmark comprise four-fifths of the Nordic world. Similar in culture and language, these countries have evolved not independently, but with an overly binding cohesive mesh. Through wars with each other, imperial rule, and migration, these countries have grown together, from fledgling wilds to refined powers. As Sven Rossel writes, "Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Iceland, and, to some extent, Finland share not only a historical, ethnic, and linguistic heritage but also a homogeneous
culture...” (ix). It is through this homogenous culture that the world has been given four great Nobel winning authors.

Personal means and morals surely shape the works of any author. Hamsun, Laxness, Lagerlof, and Jensen each ascertain a purely personal style and mode of expression, but some overriding force exists, collating their works with a fresh approach to literature involving various elements of the natural world. That overriding force may be the homogenous culture Rossel discusses, it may be the time period in which they wrote, or, it may be something altogether different, a conscious, concerted effort at purporting nature through literature.

These four authors were burgeoning in an era moving from one genre to the next, at times in the midst of two. Romanticism was giving way to modernism, and, with the help of writers, nature was finding its own new voice. Environmental movements on the American front were championed by the likes of John Muir and Gifford Pinchot, and American National Parks were a rising entity. While the United States was wavering between environmental preservation and conservation, Hamsun, Laxness, Lagerlof, and Jensen were providing their own view of the natural world, not directly in the light of contemporary environmental ethics, but in a literary hue altogether worth devouring.

In 1907, Johannes V. Jensen published an article entitled “Peasant/Farmer Civilization” addressing the nature-inflected writing of Hamsun and the ultimate role of the peasant/farmer on literary culture. Jensen wrote, “The most highly valued literary treasures have come to us from anonymous commoners. Modern civilization...derives its entirety from the nature-bound imagination of the farmer” (Knut Hamsun 96). The wide-ranging concept of ‘peasant/farmer’ held by Jensen, Hamsun’s retort to Jensen in an
article of the same name in 1908, reflections of both views, and intrinsic elements of
nature by these four authors create the foundation of this paper.

Four authors from four Nordic countries; four Nobel prizes awarded within fifty-
six years for works with conveniently tangential themes. Running throughout these
selected works is a conscious, concerted effort at relaying the imports of Nature. Similar
times, similar backgrounds, similar themes with slightly differing views. Nature is
present, but how, why, and how far is its shadow cast?

Norwegian Nature: Hamsun

Similar to many authors, Knut Hamsun drew upon personal experience and daily
life to formulate his craft. While the works of Knut Hamsun are as varied as the day-to-
day trials of the author himself, one constant element pervades a number of his novels,
the natural world.

Born into a farming family in 1859, Knut spent his formative years on farms in
both southern and northern Norway. After living as a child in the Lofote islands, an
environment rich in woods and mountains, Hamsun’s intense feelings for nature were
provoked (Rossel 99). These feelings are manifested in a number of early peasant
novellas, giving way to the naturalistic themes his later novels adopt.

After spending six years in the United States and traveling to large cities like
Oslo, Copenhagen, Helsinki, Moscow, and Paris, Hamsun returned to his roots, Norway’s
rich farmland, to marry and raise a family. This return to farm life may have given vision
for novels containing the same, portrayals of nature and the farm.

Johannes V. Jensen, a Danish friend and colleague, once wrote, “The most highly
valued literary treasures have come to us from anonymous commoners. Modern
civilization...derives its entirety from the nature-bound imagination of the farmer.”

Provoked by Jensen, Hamsun wrote an article similarly entitled “Peasant/Farmer Civilization,” refuting Jensen’s comments. In his essay, Hamsun describes the development of the modern artist as a movement away from nature, questioning Jensen’s use of the term ‘farm culture.’ Hamsun reproaches Jensen’s stance, writing “You [Jensen] could write a more wonderful medieval ballad than Scandinavia has ever seen,” alluding to the implications of rustic art and literature Hamsun feels as present in Jensen’s ‘farm culture.’ If by ‘farm culture’ Jensen meant the daily simple pleasures and practical endeavors of peasant culture, Hamsun preferred it instead be called by its proper name, materialism (Knut Hamsun 96). Hamsun did not consider this form of materialism to be a suitable subject for modern literature.

What implications are gleaned from Hamsun’s response? While Jensen does laudably approach an ideal, Hamsun seems to refute it with a derogatory reproach. However, if Hamsun’s use of the term ‘materialism’ in the strict sense that ‘farm culture’ is built upon the daily material laboring of man with the earth is applied to his later novel Growth of the Soil, it can only be assessed that either Hamsun was wrong in his earlier statement, Hamsun evolved to a position closer to Jensen, or that the ‘Great National Novel of Norway’ is not a literary treasure.

