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**John Muir: A Rugged, Religious, Sensitive
Mountain Man**

by

Bradley B. Ward

FINAL PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS IN LIBERAL STUDIES

SKIDMORE COLLEGE
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Readers: Adrienne Zuerner and John Anzalone

John Muir on Mount Rubidoux (Roubidoux), Riverside, California



John Muir:

A Rugged, Religious, Sensitive

M o u n t A i N



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August 31, 2009

Dr. Adrienne Zuerner and Dr. John Anzalone

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John Muir is known for having helped found the Sierra Club, and for having been its first president. Muir Woods, a grove of old-growth redwoods and popular tourist destination north of San Francisco, is named for him. California's state quarter features Muir and world-renowned Yosemite National Park, which he assisted in founding. He also fought to prevent the Tuolumne River from being dammed to create the Hetch Hetchy reservoir. Thus, Muir clearly possessed conservationist attitudes and ardently practiced them.

But what can be learned about gender by examining Muir and his conservationist work? What do Muir's life and his writings suggest about the gender norms of his period? To what extent did he reflect those norms, and to what extent did he challenge them? Equally important to this study, how did Muir's enactment of gender inflect his attitudes towards nature and his conservationist views? Whereas a comprehensive study could be undertaken about the meaning of American masculinity and femininity during the period of John Muir's life, I will present him through gender-colored glasses via his own words, and in consideration of the period in which he lived. Because Muir was raised in a Calvinist home, the influence of religion upon his life will be an important part of this examination. I will include five of his extensive autobiographical works - *The Story of my Boyhood and Youth* (1913), *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf* (1916), *My First Summer in the Sierra* (1911), *The Mountains of California* (1894), and *The Yosemite* (1912) – as well as *Stickeen* (1909), a brief story about his experience on an Alaskan glacier with a dog, a day which he describes as “the most memorable of all my wild days.”

I will also conduct an investigation of Muir's conservationist background, to determine how he achieved a balance of the aggressive masculine and nurturing feminine as he sought a middle path between Christianity and naturalism. Finally, because we live in a time of compounding environmental losses and outright catastrophes, with climate change and

environmental degradation no strangers to the media, this thesis asks what we might learn from Muir that has present-day and future applications that will help mitigate these losses.

I. Biography

John Muir was born in 1838 in Scotland. He was the third oldest of seven children, and the oldest of the three boys. He was raised in a strict Calvinist household, attended school regularly, and spent a great deal of time outside with other boys. When he was eleven, he moved with his family to the United States, settling in the woods of Wisconsin.

There, as the oldest boy, Muir toiled laboriously on the land. Due to the great amounts of time he spent working on the family farm and the religious studies required of him by his father, he rarely had free time. However, when he did, he spent much of that time learning more about nature simply by experiencing the world around him. He began surreptitiously reading literature other than the religious books pre-approved by his father and also began to hone his talents of invention. His interests in those two areas led him to leave home to attend the University of Wisconsin in Madison, and there he discovered a new love: botany. His first lesson in that field of study was significant. He writes,

“it sent me flying to the woods and meadows with wild enthusiasm. Like everybody else I was always fond of flowers, attracted to their external beauty and purity. Now my eyes were opened to their inner beauty, all alike revealing glorious traces of the thoughts of God...I wandered away on a glorious botanical and geological excursion, which has lasted nearly fifty years and is not yet completed, always happy and free, poor and rich, without thought of a diploma or making a name, urged on and on through endless, inspiring, Godful beauty” (Gifford 110-111).

In this passage, his references to God introduce the importance of religion in establishing a significant part of his writing style and subjects, and it also includes the importance of sight in determining his life's path.

Muir soon discovered that even the broad fields of studies and ranges of opportunities available at a university were too limiting, and this set the stage for the next phase of his life. He left without graduating to pursue his study of the natural world, *in* the natural world. He lived briefly in Canada, though soon found a home in Indianapolis, where he worked for a time in a factory. He simultaneously pursued his study of the wilderness as the American Midwest was not yet thoroughly under cultivation as it is today. Temporarily blinded in one eye by a factory accident at the age of twenty-seven, he realized during his recovery that he was still young and there was much of the world that he wanted to see without delay since he did not know whether or not his eyesight might later deteriorate or his blindness return. He said of that incident, “This affliction has driven me to the sweet fields. God has to nearly kill us sometimes, to teach us lessons” (Ehrlich 58).

Thus inspired, he left his job and set out on foot, walking approximately one thousand miles through mostly wilderness from the Ohio River to the Atlantic coast of Georgia, and after a brief trip by boat, continuing across Florida to the Gulf of Mexico. There he contracted malaria, and his recovery forced him to convalesce for months, which only served to build his eagerness to continue exploring. As soon as he was strong enough, he ventured forth once again, sailing to Cuba. From the Caribbean he had hoped to continue on to South America and explore the basin of the Orinoco River, but he could not find passage. One of his many possible alternatives was California, and he writes that he had just planned to go there “for a year or two to see its wonderful flora and the famous Yosemite...All the world was before me and every day was a holiday, so it did not seem important to which one of the world’s wildernesses I first should wander” (Gifford 613). Even upon his arrival in San Francisco, he indicated that he was undecided about his destination within California. When asked where he wanted to go from

there, he replied, “To any place that is wild” (Gifford 613). This indicates Muir’s direction in life: to a place where nature was as yet untouched by men.

Though initially undecided about where his future might lie, his decision to travel to Yosemite proved to be the one that determined the course of the rest of his life. He situated himself mostly in the Yosemite region for ten years, including five winters (Gifford 640), and it was there that he developed his conservationist beliefs and activities, as well as a religious and spiritual belief system that combined his Calvinist roots with a deepening worship of the wilderness. In California, he eventually married and had two daughters. He continued to travel, but less. He then entered a settled portion of his life just northeast of San Francisco, tending to the family orchard and avoiding the public eye for many years.

When Muir’s wife passed away after twenty-five years of marriage, he resumed traveling. His worldwide destinations included South America, Africa, Russia, the Himalayas, Australia, and a return trip to Scotland. As he aged, he began a vigorous advocacy for preservation of the wilderness that he so loved. By founding the Sierra Club in 1892, Muir advocated protection of the environment, instead of the destruction that he had seen from the effects of California’s Gold Rush, sheep-herding, widespread logging, cultivation, and other results of California’s exponential growth. He enlisted the assistance of President Teddy Roosevelt, a man who already knew the value of the outdoors, inviting him to camp together in Yosemite in 1903 in order to share the beauty of that slice of wilderness in order to preserve it. Towards the end of his life, he lost his biggest battle: that to save Yosemite’s Hetch Hetchy Valley from a dam that would capture the water of the Tuolumne River for the burgeoning population of San Francisco.

Despite a life that had been largely outdoors, and much of that in the wilderness with its inherent risks, John Muir succumbed to pneumonia after visiting one of his daughters in Daggett,

California, and died in Los Angeles on Christmas Eve, 1914, at the age of seventy-six. His legacy continues to the present, nearly one hundred years after his death. The Sierra Club continues its efforts, and Muir's name is continually affixed to parks, highways, university programs, high schools, medical centers, and other places that ensure that his name will live.

