

# Analysis of *Dances with Wolves* from the Perspective of Deep Ecology

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## Abstract

*Dances with Wolves* (1988), the masterpiece of Michael Blake, tells the story of a Civil War-era United States Army lieutenant named Dunbar who was dispatched to the American frontier to find a military post, and who eventually blended in the community of the aboriginals, Lakota. Since its publication, there have been many interpretations of the novel. However, no one has carried out research on the novel from the perspective of deep ecology, one of the basic branches of ecocriticism. As all the other writers pondering the relationship between humans and the environment, Blake launched a call on humankind to reflect deeply on environmental crisis and most of his works were brimmed with concerns over the relationship between humans and the environment. This paper intends to interpret *Dances with Wolves* from deep ecological perspective and to explore the ecological ideas implied in the novel. Firstly, the paper gives a sketch of deep ecology, the ultimate norms of deep ecology and the concept wilderness which the author of this paper will apply to the study. Secondly, the paper expounds the protagonist Dunbar's Self-realization through analyzing his adventure on the prairie. The paper respectively illuminates his Self-realization from three aspects: Dunbar's adventure in the wilderness, Dunbar's intimacy with his initiator Two Socks and Dunbar's companionship with his mentor Kicking Bird. The last part of the paper is a conclusion that summarizes the social significance of Dunbar's Self-realization. For the common benefit of the whole ecosystem, Michael Blake, with the book, advocates human beings to cultivate ecological consciousness, to possess the ecological responsibility, to respect the values and rights of all forms of life and to live in harmony with nature.

**Keywords:** *Dances with Wolves*, Michael Blake, deep ecology, Dunbar, self-realization

## 1. Introduction

Michael Blake (1945–2015) is an American author. He was once stationed at Walker Air Force Base, when he wrote for the base newspaper. After retiring from the base, he majored in journalism in University of New Mexico and continued his writing. He loved to write and held an editorial position with *the Free Press*, an underground weekly newspaper in Los Angeles. In order to do something that would last, he engaged in studying cinema performing and specialized in writing film script in a local film school in Berkeley. The whole 1980s witnessed only one film script of Blake adapted into the big screen as a low-budget independent film called *Double Down*, in which a little-known figure named Kevin Costner acted the leading role. Though the movie achieved a moderate level of success, it was the beginning of a long and prosperous friendship between Blake and Costner. Thereafter, Blake wrote another screenplay *Dances with Wolves* that tells the story of a Union officer assigned to an outpost on the Western frontier shortly after the Civil War and built friendship with a group of aborigines, Lakota. Kevin encouraged Blake to turn the script into a novel, to improve its chances of being adapted into a film. Until 1987, when Kevin decided to try to make the novel into a movie, Blake had little more than his artistic principles and the generosity of friends to keep him going. He had spent 20 years writing mostly unproduced screenplays, and *Dances with Wolves* had never even been remarked before it was finally published in paperback in 1988. The movie of the same name adapted from the novel achieved a giant success and soon there was a culmination of the sales process of the book. Blake won Academy Award for Writing Adapted Screenplay and his book was No. 1 on *The New York Times*' paperback best-seller list for 11 weeks. Some people argued Blake actually wrote *Dances with Wolves* so that his friend Costner could make a movie, but Blake said he wanted to tell a story of a white man who learned to appreciate the rich but vulnerable culture of the American

Indians, as he himself had. So deeply attracted by Indians and their culture, Blake integrated his knowledge and experience from Indians into his writing. “One of the things that had fascinated me about Indians was that they took great pride in the fact that they were partners with nature,” says the author, who started reading histories about the frontier Indians and their bitter conflicts with white soldiers about seven years ago. “The Indians’ sense of community was something I had never had in my life,” says Blake. “I come from a broken home. I did not starve—but spiritually, I did not have very much to sustain me. The Indians had hard lives, but they always had the spiritual thing going” (Berkman, 1991).

As some critics see it, Blake’s work is well polished, and even when he makes the novice’s mistake of making his protagonists more capable and assured than perhaps, they ought to be. As a historical fiction with a hidden message for peace, the book is so extremely well written that many teachers recommend it to high school students or young adults because younger people can understand objectively what America is doing to countries today. As previously stated, the novel did not stir attention from the public after its publication. Whereas people had an eye on it in the wake of the huge hit of the movie of the same name. Notwithstanding, it is generally known that there remains a paradox that the high popularity of a novel often goes before heated disputes among critical circles. *Dances with Wolves* also has been argued from a multitude of angles: the comparison of the novel and its film adaptation (Berkman, 1991), the analysis of female images in the novel (Dai, 2012), the analysis of the image Native Americans in the novel (Wang, 2012), the ecological ethics embodied in the novel (Xuedi, 2012; Mingke, 2013; Jing, 2015), the comparative study of the novel and other novels (Lingqin, 2010; Lingjiao, 2017; Xueman, 2019), the study of literary image (Xiangke, 2008), the cultural identity transformation of the protagonist (Xiaomei, 2014) and the symbolic meaning of the novel (Xiaoqiang, 2013). Some critics deem that Blake abandoned the hackneyed precedent of stereotypical disdain and hatred to Indians, and through exposing the wrongs of nation to a group of peaceful people, Blake explored the theme of the cultural conflicts and coexistence between the whites and the aboriginals in the Northern America. Some critics affirm that the novel is a highly successful attempt at re-writing history and it is therefore worth reading. These research achievements above give a dimensional illustration about the novel, which broaden the interpretations of it to help readers gain more profound appreciation of it. However, no researches on *Dances with Wolves* evaluate it from the perspective of deep ecology to explore the ecocritical implications in it and to find how humans interact with wilderness.