Hamsun’s evolving stance on farming, and the broader umbrella of nature, can be seen in two of his works, Pan, written in 1894, and Growth of the Soil, written in 1917. Both of these novels range in contextual themes greatly, but contain one distinct similarity, a concerted effort at purporting the importance of nature in both the individual and society.
In *Pan*, Hamsun presents a protagonist, Lieutenant Thomas Glahn, in a story that contains an intertwined duality. This duality consists of the two fronts that give this novel standing power. On one front, Hamsun addresses Glahn’s summer experiences in the native wilds of Nordland. These experiences embody a neo-romantic form of pantheism bordering on hysterical absurdity. The second front, to which absurdity is also attached, involves Lieutenant Glahn’s love/hate/misery encounters with three women. These women provide the reader with humorous reprieve from the nature walks and hunting trips Glahn periodically takes throughout the novel.

*Pan* is set in Nordland, the place of Hamsun’s youth, in and about the fishing village of Sirilund. Unlike the other characters in the book, Glahn and his faithful dog, Aesop, live not in the village of Sirilund but in a cabin resting in the nearby forests. Glahn’s residence in the forest, out and away from the civilization of the village, implies a sense of seclusion, an attempt to separate from society. Such withdrawals from society are often reflected in literature, ranging from Thoreau and *Walden Pond*, to the cheap, harlequin mountain man tales of the western expansion America endured in the nineteenth century. But, if this is an attempt by Glahn to hide in nature, away from human surroundings, it remains an incomplete quest. His continual interaction with village folk and accepted invitations to social gatherings keep the isolationist’s quest out of Glahn’s reach. Granted, Thoreau, in his time on Walden Pond, was surely not as separated from society as his writings may suggest, but was the intent of Hamsun’s creation of Glahn to fight for or against nature as a release from societal bonds?

Topically, it appears that when Glahn is alone with Aesop, his faithful companion, hunting in the woods, that he is free from the burdens encountered when
interacting in social situations. Hamsun paints Glahn as an awkward man, a social outsider that outcasts himself from the same social circles he repeatedly approaches with anticipation. As Glahn recounts, “I prefer to stay in the woods, that’s my joy. Here in my solitude it does no harm to anyone that I am as I am, but when I get together with others I have to concentrate on being as I ought to” (Pan 78). Healthy or not, nature is Glahn’s escape.

Alas, Lieutenant Glahn does not fully separate himself from society and seemingly lives two lives, each of half-hearted measure. One life encompasses an overly dramatized version of Nature’s pantheistic idealisms, from which stems the belief that a God exists within every element of nature, and the other a pathetic string of unacceptable social actions. Glahn switches from telling about a rock that knows of his presence, “There was a rock in front of my hut, a tall, gray rock, by its looks it seemed well-disposed toward me, it was as if it saw me when I came by, and recognized me” to catching himself with perturbing action in social situations akin to an absurdly disobedient child (Pan 7). In one scene, Glahn, for no apparent or explained reason, throws the shoe of a love interest into the sea while on a boat ride.

Are Glahn’s absurd social actions nullified by his ‘escape’ into nature, or does the act of escaping quantify a greater wrong, painting nature not as a safe-haven for the socially unsound, but instead as a potentially treacherous pit quietly waiting to usurp the unwary? Perhaps this question would be more positively answered had the novel ended with Glahn’s ‘happily-ever-after’ life alone in the Norwegian woods, but it ends with a report of the Lieutenant’s death while tiger hunting in the wilds of India. Glahn falls
victim to nature, suffering a glorified death (gun in hand) in exotic style (wild tigers) that caps a novel where nature is constantly eroticized.

Glahn’s death in nature signifies that an escape into nature, whether half-hearted or not, is not an amenable way to exist in the natural world. While Hamsun uses Glahn’s escapades into nature to discuss his lofty version of pantheism, the ideal itself does not prove to be a sustaining factor in Glahn’s life. In fact, it eventually causes his death.

Throughout the novel, Glahn’s relationship with nature appears to the unobservant as a parallel to the predominant western view of human dominion over nature, a ‘command and conquer’ the woods mentality. Glahn is a hunter, but only kills for subsistence. In reality, Glahn’s approach to the natural world takes a form far different than that of the common western man concerned only with controlling and subduing the forest; Glahn’s is a search for meaning through interpretation, Nature as a mirror of and reason for his existence. Ronald Popperwell writes:

He [Glahn] makes nature minister to his needs for companionship, for God, and the fulfillment of his visions. For Glahn, nature is never autonomous; it never operates on its own account. This gives him the satisfaction of being in complete control (unlike his relationship with Edvarda), since he sees what he wants in nature, namely a reflection of himself (26).