II. Early Influences

Calvinism shaped Muir's life in a number of areas, notably in his gendered worldview and belief in a God who created the nature Muir so appreciated. The most common element of Muir's writing, aside from its descriptions of nature, may be the extensive religious terminology and characterizations that he weaved into his writing about nature. He implies that religion pervaded the Scottish culture in which he grew up, indicating "like Scotch children in general we were taught grim self-denial...to mortify our flesh, keep our bodies in subjection to Bible laws, and mercilessly punish ourselves for every fault imagined or committed" (Gifford 65). Muir writes that in Wisconsin, chores took up six days of the week, and half of the remaining day, Sunday, was devoted to religious activities (Gifford 78). Yet despite his father's strict religious fervor, Muir voluntarily embraced it as well on some level. One of the few possessions he elected to carry with him many years later on his thousand-mile walk was a New Testament and he stayed in Utah for two weeks with Brigham Young's son (Ehrlich, 145). Jeffrey Brodd writes that the main concept of Calvinism is predestination (240) and Huston Smith agrees with its primacy (283). Indeed, references to this concept appear in Muir's work many times. He wrote on one occasion, "I moved on across the glacier as if driven by fate...how much of the uncontrollable there is in us" (Gifford 321). Muir even wrote that he believed the glaciated Sierra Nevada were "predestined" (Gifford 301), which is of utmost significance because he was

“considered by many people of his age...the world’s foremost expert on glaciers” (Muir 79). He also describes all of the wonders of his beloved wilderness as “an endless Godful play...speeches and music and acting and scenery and lights! – sun, moon, stars, auroras” (Gifford 268). To Muir, in words redolent of Shakespeare, we are all on the stage of this world theater, and the director is a male God. Such passages suggest that Muir possessed his own blend of science and religion. Those two fields were increasingly at odds with each other. Malcolm Margolin writes of the emerging controversy, “Scholars were just breaking away from the biblical interpretation of creation,” and Muir’s specialty, glaciology, was an entirely new field that would have been heresy to devout Christians (Muir 78-79). Muir’s departure from the strict belief system of his childhood required much strength and faith in himself and would have likely aroused quite a bit of controversy in his home...most of all with his father.

Muir’s father played a significant role in shaping his early life and ruled the roost with a strong hand. He described his father as a “tyrannical Calvinist” (Gifford 14) and a stern disciplinarian who enforced rules by corporal punishment. He forced his son to memorize most of the Christian Bible “by sore flesh” (Gifford 36). He asserted that the Bible was “the only book human beings can possibly require” (Gifford 98) and forbade most other novels. During family meals, Mr. Muir said grace “as was customary in Scotland...No idle word was allowed to be spoken...much less any laughing or fun or storytelling” (Gifford 100) and taught his children “to consider ourselves very poor worms of the dust, conceived in sin...quenching every spark of pride and self-confidence was a sacred duty” (Gifford 104). However, the younger Muir’s mind was not the only thing that fell under his father’s influence. A cruel taskmaster, his father valued physical fortitude. In Wisconsin, Muir was responsible for plowing, chopping out large roots, and digging a ninety-foot well. He toiled in frigid winters and blazing summer heat, often from

four in the morning until nine at night - "Think of that, ye blessed eight-hour-day labourers!" (Gifford 87), he writes. His father only allowed him to rest once, when he had pneumonia. Thus, the patriarchal influences of Muir's father upon his son's young mind and body were inescapable.

American society of the late nineteenth century was largely patriarchal in its organization and ideology. This, combined with Muir's strict Calvinist upbringing, infuses his writing. To begin with, Biblical references, specifically, those to the patriarchs of the Old Testament, abound in his texts. For example, a glacier, Muir's specialty, is to him "God's crystal temple...Solomon's marble and ivory palaces were nothing to it" (Muir 78). He compares events in his life to stories of Moses and Abraham. He even *hears* the Bible in nature, writing that frogs' chirps sounded like "Isaac...Yacob, Israel" (Gifford 49). Aside from Biblical references, the many naturalists and other scientists whom Muir refers to include Darwin, Audubon, and Linnaeus, the sheer number of them demonstrating how much influence they had upon Muir. He also refers to Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Burns, and Hawthorne. At first glance, then, Muir's gender ideology conforms perfectly to that of his time period. However a closer examination of his uses of gendered language reveals a more complicated picture.

III. Muir's Gendered Writing

The patriarchal influences upon Muir's life are clearly evident in his writing style. Just as Muir infused his writing with religious references, he did so with gender.

Although he wrote all of these selections well after he had been married, he does not mention his wife even once - although in fairness, most of the topics of these works are recollections of his wilderness days before he met her. And whereas he had four sisters, he

almost never mentions them, despite sharing two houses with them for nearly twenty years. Finally, during his thousand-mile walk, during evenings when he stayed with married couples, he rarely mentions the wives, yet goes into great detail about his discussions with the husbands as well as their livelihoods and interests. Therefore, women are largely invisible to Muir, which reflects the norms of his time.

Another way to gauge the influence of gender upon an author is to investigate her or his writing for examples in which she or he uses both female and male pronouns, but lists one of the two first more often than not. For example, in the previous sentence, the female noun comes before the male in all three instances. In Muir's case, on the other hand, the males are overwhelmingly listed first. One example is his usage of the expression "lads and lassies" (Gifford 449). He mentions males first not only when he writes about people, but also when he describes nature. For example, when he details a bird or a tree, the male sex of each nearly always comes before the female. In another instance, he writes of how some baby birds "are looked after by both father and mother" (Gifford 215). By contrast, Muir mentions females before males in only a handful of cases. One time that he does so is in his description of leaving Scotland, about which he writes of "the pain of parting...from mother and sisters and brother" (Gifford 43), which contains the emotional element of sadness. Also, when he describes the mountain hemlock's flowers, he writes of the female sex before the male. This is a plant that Muir describes with the word "feminine." Nonetheless, examples of his favoring males over females by this method of writing are dominant.

An additional avenue down which to investigate Muir's gendered writing is the instances in which he employs variations of words that refer to the male sex. A first category of this type would be his usage of words that contain the suffix, "-men" or "-man." Over a dozen of his

words referring to labor roles have the suffix “-man” or “-men”, including fisherman, ferryman, and milkman, reflecting the domination of those roles by men. By contrast, he does not make use of any words ending in “-woman” or “-women”. As was typical at his time, Muir employs the words “men” and “man” to refer generically to all humans - whether male or female – and the former either also to refer collectively to humankind in general, or specifically to activities of the male sex. For example, he refers to how apples are “fit for gods or men” (Gifford 287). In this instance, Muir could have also included goddesses or women but chose not to. On another occasion, he describes how “the beauty of lilies falls upon angels and men...but as far as I have seen, man alone, and the animals he tames, destroy these gardens” (Gifford 225). Here, Muir is using “men” to refer to women as well, since surely the beauty of lilies must fall upon them as well as men. Muir also uses these gendered expressions to refer to ethnic groups. In doing so, he again follows conventional norms. For example, he uses the terms “white man” and “red man” to refer collectively to Caucasian and Native American women and men, respectively. However, an exception is that whereas he has excluded his wife, sisters, and nearly all other women from his writings, he goes into detail about the activities of Native American women, whom he specifically calls either “Indian women” or “squaws.” This is important because he describes Native American women as strong. For instance, he writes of the “immense loads the...squaws...carry bare-footed through these rough passes, oftentimes...sixty or seventy miles...pack-animal wives...” (Gifford 329). Muir, then, does not use androcentric terminology for these women who demonstrate physical fortitude. It is also of note that on any of the rare other occasions when he does mention women none of their activities involve strenuous physical labor. Another study of Muir’s preference for male terms can be made of his usage of the word “he” or “his.” For example, he writes, “no lover of trees will ever forget his first meeting with