When we read the novel curiously, especially with diligence and attention, it takes no pains for us to find that the novel came into being as an answer to contemporary movement of “Green Literature”: ecocriticism, which grew up in the United States since the last decade of the 20th century. In fact, the novel is affluent in ecological ideas and the protagonists in the novel are endowed with ecological consciousness, which deserve further study, especially under such a background with the deterioration of the environmental crisis. In *Dances with Wolves*, Michael Blake presents a detailed description of how the frontier of America and the Indians’ lifestyle in the 1860s were like. As an acute observer, Blake catches the vision of the close relationship between human beings and nature, i.e., human beings are not the master of nature, but a part of nature. Blake also probes into how ecological crisis leads to the destruction of ecological conditions on the planet and how it furthermore aggravates spiritual crisis of human beings. Accordingly, it is worth exploring the novel to find those ecological thoughts with approaches of the theory, deep ecology.

## 2. Deep Ecology, Self-Realization and Wilderness

Deep ecology is a holistic approach to face world problems, bringing together thinking, feeling, spirituality and action. As a basic branch of ecocriticism, deep ecology challenges scientific ecology that does not include the spiritual dimension. To Devall and Sessions, deep ecology is “an invitation to thinking, and presents challenging questions and dilemmas” (1985, p. 10). Deep ecology is “deep” because it poses deep questions about the normative and descriptive premises of modernity. Examples of deep questions are as follow: Why do we think that economic growth and high levels of consumption are so important? Do the norms of anthropocentric modernity provide a way of life that is truly satisfying? Does the present society fulfill basic human needs like love, security, and access to nature? Which society, which education, which form of religion, is beneficial for all life on the planet as a whole? (Devall & Sessions, 1985, p. 74). People will discover that modern norms not only promote environmental problems, but also are inconsistent with the norms of many philosophical and spiritual traditions. Thus, Naess commented in an interview conducted at the Zen Center of Los Angeles in 1982, “All the sciences are fragmentary and incomplete relation to basic rules and norms, so it’s very shallow to think that science can solve our problems. Without basic norms, there is no science” (Devall & Sessions, 1985, p. 12)

Arne Naess develops two ultimate norms or intuitions that are themselves not derivable from other principles or intuitions. The norms valued deeply by ecology are arrived at via the deep questioning process, and they reveal

the significance of moving to the philosophical and religious level of wisdom. One of the norms is “Self-realization”. Self-realization means full development of all the potentials of the individual (including the transcendental level, which is signified by the capital “S”) and it goes beyond the modern Western self that is defined as an isolated ego striving primarily for hedonistic gratification or for a narrow sense of individual salvation in this life or the next. “Self-realization” to Naess is “an ecological approach to being in the world” and his concept of “Self” is a way to achieve a “healthier self”, or “ecological-self”, which he describes as “everything with which a person identifies” (1986, p. 236). In this identification process, it is indispensable to distinguish the *self* from the *ego* because confusing *self* with the narrow *ego* makes us underestimate ourselves. He criticizes what is traditionally understood as the *maturity of the self* because it leaves Nature out. Certainly, the relationship between society and humans is important. However, *self* is much richer in its constitutive relationships. In view of that human nature is with sufficient comprehensive (all-sided) maturity, humans cannot help but ‘identify’ themselves with all living beings: beautiful or ugly, big or small, sentient or not. Therefore, the self-realization we experience when we identify ourselves with the universe is heightened by an increase in the number of ways in which individuals, societies, species and all life forms realize themselves. The greater the diversity, the greater the self-realization. The sense of *self* in deep ecology requires a further maturity and growth, an identification which goes beyond humanity to include the nonhuman world—animals, trees, and even features of landscape such as rivers and mountains. We must see beyond our narrow contemporary cultural assumptions, values and the conventional wisdom of our time and place, and this is best accomplished by the meditative deep questioning process. Only in this way can we hope to attain full mature personhood and uniqueness.