Lt. Glahn’s view of nature as a reflection of himself and an embodiment of higher beings becomes transposed onto, and synonymous with, his feelings for one of the three main female characters in the novel, Edvarda.

Glahn views Edvarda as exotic, and the erotic way in which he approaches her mirrors his dealings with nature: “Why should I let myself be blinded any longer by this capricious person, this fisher wench...hadn’t her name been stuck in my heart long enough, sucking it dry?” (Pan 77). Yet, Edvarda’s hold on Glahn remains as firm as the
one nature has on the poor lieutenant, “I go from one flower to another, they are in ecstasy; the flowers are steeped in an erotic ecstasy” (33). Once again, the question remains, are both the cause and effect of Glahn’s transposition from nature to Edvarda healthy? No. While the Lieutenant can mold nature into the mirror he wishes it to be, he is unable to mold Edvarda in the same way. This leads to the ruin of Glahn’s social relationship with the woman, and the path leading to his eventual death, a trip afar to India.

From the title onward, Hamsun’s novel purports pantheism, the belief that a deity exists within every living or non-living object in the natural world. It is an interesting ideal warranting serious thought by any eco-minded individual, but Glahn’s overly sympathetic embodiment of it detracts from the inherent possibilities of pantheism that may ultimately lead to an environmentally conscious human populace. One finds it difficult to find credibility in a Glahn that approaches nature in such an emotional manner:

I’m filled with a mysterious gratitude; everything befriends me, intermingles with me, I love all things. I pick up a dry twig, hold it in my hand and look at it as I sit there having my own thoughts. The twig is nearly rotten, its poor bark affects me, pity stirring my heart. And when I get up to go, I do not throw the twig away but lay it down and stand there feeling fond of it. Finally, with moist eyes I give it one last look before leaving it there (15).

Many readers may have difficulty accepting with validity a protagonist that cries over the state of a single twig.

Problems with the pantheistic approach Hamsun uses through Glahn’s dual life exist, but valuable lessons still remain within the pages of Pan, lessons the world must recognize and accept in order for continued survival. “Well, I didn’t shoot to murder, I shoot in order to live. I needed one grouse today and so I didn’t shoot two, I’d shoot the
other one tomorrow. Why should I shoot more?” Lieutenant Glahn says in an early tone of conservationism (23). And thus, it is in statements like this that Knut Hamsun’s reflections of nature shine brightest.

Lieutenant Glahn is a needy character. Hamsun’s implementation of pantheism appears to be a way of filling the personal voids Glahn has, but the outcome of such a transposition ultimately ends in failed human relationships and death. Regardless, Pan provides an excellent view into Hamsun’s early views of nature and its role in human life and literature. Hamsun gives nature indirect, roundabout importance in filling the selfish needs of the Lieutenant, explores the realm of ‘natural’ deities, and the role of nature as an escape.

Hamsun’s reflection of nature assumes a different role in a later novel, Growth of the Soil, a story about Isak and his wife Inger, the life they live, family they raise, and interactions they have in taming the northern wilds of Norway on their farm, Sellanraa. From the onset of the story, Hamsun introduces a view of nature entering ownership into the relationship of man with nature; it is a new twist away from the pantheism of Pan. The ownership the novel deals with is not constantly in favor of Isak, and the other farmers in the novel. The relationship is comparable to servant-master, where at times man wins small victories in clearing a plot of trees for tilling or reaping a good year’s harvest, but nature nearly always ends with the upper hand.

Hamsun creates a sense of human dominion, nature’s purpose for man and man’s purpose for nature, on Growth’s first pages:

The long, long road over the moors and up into the forest—who trod it into being first of all? Man, a human being, the first that came here. There was no path before he came. Afterward, some beast or other…. Thus was made the road
through the great Almenning—the common tracts without an owner; no-man’s land (3).

Hamsun here discusses that the land exists for man, not beast. This opening paragraph to the novel leads the reader into a new version of Hamsun’s reflections of nature, a view that glorifies both the land and the Norwegian farmer who toils daily upon it. As Harald Naess writes in his article about *Growth of the Soil*, “In his [Hamsun’s] early novels, even though they have pastoral scenes, the farmer is looked down upon as ‘nothing but lice, peasant cheese, and Luther’s catechism’” (6). As one of Hamsun’s later novels, and the work that most likely garnered his Nobel for a lifetime of literary work, *Growth* is the national song of patriotism for the Norwegian farmer. A positive response to Jensen it may be, the acceptance of ‘farm-culture’ and ‘materialism’ as wholly good.