the sugar pine” (Gifford 361). Despite Muir’s omission of the female sex in this instance, there are doubtless a multitude of women who, like men, love trees. He also sees in nature male activities, such as when he describes a sugar pine that “preaches the grandeur of the mountains like an apostle” (Gifford 381) or when a grasshopper jumping on a large rock reminds him of a preacher giving a sermon on a pulpit (Gifford 241-242). Even when the subject is unseen, Muir either assumes it was a man, or defaults to a male term. For example, when coming across a trail he writes, “None but a shepherd could make such a track, and after tracing it a few minutes I began to fear that he might be seeking pasturage” (Gifford 344). In that instance, he does not know that the shepherd is guaranteed to be a man, even if his cultural upbringing persuades him that there is a great likelihood of it. Muir also uses the male pronouns “he” or “him” to refer to individuals of many plant and animal species. While some animals, such as ducks, have easily distinguished males and females based on their plumage, Muir does not ever indicate whether or not he knows others’ male sex with certainty from having conducted a physical inspection of them. For example, describing a squirrel, Muir writes, “He will even attempt at times to drive away dogs and men...Seeing a man for the first time, he approaches nearer and nearer” (Gifford 391). Of all of the flora and fauna described by Muir, for merely two examples does Muir describe either a plant or animal as female: the mountain hemlock, mentioned earlier, and mountain heather or *cassiope*. This latter example is significant because *cassiope* was his favorite plant. In addition to Muir’s gendered descriptions of living beings, another grouping is his references to the category of inanimate objects. This category includes two exceptions to his preference for male terminology. He characterized an earthquake in Yosemite Valley as Earth “calling to her sister planets” (Gifford 643), indicating that to him not only Earth - having just generated a powerful shaking of its crust - but other planets are female as well. The other

exception is his reference to an ocean-going ship as a “she.” This has significance because ships are built to withstand the most severe of tempests, protecting her passengers and cargo in all types of conditions. Therefore, just as with Native American women these two exceptions pair femininity with strength and are two of the few challenges to Muir’s expected preference for male terminology. Muir’s gendered language is not surprising, given his era. The Writing Center of the University of North Carolina summarizes such instances as “English speakers and writers have traditionally been taught to use masculine nouns and pronouns in situations where the gender of their subject(s) is unclear or variable, or when a group to which they are referring contains members of both sexes.” (www.unc.edu)

One final category of gendered language includes proper nouns used to refer to people, animals, and plants. Muir’s selection of such words elevates the male sex. In nearly all cases when he refers to plants as male, he employs titles indicating royalty. For example, a type of grass he encounters has “princely mould and dimensions...I wish I could place every one of these regal plants among the grass settlements of our Western prairies. Surely every panicle would wave and bow in joyous allegiance and acknowledge their king” (Gifford 135). He also uses “king” to refer to many trees. But whereas he frequently uses “king,” he only twice uses “queen,” and one of those instances is for a queen bee, which is merely the usage of a scientific term instead of his own rendition. Similarly, he uses “prince” but does not once use “princess.” Many of these examples have roots that took hold strongly in Muir’s early years when he was exposed to a religion in which Lord Jesus is the Prince of Peace, Christ is King, and the devout go to the Kingdom of Heaven. Moreover, whereas he refers to the silver fir and sugar pine as “patriarchs,” he does not once use the term “matriarch.” He refers to the Douglas squirrel as “Sir Douglas” (Gifford 393), but as with his absence of a princess despite a prince, he makes no use

of its counterpart “Madam.” Additionally, he deploys “master” slightly more than “mistress,” “bachelor” but not “bachelorette,” and “forefather” but not “foremother.” In his usage of terms for siblings, Muir employs “brotherhood” but not “sisterhood” and “brotherly” but not “sisterly.” His description of bears as “my hairy brothers” neglects female bears. Finally, on a number of occasions, he combined multiple gendered terms, but all favor the male. In one example, he refers to plants so sharp that they will shred a person’s skin “without the smallest consideration for Lord Man,” (Gifford 159) thereby not only rendering women invisible but also according regal status to men. A final example of this writing contains a triple usage of androcentric terminology, when he describes a bear running “from his bad brother man” (Gifford 240).

Therefore, an analysis of Muir’s gendered language reveals a strong favoritism for the male. Margaret Matlin calls this method of writing “Masculine Generic” (40). Exceptions are made only for a handful of instances in which the female is strong; in a paired grouping when the female is described with feminine characteristics; or when Muir experiences emotional sorrow resulting from a loss.

IV. Muir’s Gendered Traits

As important as the usage of gendered language is to a study of John Muir, are the behavioral and descriptive characteristics he assigns to boys and girls, and men and women. How does he describe his boyhood? Does his manhood differ? Can any conclusions be drawn about masculinity and femininity? How are such traits represented in his writings?

An investigation of Muir’s childhood is important because it describes traits with which he later came to part ways as he entered adulthood. Importantly, he noted those traits in retrospect, setting them apart from those of the man he had become. His childhood seems to

have been inextricably linked to violence. Muir's father was not the only one to dole out corporal punishment: he was whipped by his teachers as well, in what he describes as, "the old Scotch fashion...Most of them were outrageously severe" (Gifford 51). Outside of the classroom he fought nearly every day at school. He does not spare the details of how "one of our favourite playground games was thrashing each other with whips...until one succumbed to the intolerable pain" (Gifford 37) and draws his readers' attention to the fact that "our most exciting sport...was playing with gunpowder" (Gifford 38). In those early years, to him hunting was also merely a typical boyhood activity. For example, of wounding a redwing blackbird, Muir tells his friends,

"Poor bird, he's no deed yet and we'll hae to kill him to put him oot o' pain,' - sincerely pitying him, after we had taken pleasure in shooting him...with desperate humanity I took the limp unfortunat by the head, swung him around three or four times thinking I was wringing his neck, and then threw him hard on the ground to quench the last possible spark of life and make quick death doubly sure" (Gifford 78).

In this excerpt, Muir expresses some regret for wounding a small bird instead of killing it outright. There was an even darker side to Muir's childhood that he admits as well. The violence of his youth was not directed solely at his boyhood peers, nor did it merely involve hunting at a distance somewhat removed from the victim. For example, he and his peers dropped a cat from an upstairs window, shamefully admitting that such an activity "was a cruel thing for even wild boys to do" (Gifford 34). Further, contrasted with today's popular knowledge of the adult Muir's environmental stewardship, as a boy he was also drawn to activities that demonstrated an animal's lethal primal viciousness, and would purposefully seek out animals in their dying moments. He writes, "showing the natural savagery of boys - we delighted in dog-fights, and...to see a pig killed, as soon as we heard the desperately earnest squealing" (Gifford

34). These incidents go beyond mere curious observation, achieving a level of nearly sadistic revelry in the suffering of animals.

Significantly, these experiences later influenced Muir's feelings towards the environment. As he grew older he associated fewer pleasant memories with hunting. He had also observed that there existed in boys a duality. He describes this as, "often as once cruel and merciful, thoughtlessly cold-hearted and tender-hearted, sympathetic, pitiful, and kind in ever changing contrasts" (Gifford 33). And though in Scotland there was evidence of this peaceful element – no boy there "ever failed to listen with enthusiasm to the songs of the skylarks" (Gifford 40) - he writes that his arrival in Wisconsin began his departure from violence. There, he says, "we still were at school; every wild lesson a love lesson, not whipped but charmed into us. Oh, that glorious Wisconsin wilderness!" (Gifford 45). He spent countless hours observing animals cooperating and communicating with each other, and losing himself in the beauty of the trees and flowers around him. He wrote that a farm life such as the one he lived allowed boys to grow a love for animals (Gifford 59) instead of harming them. As an adult he writes strongly of his conviction about the violent immaturity inherent to boyhood. "Surely a better time must be drawing nigh when godlike human beings will become truly humane, and learn to put their animal fellow mortals in their hearts instead of on their backs or in their dinners...when thoughtless childhood is past, the best rise the highest above all this bloody flesh and sport business" (80). Here he implies that only those who act like children – and he knew only of the experience of having grown up as a boy, not as a girl - are inhumane towards animals and that when one grows older as he is, there is a coinciding maturation towards environmental stewardship. As his boyhood receded on the path of his life, he crossed a line from destroyer to conservator, where he would remain throughout his life.