About the word “wilderness”, someone may imagine a plain, a desert, the sacred or the sublime. The idea of wilderness often signifies a place uncontaminated by civilization and it is “a construction mobilized to protect particular habitats and species, and is seen as a place for the reinvigoration of those tired of the moral and material pollution of the city” (Garrard, 2004, p. 72). The question about wilderness is central to deep ecology to the status quo of literary and cultural studies, in that it does not share the predominantly social concerns of the traditional humanities. Wilderness retains important meaning for deep ecologists because the attainment of one’s Self-realization is where wilderness plays a significant role. Deep ecologists claim that environmental problems result from an anthropocentric attitude that ignores the fact that humans are a part of nature. Largely, the anthropocentric attitude is to blame for environmental malaise of the time. To fundamentally resolve the aggravated environmental crisis, deep ecologists call for a shift away from anthropocentric humanism towards an egocentrism that is guided by the norm of Self-realization for all beings (Zimmerman, 1994, p. 2). The possibility of Self-realization ought not to be restricted to humans alone. In order to truly and appropriately perceive and understand the world, we must firstly dismiss the assumed but inaccurate bifurcation between self and nature and we must grasp the depth of relational reality of all things, including the nonhuman world. Wilderness preservation becomes crucial for deep ecologists because designated wilderness areas are, for them, necessary components in this process of Self-realization—a sort of asylum of reorientation where this ideal self can take form. Many deep ecologists maintain that wilderness is essential for Self-realization of humanity. Furthermore, because there is a commonality between wilderness and people, i.e., both nature and humans are being undermined by industrialization, social injustice, and, in the case of many developing nations, overpopulation, without experiencing wilderness, people would have fewer opportunities to identify themselves with nonhuman life and would not develop a deep ecological attitude. As a result, wilderness provides the location for an “intuition of identification with nonhuman beings” (Zimmerman, 1994, p. 36) which in turn motivates people to have a deep questioning of basic beliefs. People contacting animals and plants in wilderness enables them to see that nonhuman organisms are not radically “other”. Observing the activities of other organisms and seeing how they endure experiences similar to humans are conducive to humans to have a life-changing intuition about their relationship with nonhuman life. This intuition leads to a sense of wider identification with the reality in which one discovers that the self is not an ego encapsulated inside a skin bag, but is an event constituted by a complex network of relations. Eventually, a sense of wider identification is constructed on a realization of commonality. Apparently, wilderness is quite essential during the process of one’s self-realization.

### 3. Dunbar’s Journey of Self-Realization

In *Dances with Wolves*, Blake incarnates the idea wilderness with the American frontier or the prairie where Dunbar accomplishes his Self-realization. The novel is more like a diary about Dunbar’s adventure on the frontier, which forms the central stage of his Self-realization. As Blake said, “Inside everyone is a frontier waiting to be discovered. Lt. John Dunbar is about to discover the frontier...within himself” (Blake, 1988, p. 10). Concretely, his adventure in the wilderness, his intimacy with the wolf Two Socks, his cordial friendship with his

mentor Kicking Bird profoundly affect his attitude towards nature and human civilization, and inspire him to cultivate ecological consciousness.

### 3.1 *Dunbar's Adventure in the Wilderness*

#### 3.1.1 Alienation from the Army

Lt. John Dunbar established himself as a hero by providing a diversion so that a group of Union soldiers could overcome an entrenched Rebel position. The story began with a bloody battle in which Dunbar was in danger of being amputated for his leg which had been so badly wounded. At that time, the two debilitated armies had been in a military confrontation state for many days in which no one expected an attack from the opposite side. Just at the moment, Dunbar unexpectedly jumped onto his horse Cisco and galloped in the direction of the enemy. When he came close to the enemy, he abruptly loosened the reins, stretched his arms and looked up to the heaven, galloping away to his heart's content. The suicidal act shocked both sides at war. Dunbar did it because he would rather die with dignity than lose his leg, not because he wanted to be a hero. It can clearly be seen that Dunbar prefers living with dignity to drifting along. Marvelously, he escaped from the bullets and survived. His bravery gave a boost to the morale of the army and they launched an offensive and got a final win in the battle. Dunbar became famous in a fight, but he refused his senior official's award that he could choose to post at any post at will, and requested to be dispatched to the frontier. He did it for he wanted to see the frontier before it extinguishes.