As Isak’s cultivations of his land about Sellanraa turn into good years creating growth on the farm, a disparaging sense of helplessness in nature is established. Isak has no power over the weather and remains at the whims of the wind. Good years of fruitful harvest are hampered by inclement weather and interspersed bad crops. Isak, while tilling the land and mastering both wood and beast, remains an obedient servant of nature. Unlike Glahn, Isak of Sellanraa sees nature as an uncontrollable entity that, with some good fortune, may provide a life of solitude and prosperity.

While this is a story for the people of Norway, farmer folk of the North, *Growth of the Soil* is much more than the tale of a farmer’s family. Through the wandering businessman Geissler, social issues, industrialization, and politics meet the simple folk at Sellanraa. As Harald Naess writes, “After all, in Scandinavia, it is possible not only to be a progressive social engineer and yet be drawn to the solitude of the woods or to appreciate a sense of personal insignificance vis-à-vis all-powerful nature” (9). And so
Geissler is, a reflection of Hamsun in fiction, a fox, a social engineer always with a plan for something greater than the hardworking hands of Isak alone can provide.

Throughout *Growth*, it is apparent that the novel is Hamsun’s platform for idealizing ‘materialism’ through farming, in that farming is an acceptable, ‘essential and constructive,’ form of serving some higher will (Naess 14). In this sense, a stark contrast between the Hamsun of *Growth*, and the Hamsun of “Peasant/Farmer Civilization” is seen. Regardless of the reason for change, it provides a view agreeing with the literary treasures Jensen addresses, written by a mature Hamsun fully embracing his ‘farm culture.’

*Pan* and *Growth of the Soil* offer two differing views of nature. Each with implicit difficulties and successes, both novels offer reflections the world must see without dampening blinders. For independent reasons, Hamsun differently addresses nature, explaining varying themes with the same predominant level of importance. Respect and love for nature remain, as does the power of nature both books purport, long after the characters fade away.

**Laxness: Independent People, Tied to the Land**

Halldor Kiljan Laxness, born in Reykjavik, Iceland, in 1902 knew much of Mother Nature as a child. Reflected in his many writings, and embodied in his Nobel acceptance speech, earthly environments created a productive stranglehold on the author’s life:

I spent my entire childhood in an environment in which the mighty of the earth had no place outside storybooks and dreams. Love of, and respect for, the humble routine everyday life and its creatures was the only moral commandment which carried conviction when I was a child (from Laxness’s Nobel acceptance speech 1).
Originally born Halldor Gudjonsson, the author later adopted his penname, Laxness, from the name of the farm his family moved to when he was three years old. After writing his first novel at age seventeen, Laxness spent the major part of his next ten years traveling throughout Europe and the United States, writing varied works in Icelandic and trying his fortune at script writing in California.

In 1931, Laxness “turned toward the common people of Iceland for inspiration” with the production of *O Thou Pure Wine*, followed by *The Bird on the Beach* in 1932, both books were later combined as *Salka Valka*, “The primitive child of nature who is capable of dealing with all the difficulties and harshness of existence” (Rossel 250). In 1935, Laxness finished the novel that most likely won the author a Nobel Prize, *Independent People*.

*Independent People* continues the ‘return to roots’ tradition of *Salka Valka*, addressing the broad Icelandic farming history in epic form. In the story the protagonist, Bjartur, after working as a farmhand for the local bailiff for eighteen years, earns enough to finally buy his own small farm. The portion of land he buys is located on the very edge of the Icelandic wilderness. Originally named Winterhouses, Bjartur renames the property Summerhouses, acquires a dog, horse, wife, and twenty-five ewes to become Bjartur of Summerhouses, farmer, independent man, and “The king of his own small realm” (Hallberg 93). As Bjartur tells of his own turf palace, “I may not have built myself a king’s palace of marble and sapphire, but I’ve built myself at any rate a palace that stands on a foundation of eighteen years” (112). But, Bjartur’s life on the farm comes at a price. His freedom comes at a price. Tragedy strikes; two wives die, and lambs are continually lost.
Laxness’s novel certainly draws many comparisons to Hamsun’s, *Growth of the Soil*. With certain similar questions posed, the two works appear jaggedly connected. In response to this, Laxness writes:

...My certainty that Hamsun’s social conclusions in *Growth of the Soil* were on the whole erroneous had its part to play in the origin of my book. These two books, like thousands of other books, have in common the fact that they deal with farmers and their problems; but the keynote of the one book is clearly opposed to that of the other (Hallberg 97).

Laxness, however, may be conveniently dismissing the common social issues intertwined in nature that the two books share. As Brad Leithauser writes in his introduction of *Independent People*, “While the book does keep large issues constantly in mind...it is also very much about dung and sheep-parasites; it sets the reader vividly, unforgettably, upon a farm” (xviii). Before the larger social issues can be dissected, an honest interpretation of Bjartur’s relationship to the land, his role as farmer, must be made.