It is the adult John Muir with whom most of us are familiar: the conservator, advocate for the protection of the wilderness with its abundance of life. As opposed to his boyhood hunting forays, by the time he was a young adult he rants,

“it appeared as ‘d---dest’ work to slaughter God’s cattle for sport. ‘They were made for us,’ say these self-approving preachers; ‘for our food, our recreation...’ As truthfully we might say on behalf of a bear, when he deals successfully with an unfortunate hunter, ‘Men and other bipeds were made for bears, and thanks be to God for claws and teeth so long’...Let a Christian hunter go into the Lord’s woods and kill his well-kept beasts...and it is well, but let an enterprising specimen of these proper, predestined victims go to the houses and fields and kill the most worthless person of the vertical godlike killers – oh! that is horribly unorthodox... Well, I have precious little sympathy for the selfish propriety of civilized man, and if a war of races should occur between the wild beasts and Lord Man, I would be tempted to sympathize with the bears” (Gifford 155).

In this passage Muir rejects conventions of the Bible that advocate the primacy of humans over all. While Genesis 1:28 states, “subdue [earth]. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle and all the animals that crawl on the earth,” Muir arrived at a different conclusion. What he believed was that if men truly had a God-given dominion over all, it should not be in the destructive sense. Instead, it should be a dominion of protection. But more than simply a philosophical difference with the Bible’s authors and adherents, he is outraged at the very hunting practices in which he formerly engaged. He had so completely severed ties with his past that by the time of his adulthood adventure with Stickeen, he wrote, “I never carried a gun” (Muir 11). Similarly, he had also hunted aquatic wildlife as a boy, but by the time he was an adult wrote, “Sport they called it. Should churchgoers try to pass the time fishing in baptismal fonts while dull sermons were being preached, the so-called sport might not be so bad; but to play in the Yosemite temple, seeking pleasure in the pain of fishes struggling for their lives, while God himself is preaching his sublimest water and stone sermons!” (Gifford 260). Therefore, two of the pastimes in which he engaged as a boy – hunting and fishing – were

to his adult sensibilities destructive pursuits about which he was outraged and that he protested with vehemence.

Aside from hunting and fishing, the young Muir had participated in or otherwise experienced a number of other activities that his adult voice criticized as destructive. He reserves his most critical words for sheepherding. He had seen firsthand its consequences. For several months as a young man, he had accompanied a sheepherding expedition to the Sierra because it was the only work to be found. It was not long before he realized how damaging it was to nature. Upon returning one afternoon from a hike in the mountains, he discovered that “My worst fears were realized. A trail had been made...all the gardens and meadows were destroyed by a horde of hoofed locusts...The money-changers were in the temple” (Gifford 344). But he indicates that his nemesis, the target of his criticism, is not defoliating sheep so much as their owners. He writes of them, “Poor, helpless, hungry sheep...made less by God than man...their voices...call out one’s pity” (Gifford 225). He implies that sheep are merely doing what they have to in order to survive – eating – but whereas they are God’s creation, it is man who has made them into the destructive animals whose effects Muir has seen. He wrote that due to profit seeking, “the wool is drawn close down over the poor fellow’s eyes, dimming or shutting out almost everything worth seeing” (Gifford 198). Here he is saying that even more valuable than economic profits is the beauty to be seen in nature. Muir had arrived in California not long after the beginning of its Gold Rush. Of mining, he derides its effects as “the white man’s marks” (Gifford 210) and describes California’s forty-niners as “mostly blind with gold dust” (Gifford 355). This comment, like Muir’s feelings about sheepherding, refers to the importance of sight in appreciating the splendor of nature that he cherishes, ruined by the pursuit of precious metals. Logging was another activity that Muir opposed. As a boy, he had chopped

wood for his father, and as a young man was briefly employed as a sawyer. And while as an adult he admitted engaging in activities with similar roots - cutting small quantities of alpine branches for nighttime camps and pieces of an 1140-year-old Western juniper (Gifford 659) - the former was on the most minute of scales and the latter was in the name of the scientific study of dendrochronology and in order to further his own education. But of large-scale commercial logging, Muir describes the sequoia – the world’s largest tree - as the “noblest of God’s trees. In Nature’s keeping they are safe, but through the agency of man’s destruction” they are disappearing (Gifford 670). Muir appears to have had a similar change of heart with regards to reservoirs. While as a boy he dammed a small stream on his father’s Wisconsin property, as an adult, he engaged in his signature battle to prevent the water of the Tuolumne River’s Hetch Hetchy Valley from being contained. He wrote angrily, “Dam Hetch Hetchy! As well as dam for water-tanks the people’s cathedrals and churches, for no holier temple has ever been consecrated” (Gifford 715-716). Therefore, many of the activities that he had pursued in his youth were to his adult sensibilities violent or otherwise destructive.

Muir’s works indicate his belief that the destruction of nature’s blessings was a pastime of boys, to be abandoned as one grew into a man. His writings further indicated that there are a number of specific characteristics inherent to that manhood. While in all of these varied selections of his works the word “masculine” is not used once, “manly” is found four times. He employs one usage to characterize retired gold miners in California. He described “the extremes possible in one and the same character: harshness and gentleness, manliness and childishness...Men...now play in the streets with children” (Gifford 430). In supplying sets of opposites, Muir chooses to set “manliness” in opposition to childishness, which reinforces the process of maturing that he describes about himself. However, the childishness that he

emphasizes and favors here is one of playfulness, as opposed to the violent one he so flatly rejected.

Another instance of the word “manly” occurs when Muir, describing his boyhood, writes that he had attained “the manly belligerent age of five or six years” (Gifford 35). Therefore, in this passage he equates manliness with aggression, which parallels many of his previous descriptions of his boyhood. As Muir aged he abandoned violence, whereas he repeatedly cites examples of men who continue to practice it. For example, during his thousand-mile walk he came across homes, fields, and forests destroyed by the men who had fought the recently concluded Civil War. He dedicated his life to preventing similar war against the environment, preferring explosions of wildflowers to explosions of gunshots, and a chorus of songbirds to a chorus of chainsaws.

In a third instance of the word “manly,” Muir describes nearly drowning in a lake as a boy, and the culprit that he implicates is “unmanly fear” (Gifford 64). This reflects cultural norms, and implies that to a growing boy, the destination of manhood will not be achieved through fear. This was a definition of manly that Muir took to heart. A study of Muir’s reveals a man not afraid to throw himself into the middle of dangerous situations, be it threats from nature or from other men. That Muir chose to encourage preservation of the wilderness while so many other men were destroying it is an indication of his fearlessness. His boldness was developed by childhood encounters, and reinforced throughout the rest of his life. For example, he cites an incident of being bitten as a boy by a squirrel but taking the rodent, still clinging to his hand with its teeth, back home to keep as a pet (Gifford 82-83). Many of his experiences in the wilderness brought him close to death, yet he did not turn away from them and was emboldened by taking risks. For example, he wrote of his adventure with Stickeen as his most exciting day, during