War has been with humans throughout their existence on this planet. Ever since a long time ago, there were some extreme views on war. To Nietzsche, fighting was a noble occupation and men were trained for war while women were born to be the recreation of the warrior. Mussolini looked upon war as a moral necessity. Hitler regarded war as the basic principle of life. For him, law was only that which a soldier laid down and only those who helped the state to prepare for war really contributed to national culture and social well-being. These extreme values are criticized and condemned today, and the crime of war to humanity should not be ignored. In the battle, Dunbar was powerless and passive and was taken advantage of by war maniac. As time went by, war brought him to the abyss of despair, fear and perplexity. He lost his natural instincts and did not know in which aspect his inherent quality was. Fortunately, he survived the war and it changed all his rest life. Contrary to other soldiers who have had conventional thoughts of line, there was not enough time for him to be awarded for his military exploit; he volunteered to be posted on the frontier for it had been his resolution since his childhood. He did not loaf purposelessly in this tortuous world of passive adaptability and tried to understand what it had meant so far. He wanted to see for himself the mystic frontier before he died and recognized the mysterious depth of his role as an archetypal-mythical hero soldier to throw away the stereotypical images of his own. For this, he had to give up known means of control and accepted logic of causality in search of inner reality of his experience. Actually, his unusual act of being posted to the frontier implies that he has been sick of the undying ruthless slaughter and unmerciful humanity and he has extremely yearned for freedom. He is a pure prophet who foresees the future fate of the frontier and Indians. With the whites pushing westward movement, an abundance of land was occupied and natural resources were pocketed by the whites, which inevitably brought destruction to the living space of Indians and furthermore the population of them gradually decreased. After he had perceptively observed the crisis of this, he determinedly chose to alienate himself from the army and enjoyed the joy and satisfaction brought by the remote and desolate wilderness.

#### 3.1.2 Solitude in Wilderness and Growth to the Self

According to the ultimate intuition of Self-realization, cultivating ecological consciousness involves being honest with ourselves and seeking clarity in our intuitions, then acting from clear principles. In addition, humans need to directly contact untrammelled wilderness and places undomesticated for narrow human purposes, and they need to appreciate silence and solitude, and to rediscover how to listen (Devall & Sessions, 1985, p. 11). In *Dances with Wolves*, posting on the frontier provides such an opportunity for Dunbar to dislocate himself from a social self, to explore a nonhuman world so as to search for his real or biological personhood, in the absence of external goals, stimulation and feedback.

Since humans are born in the world, they have had an extraordinary relationship with nature, a place where humans could turn to when they want to temporarily separate from civilization as a response to the pressures and stresses imposed upon them by societies and cultures. People of all walks of life, including many prominent figures of human history like Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Moses and Buddha may turn to nature to experience solitude in the wilderness. The indigenous cultures of North America have long used solo journeys away from the community in their rites of passage and religious rituals, and spend time alone in the wilderness as a powerful personal experience. Why do people choose to pursue an experience of solitude in the wilderness?

Psychologist Anthony Storr notes: “changes of attitude are facilitated by solitude and often by changes in environment as well” (1988, p. 32). That is to say, people seek wilderness solitude to bring about a deep personal change. When one is alone, far away from civilization, he feels less pressure to act a certain way, to dress a certain way, to engage or not engage in certain behaviors. When one is alone in the wilderness, there will be less or even no behavioral norms for he or she to abide by and there will be much less or even no pressure at all. The less one feels a part of a social order, the easier one moves beyond certain behavioral norms.

For individuals who live within the influence of Western civilization, a visit to wilderness is to elude the clamoring and nastiness of the cultural apparatus (Abbey, 1971, p. 7) and to enjoy the aloneness in a place of refuge from the toils of social life. Since his childhood, Dunbar was greatly impressed with the frontier of America and it seemed to be a long-standing dream of serving on the frontier. Preoccupied with the curiosity to know what lied within the frontier, what the mysterious buffaloes were like, Dunbar believed that the frontier not only stood for the rational and logical view of this linear world to be registered through the senses, but also what lied beyond this tangible world. On his first day of arrival on the frontier, he was completely indulged in the frontier; he was swallowed, adrift and thrilled; his blood was quiet.

To the philosopher Phillip Koch, solitude is like being in an experiential world in which others are absent. He outlines three necessary conditions for solitude: physical isolation from others, social disengagement, and reflectiveness. He also claims that solitude in wilderness possesses virtues “Freedom, Attunement to Self, Attunement to Nature, Reflective perspective, Creativity” (1994, p. 99). Living alone in the wilderness and getting intimate with nature bestow Dunbar an opportunity to enjoy maximum freedom, isolate him from other people and his engagement, and enable him to reflect on the complexity of life as well as Self. The prairie is a place of refuge from the uproariousness of civilization, in which Dunbar, as a strange guest at first, was acquainted with the land and everything within it. The absence of human noise and mess, is one of the most important sensory features of solitude. Seeking solitude is to seek an escape from the noises of human civilization such as car horns, ringing telephones, television and radio broadcasts, and so on. Being alone in the Fort, Dunbar was glad for the company of silence around him and tried to perceive much more than he could perceive in cities, the sounds of the wilderness. The exotic beauty of nature fascinated him most and he paid awed tribute to the majesty of one manifestation of nature’s grandeur. He loved the glorious prairie that was ablaze with wildflowers and overrun with game. He knew he would never grow tired of the sight: The buffalo grass, alive as an ocean, were waving in the wind for as far as his eyes could see. He lived a life as simple as the indigenes. He searched some animals’ bones and remodeled them into needles to do sewing. It was a wonderful feeling that there was no work, no play and therefore his mind was free. He was separate and he was whole, all at the same time.