The nature that Laxness presents via Bjartur comes in the form of farmland, Icelandic mountain rangeland for sheep. This ‘nature’ is the key to Bjartur’s bane, his quest for freedom. In attaining freedom, he must control his livestock and maintain fodder, healthy land, for his animals. While he, similar to Isak, cannot fully control the land, he must dance to a cyclical tune of cohesive stability, good years countered by bad.

In the forefront of Bjartur’s mind remains his daily toil for continued independence. This toil is sustained in literal subservience, not to other humans, but to the land that creates his freedom from others. “My sheep have made me an independent man,” states Bjartur, “and I will never bow to anyone” (251). Independent from others, Bjartur may be, but dependent on the land, he surely is.
Aside from issues of dependence, Laxness presents Bjartur as a knowledgeable man, a farmer that knows his land, “Bjartur of Summerhouses knew better than most people all those nooks and crannies of the far mountain pastures…” (85). Bjartur feels for his land and stock in a way similar to Hamsun’s Lt. Glahn, but not as emotionally dense. There are no tears over twigs for Bjartur, just patriotic song and rhyme for mountain lands, “But the high heath had also a value for this man other than the practical and the economic. It was his spiritual mother, his church, his better world…” (86). While this does not purport any sense of an ethical approach to nature, it is a clear reflection of the role nature plays, or should play.

Similar to both Glahn and Isak, solitude is an inherent element in the ‘life within nature’ that Bjartur lives. Haldor Laxness explicitly states the importance of solitude combined with the natural world, adding a romantic twist, “Nothing nurtures the poet’s gift so much as solitude on long mountain journeys” (86). Through Bjartur, and his ‘long mountain journeys,’ a sense that his poetic gifts receive nourishment remains prevalent throughout the novel.

As *Independent People* continues along in epic fashion with the lives of Bjartur and his family, the all-important heath remains the foundation upon which the novel is built. At one point, when one of Bjartur’s sons desires to leave the farm and travel to America, Bjartur answers him, “World? What is that? This is the world, the world is here; Summerhouses, my farm—that is the world” (214). The son leaves Bjartur’s world, and, by the novel’s end, Bjartur himself is forced to leave it too and move to a new plot of land.
What important issue is Laxness here trying to address? After establishing Summerhouses as the center of Bjartur’s world, and then creating a plot involving his removal, readers may be left in a quandary. Unlike Isak who, aside from minor setbacks, gains considerable wealth due to his hard farm laboring, Bjartur suffers a farmer’s ultimate loss, the loss of the land itself. As Bjartur comes to terms with this loss in the presence of his sickly, illegitimate daughter, Asta Sollilja, the flower of Bjartur’s life, Laxness champions perseverance, “My opinion has always been this,” Bjartur says, “that you ought never to give up as long as you live, even though they have stolen everything from you. If nothing else, you can always call the air you breathe your own, or at any rate you can claim that you have it on loan” (479). Thus the story ends with Bjartur and Asta on their way to new lands, dejected but not broken.

*Independent People* is indeed an epic work about the life of an Icelandic sheep farmer. Laxness’s treatment of the complex issues contained within solidify it as a formidable piece of literature, and, in many ways, it appears to be an extension of the work earlier put forth by Hamsun in *Growth* regarding reflections of the farmer. How does it relate to Jensen’s statement about ‘farm culture?’ Directly equated, Laxness exemplifies the ‘anonymous commoners’ explicit in Jensen’s essay. *Independent People* is full of reflections about nature, reflections that stem ‘from the nature-bound imagination of the farmer.’

*Lagerlof’s Wonderful Adventures*

Selma Lagerlof’s approach to nature meets the reader in a form much different than those used by the previous two authors. Unlike Laxness and Hamsun who intertwine complex social issues with the world of nature on a level only fit for adults,
Lagerlof relates the tales and traditions of her native Varmland, a region in Sweden, on a level open to all ages. One of her many masterpieces, *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*, written in 1907, two years before receiving the Nobel Prize, assumes the role of geography reader for school children.

The novel, despite its simplistic approach, delves into contemporary Swedish issues, including the development of industry and agriculture on a supplemental level that does not detract from the fairy tale references and story-telling tendencies that make the book such an enjoyable read. *Wonderful Adventures* further differs from the previous works in that it overtly suffices as an educative novel. As the main character, Nils, is magically turned into Thumbietot, a Tom Thumb character, and taken on a journey by a wild goose; readers are not only entertained, but also learn integral lessons about Swedish history, geography, morals, and the environment.