which in a cold, snowy wind he traversed a yawning crevasse via a long, narrow, slippery ice bridge far above it, “excited and strengthened by the danger” (Muir 38). On another occasion, in Yosemite, after climbing all day up several thousand feet through snow so deep that it nearly buried him in places, he was caught in an avalanche that swept him all the way back down. But instead of fear, he described it as “exhilaration...In all my mountaineering I have enjoyed only one avalanche ride...This was a fine experience...Elijah’s flight in a chariot of fire could hardly have been more exciting” (Gifford 638). Climbing to the top of Yosemite Falls, the world’s highest at 2,425’, he purposefully crawls down a steep, wet slope and out onto the cliff’s ledge, water rushing all around. He wrote of this experience, “I...concluded not to venture farther, but did nonetheless...a glorious time...triumphant exhilaration.” (Gifford 233-234). One icy winter night he even climbed behind the *bottom* of the falls, pounded by the water cascading down on him from thousands of feet above (Gifford 628-629). On another occasion he reached the top of 14,494’ Mt. Whitney, the highest peak in the lower forty-eight states. Climbing red firs up to 240’ tall was one of his favorite activities (Gifford 252), but simply climbing trees was not enough: the added element of severe weather contributed excitement for him. Of one stormy ascent, he writes, “especially when they are waving and singing in worship in wind-storms, is a glorious experience” (Gifford 647). In the wilderness, even if he could escape death, he was at the very least prey for many of its inhabitants. Many of the wild animals that he encountered were capable of inflicting a variety of mortal wounds. Yet Muir did not shy away from them. When encountering a bear, instead of cowering in fear, “I thought I should like to see his gait in running, so I made a sudden rush at him” (Gifford 240). He was viciously attacked by dogs, and was not scared by alligators, rattlesnakes, or swarms of bees. Despite the severely painful bite of the black ant, he described it as a “wonderful electric species!” (Gifford 206). He endures the

common maladies of the wilderness, even voluntarily spending one night alone in a cemetery “somewhat disturbed by large prickly-footed beetles creeping across my hands and face, and by a lot of hungry stinging mosquitoes” (Gifford 141). Thus, Muir evidences no fear of the perils of the animal world. Not only did he seem not to fear death or injury, he also considered ways in which it would be an honor to meet his end. He writes that the mountains are “divine places to die...compared with the doleful chambers of civilization” (Gifford 328). Of venturing out onto the lip of Yosemite Falls, he wrote that he would not mind being swept over, for “where could mountaineer find a more glorious death!” (Gifford 234). Another noble option to him is being buried alive underneath earthquake rubble. In *Stickeen*, he wrote, “I have oftentimes felt that to meet one’s fate...in the heart of a glacier, would be blessed as compared with death from disease” (Muir 52). Therefore, in this definition of manly Muir finds a comfortable home. To him it means the strength to attempt the most extreme of challenges, and he wears it well. However, instead of conquering nature and leaving it vanquished, he meets it head-on, engages in a battle of wills, and leaves it healthy and intact.

His fourth and final usage of the term occurs when he describes the men of the mountains in summertime. He notes how, “Most of them heartily content to ‘rough it,’ ignoring Nature’s fineness as bothersome or unmanly” (Gifford 219). Here Muir sets the common interpretation of manliness in opposition to comfort and sensitivity. He elaborates on this important notion in many other instances. In the most detailed example, he writes of how from the red fir, “mountaineers always cut boughs to sleep on...mixed with ferns and flowers for a pillow...The essences of the pressed leaves seem to fill every pore of one’s body, the sounds of falling water make a soothing hush...any combination of cloth, steel springs, and feathers seems vulgar in comparison” (Gifford 367). Thus, here Muir describes how multiple sensory stimuli characterize

the balance of senses that he believes is present in even the most rugged of individuals, yet often subdued as unbecoming of a man. And yet, he then goes on to provide a plethora of examples of exceptions to this stereotype: the most rugged of men who also allow nature's bounty of senses to permeate their being. For example, of the hemlock spruce, he notes how "apathetic mountaineers, even, seeking only game or gold, stop to gaze...and mutter to themselves, 'That's a pretty mighty tree,' some of them adding 'd----d pretty!'" (Gifford 383). In this passage Muir doles out a compliment to those men whose professions he has abandoned as a boy and criticizes so strongly as a man. Likewise, he recounts how he has "often been delighted to see a pure, spiritual glow come into the countenances of hard business-men and old miners, when a song-bird chanced to alight near them" (Gifford 417). He extends this power of nature through a usage of superlatives. For example, he writes that a mountain lily "puts the roughest mountaineer on his good behavior" (Gifford 196) and "There is that in the glance of a flower which may at times control the greatest of creation's braggart lords" (Gifford 151). A further exploration of Muir's concept of this element of manhood leads to one other man: God the Father. Muir describes the wildlife living in the Appalachians "under the tender keeping of a Father's care" (Gifford 130). This passage reveals a father – the most supreme, omnipotent God – whose traits include caring. This is a quality that Muir never ascribes to his own father. In another instance Muir describes how God cares not just about the pretty flora, but also the fauna that man fears. He writes, "Fierce and cruel they appear to us, but beautiful in the eyes of God. They, also, are his children, for He hears their cries, cares for them tenderly...They dwell happily in these flowery wilds, are part of God's family...cared for with the same species of tenderness and love as is bestowed upon angels in heaven or saints on earth" (Gifford 148). Here Muir indicates that even God cares gently for those creatures that man often despises: His love is

universal, and bestowed no less upon the creatures of the earthly realm than to most blessed objects in scripture. Thus, Muir portrays manliness with a number of qualities, distanced from boyhood, and with a sensitivity to nature repressed by many men but demonstrated by God, the most powerful man of all.

In spite of myriad - and in some cases inescapable and cruel - patriarchal influences upon his life from boyhood into adulthood, Muir also possessed that trait seemingly at odds with normative manhood, one which he indicated was also exhibited by God: strong sensitivity. It was noted earlier that he employed a rare usage in his writing of referring to women before men when describing leaving some of his family in Scotland. Similarly, of leaving his Wisconsin home for university, he writes, "The aching parting from my mothers and sisters was, of course, hard to bear" (Gifford 104). Notably, he does not mention his father or brothers in that thought. Therefore, in both of those examples where he breaks with writing convention and mentions women before men, he is experiencing a loss and expressing sorrow. Muir includes many other examples of his sensitivity to others. He learned to care about animals as a boy, and expressed much sadness about the death of one of their horses in Wisconsin. He wrote of her last moments, "She tried to follow us children, so long her friends and workmates and playmates. It was awfully touching...she came to me trembling, with beseeching, heartbreaking looks, and after I had bathed her head and tried to soothe and pet her, she lay down and gasped and died" (Gifford 59). Such concern extended beyond domestic animals with whom he had forged a relationship, and into the outside world. In another instance he "found a poor snipe in our meadow that was unable to fly on account of difficult egg-birth. Pitying the poor mother, I picked her up out of the grass and helped her" (Gifford 66). However, while these examples are all of female subjects, Muir includes males as well and also indicates that such love of animals is not limited

to him. Of the speckle-breasted song sparrow, he writes as a boy, “no singer of them all got further into our hearts...The richness, sweetness and pathos of this small darling’s song as he sat on a low bush often brought tears to our eyes” (Gifford 69). His sensitivity to nature derives in some cases, just as the rugged men to whom he has referred, from stimulation of his senses. For example, his writing is resplendent with references to the visual beauty of flowers and the sounds of waterfalls. In one instance, Muir writes of a plant, “I like to wear its pretty fragrant racemes in my buttonhole” (Gifford 197). It is through animals and other elements of nature that Muir’s sensitivity to nature took root and deepened, and that was another defining component of his manhood. Further evidence of Muir’s enthusiasm is that just as his language is coded by gender, his punctuation exhibits an abundance of exclamation marks when he describes nature. His work would not be complete without them! They are an expression of his pure bliss and exuberance about nature, and thus inherent to his masculinity. In stumbling across one particularly stunning landscape, he writes that he “shouted and gesticulated in a wild burst of ecstasy” (Gifford 232). He desired to share such experiences with others, in another situation encouraging others to follow his lead and experience “all your body aglow, nerve currents flashing through you never before felt...head and heart are awake and rejoicing” (Gifford 690). Another time he describes how “You bathe in these spirit-beams, turning round and round, as if warming at a camp-fire” (Gifford 183). In creating for his readers a visual representation akin to dancing, he is demonstrating remarkable self-awareness. He often finds a like-minded presence in nature. In one instance he describes “thousands of rejoicing flood waterfalls chanting together in jubilee dress” (636) after a storm. He was also expressive with his artistic skills, constantly drawing sketches and wanting to learn how to paint (Gifford 315-316). Muir’s enthusiasm is notable in the context of his strict upbringing by a father who never displayed the same trait for sights,