Solitude in the wilderness enables Dunbar to effectively listen to himself, to be in touch with his inner feeling. It is in such a place far away from the outward that he begins to ponder the complexity of life as well as Self. Take laundry as an example. He washed everything he got and inadvertently he found being naked was a good feeling. He felt much less conspicuous without his clothes for he could notice every tiny plant, every buzzing insect and everything seemed to be remarkably alive. In this moment, he felt like a true citizen of the prairie. When he looked at his reflection in the glassy surface of water, he thought he looked so nice that he had affection for himself, and for the first time he smiled boyishly at the reflection. This description above is embodied with important symbolic meaning. His clothes and officer’s hat are the emblems of civilization. Dunbar striped away all the items artificiality imposed upon him by mechanized civilization and immersed himself in the wilderness, he felt a part of something greater than he himself and he became more mature. This is a “fusion” between the self and Nature or an identification which goes beyond humanity to include the nonhuman world. By confronting his essential self, Dunbar acknowledges his relation to the world of nature, and accomplishes his rebirth.

To sum up, solitude in the wilderness proves to be a crucial element in Dunbar’s spiritual promotion, i.e., growth to the Self. Before being posted on the frontier, Dunbar has got no identity of his own except that assigned to him by his superior in the army. Deep Ecology advocates that the ideological changes made to improve life is “mainly that of appreciating life quality (dwelling in situation of inherent value) rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living” (Devall & Sessions, 1985, p. 70). Through intimately approaching the wilderness, Dunbar, who is jaded and corrupted by civilization, has a spiritual refreshment and identifies himself with the wild, beautiful frontier. It is in the wilderness that Dunbar learns the frontier is a mythic place of freedom and peace, and finally he recovers his true self he has lost because of the corrupting influences of the artificial lives. When he initiates into the inner world in search of his true self, he gets maturity and growth and identifies himself with the nonhuman world.

### 3.2 Dunbar's Intimacy with the Wolf Two Socks

#### 3.2.1 Wolves: A Literary Image

Wolves are always images of great complexity in literary works both at home and abroad, which reflects a complex feeling of human beings to wolves. On the one hand, wolves are the embodiment of demons. Like tigers and lions, wolves are carnivores, but they are not titled with good names as the former. On contrary, wolves are brought into disrepute and are defamed repeatedly. In the old times, wolves had a notorious reputation for they were often described as the very incarnation of cruelty and craftiness and therefore were reduced to being discriminated, hated and slaughtered. President Roosevelt once defined wolves as "the archetype of ravin, the beast of waste and desolation" (2005, p. 699). He devoted several pages to state clinically the methods and motives for extirpating wolves, and then puzzled over their demise, in the contradictory bewilderment symptomatic of sportsmen writing on wolves. After mentioning the tens of thousands killed by hunters, ranchers and government agents, Roosevelt wrote, "Yet even the slaughter of wolves wrought by man in certain localities does not seem adequate to explain the scarcity or extinction of wolves, throughout the country at large" (2005, p. 701). On the other hand, wolves are worshipped and highly extolled as heroes. Especially in literary works of recent times when the assertions of ecocriticism become more and more popular in literature, wolves become the preference of many ecological literary works. Chinese writer Jiang Rong endows wolves with abundant emotion in his novel *The Wolf Totem* (2004) in which wolves' wisdom, loyalty to their family and the sense of team spirit are greatly praised. No matter what wolves are eulogized or spoken poorly of, they have become one of the most important figures of literary works. Blake has great love for animals like buffaloes, wolves, horses, etc. and he is fond of writing stories about animals. He integrates this hobby into writing *Dances with Wolves* and portrays the classic wolf image: Two Socks.

#### 3.2.2 Two Socks: The Initiator of Dunbar

Michael Blake is an animal lover and he claims his love for animals differs from that of the ordinary love; it embodies the implication of ideas and thoughts of deep ecology. Arne Naess argues that richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of human. Life forms here are not limited only to humans, but include humans and nonhuman life such as whales, grizzly bears, rain forests, ecosystems, mountains and rivers, the tiniest microbes in the soil, and so on. For that reason, on the way to achieve Dunbar's Self-realization in wilderness, animals like Two Socks and the horse Dunbar keeps play an indispensable role. To a large extent, Two Socks is the initiator of Dunbar. At the core of Dunbar's idea of Self-realization is "dances with wolves", as the name of the novel claims.