Born in 1858 on a small estate called Marbacka, Lagerlof's artistic development was shaped by the old tales and family traditions that abounded in her native province. While in teacher's school, Lagerlof for the first time drew upon these oral tales for a written work that led to a lifetime of authorship. While her many works contain varied themes, ranging from religion to the animal kingdom, her use of Swedish narration remains effective throughout. In the case of *Nils*, that narration develops a central topic, nature.

As Nils is transformed into a miniature Tom Thumb and travels about Sweden on the neck of a wild goose, not only are the wild countryside's and tamed farmlands described, but also an early nature ethic is actually formulated. Through humorous tales
of animal trial and tribulation, Thumbietot protects his geese friends, and other animals of
the forest, against danger, namely from the cunning Smirre Fox.

Animal-human relations are addressed during Thumbietot and Akka’s, the lead
goose, first meeting. As Akka and the other animals in the story possess the ability to
speak, Lagerlof narrates from an animal’s point of view: “The wild goose came nearer.
But it was evident that it was hard for her to master her fear. ‘I have been taught to fear
everything in human shape—be it big or little’” (53). Akka overcomes the fear, but its
presence is duly explained in later altercations with hunters, where readers are told of gun
blasts whizzing past animals from the opposite side of the gun, in the voice of the prey.
While human predation is raised as an issue, Lagerlof does not slant against what the
Swedes have done for hundreds of years, hunted wild game.

There are instances in the story, however, where Lagerlof does assert a stance.
Subtle as it may be, the author continually describes the intrinsic value of the wilds. She
does not pit intrinsic versus instrumental, and directly debate the concerns of both, for
that would deviate from the workings of her story. Rather, in a lyrical fashion, she
combines a children’s story with environmental theories pertinent even today.

At one point in the story, Lagerlof describes Kullaberg, a mountain located in
Sweden where all the surrounding animals gather once a year for a great crane dance.
She begins her description of the mountain rather timidly, “Kullaberg is low and rather
long. It is not by any means a big or imposing mountain” (137). In opposition to the
misplaced belief that size, grandiosity, adhere to and signify terms of beauty, Lagerlof
presents a Swedish view that establishes alternate intrinsic merits as reason for human
attraction, “These remarkable mountain walls, with the blue sea beneath them, and the
clear penetrating air above them, is what makes Kullaberg so dear to the people that great
crowds of them haunt the place every day…” (139). The author ascribes more difficulty
in telling just why the animals choose the mountain as their rendezvous, but that “One
should have been there when the first sea-wave was dashed into foam…to be able to
explain why just Kullaberg was chosen…in preference to all other places” (140).
Perhaps Lagerlof is stating that the animals know, and can only know, because they have
been around since time immemorial.

What is the relevance of the intrinsic values Lagerlof attaches to nature? Simply
stated, when nature is approached with intrinsic value in mind, preservationist values are
inherently adopted, attitudes that stress the importance of nature not in relation to human
use or consumption, but in relation to nature itself. Lagerlof’s assertions do not reach
grandiose, propaganda proportions in terms of buffering an early preservationist
movement, but they do continually remind the reader that nature is an entity that must be
treated with respect.

In another adventure, Lagerlof addresses an issue akin to environmental
sustainability. While Thumbietot, Akka, and the other geese are visiting with some
sheep, the symbiotic relationship between man and animal relates:

‘We’re not far removed from it [wild sheep],’ replied the ram. ‘We have nothing
to do with human beings. It’s an old agreement between us and some peasants on
a farm in Gottland, that they shall supply us with fodder…and as a recompense
they are permitted to take away those of us who become superfluous’ (260-261).

Once again, Lagerlof presents a version of natural relations in a smooth, easy to follow
way, not deviating from the qualities of the story, but bolstering the educative messages it
contains.
The Wonderful Adventures of Nils also deals with the complex equation of conservationism, the working order of environmental use and protection, in a story about “The Big Bird-Lake.” Akka, Thumbietot, and the geese pass through Ostergota Plain, containing Lake Takern. Throughout local history, peasants have been gradually draining the lake to create more farmland, and irrigate their crops, but, at the time of Thumbietot and the gang’s arrival, a plan to drain the lake almost completely is in order. Lagerlof gives an animal’s reaction to the plan, “Think how it would be if the people drained Takern, and changed the lake-bottom into field? Then there would be no more pond-weed or duck-food for the grown wild ducks” (388). Lagerlof asserts that the wild animals should be of concern.