sounds, or smells: only the Bible and hard work. One trait that he values in men and exemplifies sensitivity is revealed through one of his friendships: gentility. Muir describes his friend Galen Clark admiringly and with a superlative: “the best mountaineer I ever met...His kindness to all Yosemite visitors and mountaineers was...constant and uniform” (Gifford 707-709). Similarly, Muir demonstrated kindness to nature. He also notes of Clark that he “was truly and literally a gentle-man” (Gifford 710), which highlights the true meaning of that word: a man who is not aggressive. This provides a counterbalance to the John Muir who condemns the damming of Hetch Hetchy with such strong words. That he chose to engage in such pitched, public environmental battles is remarkable, given his description of his personality. Of his boyhood he wrote that he was “extremely shy and had been taught to have a poor opinion of myself” (Gifford 103), and even as an adult he admits that he still is “...at best...desperately bashful and shy” (Gifford 256). Despite those characterizations, he dedicated his life to battling not nature as other men did, but protecting it from the ravages brought on by those men. Yet Muir does not allow the ego so rampant in the political arena to rule him. Despite his expertise in glaciology he admits that even to him the actions of glaciers are “as yet but little understood” (Gifford 689). Of a debate about an aspect of climate change, he acknowledges, “I confess that at first I shared in the blunder” (Gifford 374). Thus, he admits his flaws. When he writes, “I gaze and sketch and bask, oftentimes settling down into dumb admiration without definite hope of ever learning much...humbly prostrate before the vast display of God’s power” (Gifford 238), he is acknowledging that there is a power greater than he, unlike many men who want to reach the zenith of the political ladder. Muir realized that despite all that he had learned, there was so much more. Whereas other men had a sense for economic profits to be made from gold, lumber,

minerals, and meat, Muir's sensory inputs were stimulated by nature and the prospects of preserving it.

Muir mentions two topics that he believes are central to the male realm. He names "the only two subjects which Scotchmen get much excited, namely religion and politics" (Gifford 43). The former was abundant throughout his writings, the latter helped define his adulthood, and both hinged upon the acquisition of knowledge, which was a third male-dominated field in his time, as women were vastly outnumbered by men at institutions of higher education, and in many cases prohibited from enrolling at them. His travels reinforced the interaction and importance of these subjects to him as well as the domination of masculinity in them. For example, one evening in Glasgow, Kentucky, present-day home of the John Muir Highway and annual Scottish Summer Games, Muir "was invited to stay overnight in a rare, hearty, hospitable manner. Engaged in familiar running talk on politics...and theology. The old Kentuckian seemed to take a liking to me and advised me to stay in these hills until next spring, assuring me that I would find much to interest me...he was one of the school officials" (Gifford 122). In an encounter with a blacksmith, Muir links makes a case for the importance of education by calling upon the experiences of two Biblical men. Muir tells him, "you know Solomon was a strong-minded man...generally believed to have been the very wisest man the world ever saw, and yet he considered it was worth while to study plants; not only to go and pick them up as I am doing, but to study them; and you know we are told he wrote a book about plants...he had many a long ramble in the mountains...Christ told his disciples, 'Consider the lilies how they grow,' and compared their beauty with Solomon in all his glory" (Gifford 126). Muir, who like Jesus was attracted to the wilderness, found inspiration for his life's path partially from two religious men who took it upon themselves to educate others. Similarly, Muir sought knowledge about many

other subjects in order to broaden his horizons, be conversant about a wide range of subjects, and share it with others in adulthood. In fact, he had been scolded once by his father for reading too much, arising at one o'clock each morning to read until his chores began. He writes reflectively, "I can hardly think of any other event in my life...that gave birth to joy so transportingly glorious as" those early morning hours (Gifford 99) so that he could read and invent. Muir believed that education about nature was vital to preserving it. He took risks in order to gain such knowledge. One morning after many feet of nighttime snow had buried Yosemite Valley, he wrote, "I sallied forth to see what I might learn" (Gifford 677) and describes on another occasion, "toward midnight...I sauntered along the edge of the gorge...wherever the footing felt safe, to see what I could learn" (Gifford 628). Muir encouraged others to explore and become educated about nature, wishing to protect life because of how much he had learned about it. He acquired a long-term view of preservation based upon the patience required of education, instead of the instant gratification of money and profits from nature's destruction. As an adult he applied his education to the male-dominated realm of politics, becoming a modern-day crusader to protect what to him was holy land.

As important to what masculine or manliness are to Muir, are what his writing indicates they are *not*. Heretofore his only prior significant elaboration about women's activities characterized their physical strength. His sole other one refers to a variation of the sensitivity that he described as divine and masculine: caring. Of a mentally handicapped male neighbor, Muir describes how local women "never missed an opportunity to give him kind words, cookies, and pie; above all, they bestowed sympathy" (Gifford 90). Here he has characterized the women's compassion for others. An investigation of his gendered language reveals more to the reader about Muir's perception of the feminine. While he used variations of "manly" on four

occasions, he does not use the word “womanly” once. On the other hand, while he does not use the term “masculine,” the word “feminine” does occur on three occasions. All three refer to one thing - the mountain hemlock or Hemlock Spruce – and notably in all three cases it follows the word “delicate”. In the first of the instances, he describes the hemlock as “the most graceful and pliant and sensitive...indescribably beautiful...delicate and feminine...slender...the very loveliest” (660) of trees. This passage, then, includes characteristics traditionally associated with femininity. However, in the other two instances, Muir describes a different interpretation of femininity. He uses the term “feminine” in a binary pairing as he did for “manly,” setting it apart from other qualities. He writes in the first of the hemlock’s “delicate feminine grace...exposed to the wildest blasts...endured the storms of centuries of winters!” (Gifford 246) and in the second how it “though exquisitely delicate and feminine...grows best where the snow lies deepest, far up in the region of storms” (Gifford 381-382). To Muir, then, while these two descriptions of femininity are both equated with delicacy as it was in his first example, it also expresses another component. This mountain hemlock grows in harsh alpine climates in thin air thousands of feet above sea level; exposed to regular summer lightning strikes; maturing only if they are capable of surviving snow depths of tens of feet; and weathering brutal winter storms, frigid temperatures, and hurricane-force winds. Muir also continually discovered other delicate life in the most unlikely of places in the most extreme of conditions. He writes, “it was in the wildest, highest places that the most beautiful and tender and enthusiastic plant-people were found. Again and again, as I lingered over these charming plants, I said, How came you here? How do you live through the winter?” (Gifford 280). Therefore, to him the tenderness and delicacy of femininity coexists with – and is not complete without - the significant element of strength. He observes a similar combination present in bluebirds. He writes that they are

“darling singers...we all loved them. Their rich, crispy warbling is perfectly delightful, soothing and cheering, sweet and whisperingly low, Nature’s fine love touches, every note going straight home into one’s heart...yet withal they are hardy and brave, fearless fighters” (Gifford 67).

While Muir is not implying that strength is solely a feminine trait, he is indicating that it can be present with sensitivity and does not belong exclusively to the male realm.