A person must experience the conditions of solitude for a significant period, but the significant period of time must be finite. That is to say, solitude is very rarely an acceptable condition. Apparently, people enjoying solitude in wilderness are not immune from the need for other people. Dunbar is no exception. In the wilderness, Dunbar was not only physically isolated from others, but also was marooned, as he had thought in the abandoned army post. In a deep secret way, he wanted to be alone, but being marooned had none of the euphoria he had felt before. Then, it is logical for him to turn to a wolf he named Two Socks for companionship. Actually, it is Two Socks that initiates Dunbar into the prairie and to be engaged in the wilderness. Two Socks is more than a common wolf to be feared; he is the priest of the wilderness, somewhat embodying the virtues of the wilderness in a magical way. He is the representative of the primitive force of nature. Though he is past his prime, he is big and sturdy. He also represents the ancientness of the wilderness because "wisdom was the word that came to the lieutenant's mind" and "wisdom was the bonus of surviving many years, and the tawny old fellow with the watchful eyes had survived more than his share" (Blake, 1988, p. 41).

As a key factor in Dunbar's Self-realization, Two Socks' intimacy with Dunbar and sacrifice for him have great effect on Dunbar's change. Deep ecologists deem that humans need to accept the invitation to the dance—the dance of unity of humans, plants, animals, the Earth. Just as his Comanche name "Dances with Wolves" indicates, Dunbar always tries to "dance" or "amuse himself" with animals. His name is the clue of the novel, and the most important image that Blake transmits as well. Two Socks is alone, mystic and as recluse as a wise hermit. He symbolizes wisdom and gains wisdom from the prairie. He is the apotheosis of the sublime of the wilderness. From the first time when Dunbar met Two Socks, they both wanted to be friends with each other and they did it. They shared food with each other and tried to amuse each other. Sometimes Dunbar took Two Socks as the most powerful painkiller when he was in depression and Two Socks often waited for Dunbar like a dutiful camp dog waiting for his master. What impresses us most is the sweet scene in which they chased each other like a man and a naughty boy who were frolicking with each other just for fun. The scene inspired Kicking Bird to present Dunbar a name as a gift: Dances with Wolves, and Dunbar accepted it as an honor and cherished it as

much as his life. Largely, Two Socks enlightens Dunbar to aspire to learn the wilderness as well as the Sioux.

As a representative of the primitive force of nature, the death of Two Socks betokens the destruction to the prairie. It is Two Socks who initiates Dunbar into the prairie and to be engaged in the prairie; it is also him who helps Dunbar realize that humans' interference brought fatal destruction to the Sioux as well as to the prairie. The mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in America was a time of rapid progress and expansion for civilization. Cities in the East were growing quickly due to the development of industry and trade, and the areas in the West undisturbed by humans gradually decreased. With more labors moving from fields to factories, pollution increased geometrically, and resources in the frontier were beginning to be seen more and more as a commodity. Thus, a very distinct line between civilization and nature was being reinforced as civilization grew. Frederick Jackson Turner wrote one of the most significant and controversial papers in American studies *The Frontier in America History*, which set forth an analysis of the history of the frontier. The frontier was gradually pushed westward, and Americans became more and more divorced from the European way of life. The fall line (the eastern piedmont region where rushing water was a convenient source of power) marked the frontier of the 17th century. Settlement in the 18th century moved as far as the Alleghenies. It reached the Mississippi by the first quarter of the 19th century; the Missouri in some thirty more years, and the belt of the Rocky Mountains and the arid tract, by turn of the century. Traders, farmers, cattlemen, miners and city builders—each successive wave claimed as much of the land for them as they could hold until, at last, the frontier disappeared (2017, p. 28). At the end of the 19th century, the frontier was closed, and thus ended a significant chapter in the history of this nation and of the world. As a result, several significant changes occurred. As the availability of free land was basically exhausted and the Great West diminished. The frontier and everything within it constituted the unfortunate victim of American economic growth. Once Two Socks is gone, the American frontier representing nature will have gone as well. At the moment of Two Socks' death, Dunbar's friendship and intimacy with Two Socks roused his consciousness of the identification with Two Socks through the experience of "intense empathy", i.e., by connecting with him, by "suffering and-or feeling" with him and by acknowledging him. This is as Naess appeals, "human nature is such—he says—that, with sufficient comprehensive (all-sided) maturity, we cannot help but 'identify' our self with all living beings; beautiful or ugly, big or small, sentient or not" (Sessions, 1986, 20). When the "intense empathy" took place, Dunbar's self was fully unfolded and "self-in-Self" was realized, which was ultimately fulfilled when Dunbar resolutely refused to answer the barbaric soldiers' question in English. Instead, he repeatedly answered in Comanche, "I am Dances with Wolves. I disdain talking to you" (Blake, 1988, p. 299). By then, Dunbar truly accepted the invitation to the dance—the dance of unity of humans, plants, animals and the Earth.

