

**The Last Frontier: Death as Nature's Weapon in the Works of
David Vann**

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*For the Myths in my family,
My grandfather, the ground I tread
My uncle, the air I breathe,
My father, all in between and beyond.*

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Resumo

Esta dissertação centra-se na discussão de obras selecionadas de David Vann, um autor americano que se debruça sobre questões de violência e de morte, particularmente através do suicídio. Na perspectiva do autor, estes temas parecem incidir sobre alguns dos arquétipos culturais mais recorrentes e poderosos dos Estados Unidos: o mito do pioneiro; a construção individual afastada da civilização e em direção ao ambiente natural, também uma característica transcendentalista; a busca da felicidade; e, abrangendo todos, o mito da fronteira. É argumentável que Vann coloque estes temas em confronto direto com o ímpeto da caça indiscriminada, ao mesmo tempo que demonstra um fascínio absoluto pelo uso de armas como mediador do poder e até da masculinidade. Em certa medida, este fascínio evolui para uma ideologia de violência não só exteriorizada, mas também dirigida ao indivíduo como seu próprio agressor. Tendo em conta estas ideias, o objetivo deste trabalho é centrar-se mais especificamente no papel e na representação da Natureza, através da qual o indivíduo aspira ao seu desenvolvimento pessoal, e também no confronto entre o sublime que caracteriza o meio natural e a natureza interna do indivíduo, provocando, em última instância, a sua própria morte.

Palavras-chave: David Vann, Morte, Suicídio, Natureza, Fronteira.

Abstract

This research focuses on the discussion of selected works by David Vann, an American author who delves into the issues of violence and death, particularly by suicide. From the author's perspective, these themes seem to revolve around some of the most powerful and recurrent cultural archetypes of the United States: the pioneer myth; the individual construct away from civilization and into the natural environment, a transcendentalist trait; the pursuit of happiness; and encompassing all, the myth of the frontier. Arguably, Vann places these themes into direct confrontation with the impetus of indiscriminate hunting, while also demonstrating a sheer fascination with weaponry as a mediator of power and even masculinity. To some extent, this fascination evolves into an ideology of violence not only externalized but also directed at the individual as his own aggressor. Having in mind these ideas, the purpose of this work is to focus more specifically on the role and depiction of Nature, through which the individual aspires to personal development, and also on the confrontation between the sublime characteristic of the natural environment and the internal nature of the individual, ultimately bringing forth his own death.

Keywords: David Vann, Death, Suicide, Nature, Wilderness, Frontier.

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INTRODUCTION

In his 1969 essay, “The Death of the Author,” Roland Barthes states that “The Author is thought to nourish the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child.” (1977, 145)¹ There is no need to refute what Barthes argues in the context of this dissertation. Its inclusion is justified because, in a way, Vann's writing stems from a kind of survival process on the part of the author, in the face of the misfortune of having been deprived of the very relational sustenance that should have come from his father. If Barthes compares the author’s relation to his work with a father’s relation to his child, the statement alone should say enough about Vann’s work and why his writing, heavily marked by death, is so committed to life, as can be inferred by the author’s statement: “... lo que me gusta de la escritura es que hay una redención posible. Yo quería describir qué viene después del suicidio.” (Sanchís 2010)

The son of a hunter and avid user of firearms, David Vann was deprived of his father’s existence at the age of 13, when the latter, James Vann, committed suicide. After years of dealing with feelings that manifested in the most varied ways within the general confusion in which he found himself, Vann started to write fiction. He used his experience, along with the sum of questions he has been left with, using part of himself, his father, and the people he grew up with as the backbone of the characters he created. Although the characters and stories are fictionalized, the author is very open about his personal story, talking and writing frequently about how it influenced his writing.

In the afterword of his debut work, *Legend of a Suicide* (2008), he states:

1. This dissertation is edited according to the Chicago Manual style.

I need to thank my family, because it was an uncomfortable topic I was writing about — my father’s suicide — and there’s exposure in these stories. They’re fictional, but based on a lot that’s true. My stepmother, Nettie Rose, was especially generous in helping me talk through everything for several years. She had faced a lot of other deaths in her life and seemed fearless to me then. (2008, 240)

Legend of a Suicide is a collection of five short stories, namely “Ichthyology,” “Rhoda,” “A Legend of Good Men,” “Ketchikan,” and “The Higher Blue”, and the novella “Sukkwan Island.” Although the stories are independent, they also work as an integral part of a general subject that is invested on discussing the heroization of the suicidal character or even the mythification of the act of suicide, hence its title. All the short stories are narrated in the first person and reflect on the narrator’s memories related mostly with his father, mother, and stepmother. The novella is centered on a fictionalization of a trip between a father, Jim Fenn and his son, Roy Fenn, to the isolated island of Sukkwan, and is told in third person. About the novella, and its relation with his father, the author stated: “Durante diez años intenté escribir un libro sobre él, y Sukkwan Island es el resultado.” (Sanchís, 2010) Although it is clear that “Sukkwan Island” is where the reader encounters the most direct narrative about the author’s father, it is curious that the father in the story only attempts suicide. In this case, the son kills himself, in the exact same way Vann’s father has done in real life. Being the debut work of the author, *Legend of a Suicide* is the most self-reflective of the sum of his work.