That Muir chose to share his concept of strength with femininity is notable, given that he existed in a nearly exclusively male realm and became an ardent conservationist through his wilderness experiences that required a great deal of physical fortitude. Through his outdoors self-education, his sensitivity towards nature was augmented, and he strengthened his resolve to protect it for others from those who would use their strength for its destruction. The men described by Muir largely pursued livelihoods involving physical labor in the wilderness. His most frequent examples of “men at work” are miners, shepherders, loggers, and hunters: those who radically alter or destroy nature, or kill its inhabitants. He is critical of them all. That these male pursuits occurred mainly in a nature that Muir described as female cannot be overlooked. Muir, as opposed to those other men, used his physical strength not to destroy the wilderness but to explore it and then leave it largely intact. He believed that wilderness experiences served only to strengthen one, wanted others to experience the outdoors in order to help save it, and did not believe that was possible if people were sheltered from the elements by roofs, doors, and windows. For example, when he returned from being out in a storm one day, he wrote that he “pitied [the locals] for being dry and defrauded of all the glory that Nature had spread round about them” (Gifford 407). During another storm, he noted tourists “out of sight, careful about getting cold, and satisfied with views from windows” (Gifford 635). Whereas the outdoorsmen that he criticized at least were able to experience nature, many politicians lived and worked in

cities far removed from what he was trying to protect and thus with weakened sensitivity to the beauty of nature. Due to Muir's life in the wilderness, his physical and mental stamina were repeatedly tested. He was no stranger to tests of his endurance, having grown up under his father's expectations of grueling farm labor, and through the bitter cold of Wisconsin winters and its summer heat and humidity that could be equally oppressive. So when it came time for him to challenge himself in the outdoors as an adult, he was well conditioned for those experiences traversing glaciers, venturing to the cusp of a waterfall, and climbing mountains and trees. His hardiness was further indicated when, in determining the path for his thousand-mile walk, he intentionally selected "the wildest, leafiest, and least trodden way I could find" (Gifford 119), the portion across Florida from the Atlantic to the Gulf of Mexico mostly through marsh, even where he slept for the night (Gifford 154). Man cannot live by bread alone, though Muir wrote that often that was all that he ate during the course of a day, sometimes to the point of fainting. One day he hiked over forty miles without lunch or dinner (Gifford 135), relying on his reserve strength to carry him through. He wrote that of tea, "there are but two kinds, weak and strong, the stronger the better" (Gifford 220). Like Moses climbing Mt. Sinai and receiving the Ten Commandments, Muir used his strength to attain the highest summits and from there gain perspective about the scale of the wilderness: both its grandeur as well as its destruction. One cannot achieve a panoramic view from lower elevations, in the valleys and canyons and plains and forest floors. Muir understood that even high altitudes were not immune to man's imprint, because miners did not require living resources such as trees and animals, but the rocks and minerals that created so many of the sweeping vistas that Muir beheld at the end of his long climbs. Thus Muir saw why no place was safe. Greta Ehrlich argues that strength was passed on from Muir to his children. She writes that his daughters "had some of Muir's physical

toughness. They could ride a horse, drive a six-horse team, pitch in with ranch chores, and hold their own in debates during the battles to save Yosemite” (Gifford 204). Despite Muir’s displays of strength and endurance, he also seems to have believed that much of what men used those abilities to achieve was unnatural and ultimately destructive. He wrote that nature, on the other hand, appropriated the proper amounts of strength and for beneficial purposes. One example of this is his commentary about weather. He wrote, “mountain winds...dew and rain, sunshine and snow, are measured and bestowed with love on the forests to develop their strength and beauty...faith in Nature’s forestry is established, and we cease to deplore the violence of her most destructive gales” (Gifford 397). Therefore he indicates that he does not oppose destruction and power, provided it is natural instead of manmade. He did not look at a tree and see lumber and furniture. Rather, he wanted it to remain in its original, God-created form, unlike the wealthy male industrialists and economists of his time such as fellow Scotsmen Andrew Carnegie and Adam Smith. Muir thus exhibited great strength himself, going against the grain and breaking from patriarchally sanctioned traditional male norms of destruction. Yet, he remained true to male expectations by using his physical strength to take him around the wilderness, and by being a public leader, founding the Sierra Club and serving as its first president. Risking his life in locations where warning signs would be posted today, and enduring a bevy of weather conditions, Muir proved that physical fortitude was integral to whom he was.

A great deal of strength is exhibited by women during pregnancy, childbirth, and child-rearing, and another rich discussion of the feminine involves Muir’s extensive usage of the maternal words “womb” and “bosom” in his descriptions of nature. He uses “womb” on two occasions. Both of these instances are descriptions of the origins of glaciers in their highest, coldest, most protected sources: their oracles of life. Additionally, Yosemite Valley, his home

for so long, was a sort of womb. This cradle of abundant life was protectively surrounded by cliffs thousands of feet high, its snowmelt from the higher elevations channeling into rivers like an umbilical cord that provided lifeblood through the dry summers for the valley's wide variety of flora and fauna. Muir protected similar wombs of creation from the men who would destroy them with their picks, axes, saws, and herds of animals. He was protecting virgin lands from being touched by the destructive hands of these men. Just as at night he could clearly see the Milky Way and its nurseries of stars above him, so to him were the forests, meadows, and rivers founts of life. Muir uses the term "bosom" even more extensively than womb. He describes how, for example, he discovers on his thousand mile walk that Burkesville, Kentucky, "in beautiful location, is embosomed in a glorious array of verdant flowing hills" (Gifford 123) and he soon after enters the nearby "generous bosom of the woods" (Gifford 123). These passages characterize the abundance of the life that is Mother Nature. Such pastoral descriptions continued in his travels to California, where he described finding "a small lake and many charming glacier meadows embosomed in an extensive forest of two-leaved pine" (Gifford 264). This passage characterizes the interaction of lush meadow and forest biomes, as well as the animals that depend on their offerings for their sustenance. He writes of rural locales, "at the bottom of every dell we found little homesteads embosomed in wild brush and vines wherever the recession of the hills left patches of arable ground" (Gifford 432). Such homes and their human inhabitants are dependent upon the health of the surrounding ecosystem for their livelihood. In another instance, a bosom is a nesting destination or home of an inanimate object, such as in his description of a waterfall plunging "into its intensely white bosom" (Gifford 625). Each one of these usages of the word "bosom," then, is a pleasant and appealing one for him. Just as human infants are dependent upon their mother's breast milk, John Muir is pointing out

that the bosom of nature – Mother Earth - is the source of a wide range of life. Due to his extensive travels, he had seen life in all of its forms, in so many climates, including those in which it might be least expected: mountain tops and deserts. He advocated protection of these sources of life that represented to him the feminine.

The most abundant references that Muir makes to any mother are those to Mother Nature. Nature to him is not merely a gender-neutral “it.” For example, he writes, “fondly...does Mother Nature clasp her small bee-babies, and suckle them, multitudes at once, on her warm Shasta breast” (Gifford 445). In this passage, Muir anthropomorphizes Mother Nature in a physically maternal role: life-giving and nurturing. Likewise, his descriptions of nature’s “infinite lavishness and fertility” (Gifford 279) and “immortal virility” (Gifford 655) are reminiscent of his descriptions of the abundance of the bosom. He was well read in the classics, such as the Greek creation story of Gaea as Mother Earth. Likewise, Demeter was goddess of the harvest, able to bring forth life-sustaining crops but also to kill them as a reminder to the world of her daughter Persephone’s kidnapping by Hades (D’Aulaire, 62). And just as Muir believed that boys had a dual nature, he appreciated that Mother Nature too was capable of violence and destruction, but could also be peaceful, loving, and tender. In one case, he writes of “how...sternly, tenderly she loves and looks after her children” (Gifford 242), therefore incorporating two traits that are seemingly in opposition but yet balanced in Mother Nature. After experiencing an earthquake in Yosemite Valley, he reassures a frightened male tourist, “kind Mother Earth is trotting us on her knee” (Gifford 644-645). Though the earthquake is powerful and destructive – collapsing a cliff wall, causing rockslides, felling trees, and eroding stream banks – Muir instead describes it as one would a mother’s tender, loving care to help soothe her child. Yet in another description of the earthquake, he wrote that it was “as if Nature