Two Socks, the symbol of the prairie, freedom and wisdom, befriends a human Dunbar and becomes a faithful companion to him. He is nature incarnate and human beings can live in harmony with animals and nature, only when they can respect each other. The intuition of deep ecology that everything hangs together appeals us that we are not the same without our connections. Our full development depends on everybody and the development of everything else in the same way as our development influences theirs. Dunbar's intimacy with Two Socks is of crucial importance for Dunbar to decode the wilderness and to find his inner self. When Dunbar and Two Socks achieve perfect harmony and establish unity on a spiritual level, Dunbar moves forward to his Self-realization.

### 3.3 Kicking Bird: The Mentor of Dunbar

Indians, "children of the wilderness," rarely farm, and seem not to be quite human by European definitions, but they are the most admirable characters who educate Dunbar truly about the prairie. They possess humility, endurance, and devout love for soil and nature. They scrupulously abide by Indians' traditions and live in harmony with nature. Living by themselves, the Sioux maintain their purity and turn to nature. They have learned fully what the prairie has taught them and has thereby become, in a sense, priests of a wilderness religion. With the intrusion of European settlers and the whites from the eastern parts of America, the Sioux are compelled to live in more remote areas, but they are never submissive to the whites. Instead, they are proud of their race and they spare no time to fight back when they are deprived of their land.

In the novel, the first meeting between Dunbar and the Sioux ended up with an embarrassing situation because the Sioux attempted to steal Dunbar's horse only to see naked Dunbar. The lieutenant was so shocked at the sight of their rich, dark skins and strong muscles that he was as powerless as a kid at his first big parade. Words like mysterious, charming, breathtaking reflected the lieutenant's impression of them. Dunbar seemed to have a dream in which he had lost all capacity for thought and was as weak as a newborn puppy. How strange it is for a white soldier to feel that. When Dunbar made his first visit to the ghetto of the Lakota, he was obsessed with the warm, peaceful and ancient atmosphere there. He was really thrilled by the atmosphere and lifestyle of the

Lakota. By then he had an epiphany about what was at the core of his urge to be posted on the frontier. He became part of something so large that he was not a lieutenant or a man or even a body of working parts any more. He was a spirit, hovering in the timeless, empty space of the universe. What's more, he was deeply tempted by the indigenes who mentored him to fulfill his Self-realization. Blake mainly depicts Kicking Bird, Ten Bears, Stands with a Fist, among whom Kicking Bird stands out as the mentor of Dunbar in the process of Dunbar's maturity and spiritual growth. Kicking Bird, the natural leader of the Lakota for his wisdom and his power of observation, is a man representing knowledge, reflection, foresight, credibility and intuition. As the busiest man in the tribe, Kicking Bird shoulders many duties honorably and performs them well, and he does all with one ear and one eye cocked to the Great Spirit. He regards the Great Spirit as Grandfather with ultimate power, who teaches him and the Sioux how to live, what to worship, where to go and what food to carry. Due to the adoration of the Great Spirit, he always listens, always watches for the slightest sound or sign to perceive instructions from the Great Spirit. With the instructions from the Great Spirit, he has learned fully what wilderness matters to his clansman and he loves the earth as well as all things within it.

Kicking Bird inspired Dunbar into a whole new world in which Dunbar kept seeking the Lakota's culture eagerly and ultimately identified himself with the Sioux, the love of nature. Kicking Bird is quiet, manly and inquisitive with dignified, peaceful, patient manner and these strengths are so appealing for Dunbar. What attracts Dunbar most is his first-rate intelligence like a scholar, with which Kicking Bird listens with care and seems to notice everything. Even the tiny shift in the wind or the random call of a bird, may catch his attention as something much more dramatic. With more affiliation with them, Dunbar discovers he has a great thirst for their culture and he could no more turn it down than a dying man could refuse water. Soon, he has been thinking less and less about the army he serves though his identity is still a lieutenant. "As he sat by the dwindling fire and listened to the yip of coyotes down by the river, it crossed his mind that he might have stumbled on to a better life. They had a distinct pull for him" (Blake, 1988, p. 174).