After a plot twist involving the gang, a wild duck, a dog, and a conscientious peasant, plans to drain the lake are disbanded. The peasant gives final meaning to the story upon a visit to a prophet, “’For it is only those who go bent under the eternal labour with the soil, who can hold this land in good repute and honour—from one time to another’” (418). And, in this manner, Lagerlof lends herself applicability to Jensen as one of the ‘hidden treasures’ he discusses.

While preservation, conservation, and sustainability can be derived from the stories Lagerlof tells, it remains clear that these three post-modern adopted environmentally constructed conceptions stem from her personal reflections about nature, not as a political device or literary sword to slash at contemporary nature interpretations. It is the subtlety with which these notions surface that brings forth the weight of what Lagerlof has to say. As Dr. Nils Afzelius, former First Librarian of the Royal Library in Stockholm, writes, “The attempt to make Selma Lagerlof into a nice, uncomplicated
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story-teller with an indisputably good...attitude has done her more harm than the ill-will of critics” (93). Lagerlof’s magnitude, while delivered in the guise of a children’s story, remains eminently integral in comparison to Hamsun, Laxness, and Jensen. Her tales address the like-minded farmers of Bjartur and Isak, and touch upon similar environmental elements present in Pan with a new twist, nature from the animal’s point of view.

How does Lagerlof relate to Jensen’s statement about ‘farm culture?’ Selma Lagerlof rose as an anonymous commoner to great heights as a literary figure, and her ‘nature-bound imagination’ created treasures recognized with the top literary award the world knows, the Nobel Prize. In the manner that Jensen grants gratitude to the imagination of the nature bound farmer, ‘modern society...derives its entirety’ from her work.

The Natural World: Jensen’s Model

Johannes V. Jensen, born as the son of a veterinarian in 1873, whose ancestors were peasants, embodies the statement he rumbled about with Hamsun regarding the important role of the nature-bound farmer’s imagination. Working his way from common roots in the North Jutland region of Himmerland, Denmark, on to medical school in Copenhagen, Jensen never truly left behind the influences of his humble beginnings. His first masterpiece, titled Himmerland People, much like the work of Lagerlof, embodies the legends and traditions of his native region.

Akin to both Hamsun and Laxness, Jensen spent a good deal of time traveling abroad, but ultimately returned to Denmark to become what Sven Rossel calls, “One of the literary pathfinders in twentieth-century Denmark, and the writer who had the greatest
influence on the later development of Danish literature" (136-137). His work, *The Fall of the King*, set once again in his native Himmerland, is considered by many to be the most significant historical novel in Danish literature.

A second historical novel, or actually series of novels, grouped together as, *The Long Journey*, tells of more than just the history of Denmark. This series of works describes the history of humankind, beginning in the primitive times of Jutland before the Ice Age. This story of creation creates a framework for the natural elements present in Jensen’s writing. As the epic story spans human history from earthly creation to nomadic wanderers, on to Viking raids, and then the discovery of America, nature remains more than a fable, it is the constant that resides within and around all the other issues the work presents, including creation, evolution, religion, and cultural progress. His is not purely a Nordic story. “Jensen attempts to explain not only Nordic, but universally human symbols and conceptions, purely on the basis of practical and material experience” (Rossel 139). Through this piece, Jensen’s import stretches the world around, to audiences as diverse as the book’s translations allow.

*The Long Journey* is clearly written under the guise of Darwinist thinking. But, the novels’ dealings with creation ascertain biblical qualities, as one basic theme throughout remains Nordic man’s longing for the lost land of Paradise. Rossel describes that the novel “Is at one and the same time a myth about longing and a Darwinist epic about the evolution of man” (*Jensen* 115). Jensen “Claims that it was his purpose to write a new, scientific substitute for the Bible” while simultaneously acknowledging influence by “‘American Outing Literature’…Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*…and H.G. Wells’ *A Short History of the World*” (*Jensen* 116). These are, indeed, varied influences
for a novel that purports the Nordic race as culture’s creator and that the urge of voyage
and discovery stems from the dream of returning to primeval lands.

In The Long Journey, Jensen presents a ‘salt of the earth,’ anthropologic view of
nature’s molding effects from the novel’s first pages. As Jensen writes, “So great are the
contrasts that have formed man’s nature,” similarly, so great is the Nature that has formed
man’s contrasts (vii). As the first story begins with man’s evolution in the midst of the
great mountain, Gunung Api, nature exists as man’s defining element. Fyr is born and
learns to harness fire. Forest folk evolve with the aid of flint weapons and fire, upsetting
the nonchalance of surrounding animals, attacking back at the tiger and elephant who, by
nature, had the upper hand, “With some of them [beasts] their relations were those of
irreconcilable hostility, as with the tiger; but it was not man that had started that war”
(Jensen 12).