were wrecking her Yosemite temple” (Gifford 643), which indicates Muir’s recognition of her ability to destroy what she has created. Of course, nature’s destructiveness also can result in creation, such as a forest fire’s eliminating deadwood and encouraging growth of some trees that require fire for reproduction. Muir repeatedly characterizes his admiration of her other products: thunderstorms, floods, blizzards, and the root systems of sequoias. Despite what Muir perceives as Mother Nature’s strength, he also places her in a victim’s role, such as in mining country where he describes her “doing what she can...patiently trying to heal every raw scar” (Gifford 210) of the Gold Rush. Therefore, he highlights the wounds that men’s actions are leaving upon Mother Nature. Mining clogged rivers and streams: arteries that had formerly provided clean water for countless species of fish, birds, and mammals. Another time, Muir describes a single raindrop as “God’s messenger, angel of love sent on its way with majesty and pomp and display of power that make man’s greatest shows ridiculous” (Gifford 237). In this instance, he refers with appreciation to an element of nature that is also powerful, and superior to man. Muir himself was unable to resist her. He described in another instance of how (Mother) “Nature had wooingly whispered, ‘Come higher’” (Gifford 245) to him. It is of no small significance that this calling – with feminine origin - was the one that he heeded for his life’s pursuit. Of the potential of dying on or in a glacier, he wrote, “our nice bones will do good in the terminal moraine” (Muir 54-55), indicating his consideration for “recycling” human matter, in a Biblical manner of dust to dust, that would reunite him with his mother creator. Just as, for example, a tree sheds its leaves or needles, which then decompose and return their nutrients to the soil, he envisioned his own death simply being a part of the predestined natural cycle of life that would return him to Mother Earth. In another passage, he writes how Nature “gains her ends with dogs as well as with men, making us do as she likes, shoving and pulling us along her ways...all but killing us at

times in getting her lessons driven hard home” (Muir 23). Thus, here nature assumes a controlling religious power, and an omnipotent one, as if humans are simply puppets. Mother Nature is God the Father’s creation, and thus religion – with its patriarchal structure - holds that important meaning, rather than human dominion – translated as destruction – over all. One particularly interesting phrase Muir wrote describes nature as “an enthusiastic workingman” (Gifford 248). Although he has otherwise unfailingly used “her” and never “him” when referring to nature, this androcentric word reflects the dominance of patriarchy over a John Muir who in other situations has broken from tradition by, for example, noting the strength of women. Muir’s description of nature thus includes a blurring of masculine and feminine. Mother Nature is a feminine entity possessing a wide variety of qualities, not the least of which is strength, a trait demonstrated by other mothers that he points out in the human and animal realms. And in contrast with his father, Mother Nature possesses an abundance of caring and tenderness.

Muir also details the characteristics of many other mothers. Though he rarely mentions his mother, where he does discuss her it is her protective traits that he usually describes: sheltering him from his father’s beatings, or coming running when he injures himself. This is in line with the other women whose sympathy he had described. And while despite the strong patriarchal influences at play in his life he does not make mention of even one animal in a fatherly role or what paternal traits might be, he does include many references to animal mothers, as well as to maternal characteristics of human mothers. In keeping in tune with his previous descriptions of other women and female traits, the mothers he characterizes are by no means weak. During his first summer in the Sierra Nevada, a lamb cried for its mother but the mother did not come running. Muir wrote of that observation, “That play on maternal affection failed” (Gifford 231). On another occasion he describes how cows’ love for their calves is akin to “the

divine mother-love of a woman...thoughtful, self-sacrificing” (Gifford 54). In this example he notes a mother who places the interests of her children before her own. In another situation he detailed the defense mechanisms of a Wisconsin bird that would go so far as to sacrifice its own life to protect her offspring from predators, including humans. Perhaps the strongest motherly traits that he portrays are in his description of bears, which he writes “like to keep out of the way of men as a general thing, but if an old, lean, hungry mother with cubs met a man on her own ground she would, in my opinion, try to catch and eat him” (Gifford 201). According to this passage, mother bears possess aggressively protective behaviors, when necessary. This instance is also one of the few in which he refers to any animal as female instead of using a male default, and just as he used such a technique to describe the physical capabilities of Native American women, this is one in which the female subject, a mother, exhibits strength. Thus, while all of Muir’s other descriptions of animals are male-dominated, and he makes no references to fatherly behaviors in nature, he includes extensive descriptions of the characteristics of animal mothers. These range from nurturing and tender, to strong and protective. Therefore, to him mothers exhibit balance.

V. Conclusion

During Muir’s thousand-mile walk from the Ohio River to the Gulf of Mexico in either 1867 or 1868, he wrote,

“The world, we are told, was made especially for man...A numerous class of men are painfully astonished whenever they find anything...in all God’s universe, which they cannot eat or render in some way what they call useful...It never seems to occur to these far-seeking teachers that Nature’s object in making animals and plants might possibly be first of all the happiness of each one of them, not the creation of all for the happiness of one. Why should man value himself as more than a small part of the one great unit of creation?...The fearfully good, the orthodox, of this laborious patchwork of modern civilization cry ‘Heresy’ on every one whose sympathies reach a single hair’s breadth beyond the boundary epidermis of our own species...After human beings have also played

their part in Creation's plan, they too may disappear without any...extraordinary commotion whatever" (Gifford 160-161).

This passage, written when Muir was about thirty years old, has several meanings. First, Muir had already turned from an orthodox religious doctrine favored by his father. Though he extensively infused his writing with Biblical references and remained Christian throughout his life, he rejected a standard interpretation of the Bible. Moreover, he actively opposed it. He formulated his own spirituality based on respect and appreciation of the Nature created by God, instead of the subjection and ruin of it that could result from blind adherence to Biblical doctrines about the environment.

Second, through his conservation efforts, Muir deviated from the strong corporatist and capitalist push of his era. The machines of the Industrial Revolution had accelerated destruction of the environment via modes such as the Gold Rush, logging, and cultivation. Men controlled the resulting wealth as well as the government that encouraged its accumulation by sanctioning policies favoring business. Muir, on the other hand, attempted to recruit partners such as Roosevelt and other men whose power could be used for preservation of the wilderness. Muir believed that not everything in Nature was intended to be exploited by men. He saw the intrinsic value of natural capital, and the economics of beauty rather than the profits from its annihilation.

Lastly, Muir's challenges to orthodoxy extended to his conceptions of masculine and feminine. While he reflected the gender norms of his time by being a rugged outdoorsman and a leader, and writing with androcentric terminology and methods, he also emphasized the tenderness and caring inherent not only to his masculinity, but also in many other men who were otherwise stereotypically masculine. Similarly, he recognized that femininity not only incorporated the popular notion of delicacy, but also had a necessary element of strength.

While John Muir reflected many gendered norms of his time in both his writing and his actions, by challenging a number of them the result was a unique balance. Just as he sought harmony between his Christian faith and his views about Nature, so too he achieved a blend between the strength so often coded as masculine and the sensitivity that is typically assigned to the feminine. He emulated the peace that he had seen achieved by God the Father and Mother Nature. An evangelist for the environment and crusader for conservation, his writings reflect his belief in the strength of Mother Earth and women, and as well as the tenderness and sensitivity present in God and men. Muir once wrote that a friend had “declared I’ll be famous some day, a kind guess that seems strange and incredible to a wandering wilderness-lover with never a thought or dream of fame while humbly trying to trace and learn and enjoy Nature’s lessons” (Gifford 283). The legacy of his manhood continues to this day.

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