In order to educate Dunbar to learn and feel the power of the Great Spirit and to realize the enormous difference between the Sioux and the whites, Kicking Bird brought Dunbar into a special, sacred place, a mammoth forest where trees sheltered every animal the Great Spirit had made. As they came closer, the specter of the woods became more powerful, and on entering into the forest, Dunbar felt small. All he could envision was the Garden of Eden and a fantastic utopia peopled with a holy race leading tranquil lives in concert with all living things. To his astonishment, when he came closer, he found the place had been horribly desecrated. Trees of all sizes lay where they had been felled, some of which lied one over the other like toothpicks scattered upon a tabletop. Dunbar could not imagine for what purposes they had been cut. Besides, the whites murdered animals in cold blood. There, the Lakota's reverence for the forest and the whites' blasphemy to the forest formed a sharp contrast. The whites' worldview was quite alien to the Lakota's ways of thinking. Dunbar realized that Indian's faith sought the harmony of man with his surroundings while the whites' faith sought the dominance of surroundings. For Indians, the world was full of beauty and they were willing to share, to love everything; for the latter, the world was a place of sin and ugliness and they insanely conquered it for profits. In order to broaden and deepen one's self, deep ecology appeals humans to ask deeper questions of ourselves. That discrepancy between the credos inspired Dunbar to reflect on the assumptions of the dominant worldview in white cultural hegemony, i.e., the civilized and enlightened whites hoped to "civilize" the barbarous and savage Indians so that they could be eventually assimilated into mainstream American culture. Under the banner of "civilization of the tribes adjoining the frontier settlements", the whites, supported by missionaries and educators, occupied the land of Indians and had little or even no respect for the culture and rights of them. This consequently caused devastation to Native Americans and their cultures. Witnessing the destruction to the prairie brought by industrialization, Dunbar was upset to be aware that the peaceful life of the Lakota was disturbed and the ecological surroundings on the frontier were destroyed because of the irresponsibility and rapacity of the whites in the exploration of the frontier. He was greatly disappointed and was ashamed of being one of the arch-criminals. The whites' crime against wilderness accelerated Dunbar's questioning of his inner self to find his true identity and helped him in the realization of "self-in-Self" of becoming a whole person. Enlightened by Kicking Bird, Dunbar apperceived "all things in the biosphere have an equal right to live and blossom and to reach individual forms of inherent value" and "biocentric equality is intimately related to the all-inclusive Self-realization in the sense that if we harm the rest of Nature then we are harming ourselves" (Devall & Sessions, 1985, p. 67).

Actually, Dunbar had a subconscious motive to blend into the Lakota. The army Dunbar once vowed loyalty and devotion to had tirelessly extolled the virtues of service, of individual sacrifice in the name of God or country. Though he had tried his best to adopt these tenets, the concept of patriotism was only a "hollow rhetoric" which



never lasted beyond the fading: “the feeling of service to the army had dwelled mostly in his head. Not in his heart” (Blake, 1988, p. 176). He took off his army uniforms and wore the breastplate as the Lakota did. He yipped high and shrill like coyotes. Taught by Kicking Bird, he learned to eat delicious kidney of buffalos and he danced with his body painted with loud designs and his head covered with the head of a buffalo, complete with curly hair and horns. He was proud of being acknowledged as a member of the Lakota, the Lords of the Plains and he felt the satisfaction of belonging to something whose whole was greater than any of its parts. He enjoyed the tranquility in the ghetto of the Lakota and there his thought turned inward, toward himself. One day when he galloped across the vast Plain, he got a sudden enlightenment of his identity. He was charged with an intense feeling that he was the only man on earth, a king without subjects, rambling across the limitless territory of his life. As he dropped the reins and crossed his arms, laying each hand flat against the breastplate that covered his chest. “I’m Dances with Wolves,” he cried out loud, “I’m Dances with Wolves” (Blake, 1988, p. 230). At that moment, he identified himself with nature and attain full mature personhood and uniqueness.

#### 4. Conclusion

With the flourishing of ecocriticism in various fields, writings of ecoliterature obtain a prolific period when more and more writers begin to write works concerning relationship between humans and nature. Michael Blake explores the same topic through the story of a military officer’s adventure on the American frontier in *Dances with Wolves*. The frontier is the great wilderness, in which humans, plants, and animals coexist on an equal sphere within an intimate system of connections and it is impossible for one part of the system to change without influencing and affecting the other parts. For Lieutenant Dunbar, his adventure in the wilderness is a kind of salvation of his soul for his fallen self in a material society is redeemed by going to nature and his lost innocence is recovered. He gains rebirth after enjoying solitude in the wilderness where he learns that the oneness of all organisms is the essence of the wilderness, and he finds his lost inner self and grows to be a true part of the prairie. The companionship with Two Socks illumines him to catch that humans need to accept the invitation to the dance of the unity of humans, plants, animals and the Earth for we humans and nonhumans are a whole unity. Having been taught by the Sioux, Dunbar thoroughly gets rid of his former identity as a military officer occupied with anthropocentric views, blends into a member of “the Children of nature”, and live a placid and harmonious life. For the common benefit of the whole ecosystem, Michael Blake, with the book, suggests that human beings should cultivate ecological consciousness, possess the ecological responsibility, respect the values and rights of all forms of life and to live harmoniously with nature.

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