The novel *Caribou Island* (2011), again deals with suicide and it can be argued that

Legend of a Suicide was written against the reverberations of the death of Vann's father when Vann was just 13 years old. *Caribou Island* [2011] — which has at its heart a couple called Irene and Gary, whose marriage is all wrong in ways that neither one of them is able to articulate — was informed by the murder-suicide of Vann's stepmother's parents. (Cooke, 2011)

Jim Fenn and Rhoda, the latter a character drawn from the author's stepmother, are present in what seems like a prelude to the story that unveils in *Legend of a Suicide*. The novel is centered on the relationship between Rhoda's parents, Irene a woman whose life was molded to the inconsequential dreams and aspirations of her husband, Gary, a man who lives something of a double life balanced between the reality of family and commitment and the fantasy of a life within the premises of ancient times, where the wilderness dominated. Again, the crossing between fiction and reality is used:

... his stepmother's mother had shot first her husband at close range, and then herself, following his admission that he had not loved her for at least a decade, and was having an affair ... when it came to writing a novel, [Vann] thought it would be more interesting if the husband never cheats: if he's unfaithful in some deeper way. (Cooke 2011)

The question of infidelity is noticeably articulated throughout the narrative as a sort of mediator between expectation and reality, which unveils in different forms. In the case of Gary and Irene, this is shown through Gary's inability to be true to his feelings about his marriage and the wife he was supposed to love in contrast with his love for an idealized life and ultimately solitude. Between Jim and Rhoda, the infidelity is manifested in Jim's desire towards a younger and more independent woman — Monique — who embodies his fantasy of leading an uncompromising life. Along with

these characters, there are two other couples: Mark and Karen, and Carl and Monique. The latter's relationship seems sustained by Monique's infidelity and independent character in contrast with Carl's inability to stand up for his own independence. Mark and Karen's uncompromising and aloof character seems to be the sustainer of what appears to be the healthiest relationship in the narrative, while at the same time it symbolizes the total absence of expectation manifest in two characters who are only interested in immediate satisfaction. In this case, infidelity can also be discussed having in mind Mark's detachment from his parents and sister.

Halibut on the Moon (2019) depicts Jim Fenn's last days as he flies from Alaska to San Francisco for an appointment with his psychiatrist and, in his view, a last goodbye to his family and friends. Throughout the narrative, his younger brother, Gary, a man that is an antithetic figure in comparison with his older brother, accompanies him: "... Jim envies his younger brother, not only his youth and looks and the women but also his simplicity." (Vann 2019, 4) The distance between the two brothers is manifested in Gary's inability to understand his older brother's feelings and ultimately how to help. As they roam from therapist, to parents, to ex-wife and children, to friend's house for brief visits, in what seems to be Gary's way of trying to divert his brother's thoughts about suicide, the distance between Jim and his loved ones only seems to grow bigger. The novel presents a reflection on Jim Fenn's feelings, interposed by descriptions of his family in what comes as the closest depiction of real events that the author had gathered up to the time. In this sense, Jim's children seem to be almost faithful depictions of David Vann and his sister, even sharing the same names. This allows a very detailed depiction of the children's feelings and reactions when close to his father. In addition,

the suicide scene and the chain of events is also described very accurately and crudely, as is a characteristic of the author's writing.

Thus, this research will focus on the discussion of the above-mentioned works by David Vann, an American author who delves into the issues of violence, and death, particularly by suicide. From the author's perspective, these themes seem to revolve around some of the most powerful and recurrent cultural archetypes of the United States: the pioneer myth; the individual construct away from civilization and into the natural environment (a transcendentalist trait); the pursuit of happiness; and encompassing all, the myth of the frontier. Arguably, Vann places these themes into direct confrontation with the impetus of indiscriminate hunting, while also demonstrating a sheer fascination with weaponry as a mediator of power and even masculinity. To some extent, this fascination evolves into an ideology of violence not only externalized but also directed at the individual as his own aggressor.

Regarding the referred archetypes, the purpose of this work is to focus more specifically on the role and depiction of Nature, through which the individual aspires to personal development, and also on the confrontation between the sublime characteristic of the natural environment and the internal nature of the individual, ultimately bringing forth his own death.