Times of fire slowly turn into the Ice Age, and the slow, unrelenting call of the
cold leads to widespread death. The story of Carl and his woman, Mam, living on the ice
sheets of the holy Gunung Api as the only human couple of the North continues as the
family is saved only by the reintroduction of fire. Carl and Mam’s offspring multiply and
mix with the Forest Folk of the south. The story turns to White Bear and horses: “They
[the natives] were altogether unfeeling towards animals, in a way that struck White Bear
as both foreign and revolting” (183). Jensen seems to twist the traditional native/foreign
view of man and animal relationships, “...so far as White Bear could understand, in that
these cowardly plantigrades considered themselves elevated in a positively transcendental
degree above all that bore the name of beast” (183). Jensen states that man’s evolution
gives no excuse to the maltreatment of nature’s beast. White Bear domesticates the horse, and his sons become the nomadic travelers of Asia.

"Fire and Ice" is followed by "The Cimbrians," a collection of stories about Norna Gest, born in Sealand, made to travel the world around, whose life and travels span several thousand years. Gest’s thousands of years of wandering are spent in search of the ideal land, but eventually, he determines the land for which he is searching can only be on the other side of death, "And then again he sought new shores... with a great empty place in his soul, severed from life’s import but with a world before him in which to find it again" (306).

Along with the emptiness inherent in Hamsun’s Glahn, Gest shares a further characteristic, that of solitude in Nature. Similar to Glahn, Gest’s quest is not that of the true isolationist. It is a quest for the lost land of paradise, inhabited or not, interspersed with fulfilling bouts in nature, "Gest and Skur’s children put an end to their solitude and isolation in the forest; strong as had been their parents’ desire to be alone, the young people’s yearning for the world outside and the society of their fellows was a natural force equally irresistible" (300). After the death of Skur, Gest follows the traveler’s path of his children, ending with a seaward journey away from the land of the Cimbrians.

The final two books of The Long Journey, entitled "Christopher Columbus" follow the journeys and inquisitions of the Genoese explorer, Columbus. The Old World turns into the New, and "The Long Journey is ended" (675). The novel ends with Ave Stella, a cosmic being that overlooks the earth, "She is Life... from which the germs have come to earth; true Life, the source of Love, of which we can know no more than longing
teaches us” (677). Just as Jensen’s story began with mystical nature and Gunung Api, it ends with Ave Stella.

What is to be taken from the nature that remains a combined source of both constancy and change in Jensen’s book? Peter G. Christensen writes, “The forest image as the memory of perpetual summer concretizes the optimism and the sadness of hope, because it is both the goal and the lost paradise at the same time” (72). Gest’s search is for the land of paradise, not the person of paradise. It is a quest driven by the need for land, the perfect land. Just as Gest’s quest remains incomplete, so does man’s fulfillment of a return to the paradise of Eden. Christensen goes on to state, “Jensen is able thus not only to symbolize hope with the image of the seasons but also to have them function in the process of human adaptation to environmental change” (73). It is the constancy of environmental change that defines man’s nature. Likewise, for Jensen, the changing environment provides a stable enough backdrop for an anthropologic history of world evolution involving social elements of hope, longing, and travel.

Jensen’s story contains themes comparable to Hamsun’s Glahn. Jensen’s relation of man to beast is reflected in both Laxness and Lagerlof. And, Jensen exemplifies his own statement about ‘farm culture,’ in that he has created a literary treasure from the nature-bound imagination of a farmer, evolved from its source, leaving nothing short of evolution behind.

Conclusion

Hamsun, Laxness, Lagerlof, and Jensen are all interrelated by much more than mere topical commonality. More than a common time period, more than a common Nordic region of origin, more than each winning the Nobel Prize, these authors are close

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relatives in a family of writers cognizant of nature’s influence. While they may not holistically share the full extent of nature’s potential man-beast-land relations, they do all make a concerted effort at reflecting nature in literature.

Four Nobel winning Nordic authors, all discussed within the light of one encompassing statement about ‘farm culture,’ unified by reflections of nature. Each author gives a personal element, their own mirror to the world humans all too often do not truly wish to see. In reading their works, one cannot help but face the nature presented: Glahn and emotional pantheism; Isak and productive farming; Bjartur and dependence on the land; Thumbietot, Akka, and others and their tales of adventure including conservation, preservation, and intrinsic approaches to nature; Jensen and his model from creation onward.

The works discussed by these four authors all rest somewhere within the ramparts of Jensen’s statement. The words have been written ‘by the nature-bound imagination’ of the farmer. Now it is the duty of the human world to be cultivated in their Nordic ways, and decide just how long the enveloping shadow of nature’s reflection given by these authors should be cast.
Works Cited