A great part of Vann's work focuses on the subject of death, particularly suicide, apparently to develop a discourse that not only is invested on keeping open the reflections on such a complex subject, but also mediated by the above mentioned framework archetypes. Thus, the present dissertation addresses several perspectives on the subject, whether relying on scientific approaches or representational modes of thinking. This way, it might be possible to ascertain the idea that the author not only

elevates the suicidal act to the field of mythology, as can be inferred from the title of his debut work, *Legend of a Suicide*, but also that the act itself becomes a sort of ultimate frontier. It is no coincidence that these suicides take place in Alaska, a space commonly regarded as the last frontier, for its extent of unexplored land. On the other hand, this dissertation will explore the idea of death/suicide as a parallel to Nature, manifesting itself as a fantasized space where characters seek harmony and the idea of happiness away from the chaos of civilization and their own failed lives. Ultimately, Nature becomes a sublime agent of chaos in a reality that only offers the opposite of the characters' aspirations. This implies a reflection about the external, predatory nature of the wilderness and the nature of the individual, both of them competing for his own demise.

The dissertation is divided into three main sections. In the first section, death and suicide is discussed with regard to how it has been perceived, socially, historically, and psychologically, being considered a dreadful anomaly of nature, but also romanticized as an elevated act of the tormented sensitive spirit. This allows a parallel between the Romantic Movement and transcendentalism, as well as how life and nature were perceived in both cases.

In the second section, Nature is discussed as not only a place of escape but also a place of entrapment, a place that, seemingly, promises life but, in fact, offers death as it pervades the narratives and takes its place as one of the main characters. In this respect, the natural space as a threat mixes with individual nature, apparently to work into the characters not only from the outside in but most importantly from the inside out,

drawing them to extinction and leading the reader into thinking whether suicide is in fact an anomaly of nature or its own natural manifestation.

The already mentioned three works by David Vann are discussed in the third section: *Legend of a Suicide* (2008); *Caribou Island* (2011); and *Halibut on the Moon* (2019). These works suggest how Vann's characters share both a suicidal character and an urge to rebuild themselves in the natural environment, an environment they know profoundly but with which they maintain a violent relationship mediated by hunting and the constant presence of death. Nonetheless, they are drawn to Nature, fantasizing it as a place of detachment from civilization and a place where they can return to old habits and a pioneer life, failing to realize that this space will lead their miserable lives toward their own accelerated extinction.

CHAPTER ONE. Death by suicide. An Anomaly of Nature or Nature in the Making

All the armies of Europe, Asia and Africa combined, with all the treasure of the earth (our own excepted) in their military chest; with a Buonaparte for a commander, could not by force, take a drink from the Ohio, or make a track on the Blue Ridge, in a trial of a thousand years. At what point then is the approach of danger to be expected? I answer, if it ever reach us, it must spring up amongst us. It cannot come from abroad. If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide.
(Lincoln 1989, 15)

In January 27, 1838, 28 year-old Abraham Lincoln addressed the audience of the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois with a speech entitled "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions." The times were of internal conflict, mobs of citizens from all

corners of the land, and with no particular relation to any state, system of governance, or mode of thinking were practicing acts of cruelty. The victims were not only racial minorities, but also strangers to given communities, citizens with questionable activities, or any person whose posture or behavior did not abide to local customs or simply comply with an attitude that was familiar, regarded as natural within a certain community. The result was noticeable through a scenery of violence that encompassed distressing images such as the procession of bodies hanging from trees, stretching for miles along roads. A perpetuation of the feeling of violence associated to the common vigilant attitude that encompassed the impulse of taking the law into one's hands.

Lincoln was clear in the analysis of these occurrences, blaming not only a misinterpretation of the notion of freedom defended by the times of the 1776 revolution, but also a certain sense of passivity observed from a governance system, where the law seemed to move slowly and ineffectually. In the face of apparently distant institutions, armed with the psychological flag of freedom, Americans were increasingly acting as knights of civil disobedience, taking upon themselves to correct what they observed as the wrongs of society and in this manner working for peace through the propagation of a state of terror and disorder. One cannot dissociate the term civil disobedience from the name of Henry David Thoreau, the one who used the term to incite the individual reasoning of the American people against a system of governance that was ultimately invested on war and on inequality. In the case of Lincoln's speech, roughly ten years before Thoreau's words, what could be observed as an act of "civil disobedience," (Thoreau 2012) lacked the bit of sense necessary to be more than just civil disorder.

Taking on the occasion to reflect on such abhorrent behavior perpetrated by his fellow countrymen, Lincoln started by elevating the nation to the heroic imagery

necessary to approach the complicated matter of national violence that had become the general state of affairs. His words seemed to be drawn from a careful mind, as if it appeared necessary to emphasize the destructive, in his terms, suicidal behavior of a people taking rash actions in the name of what they perceived as being just. He first needed to capture their attention by highlighting the invincible character of the American nation. This way, by stressing his disbelief on the possibility of a successful foreign invasion, Lincoln attested to the superiority of the American nation concluding by referring that it would be easier to imagine an invasion from the inside, a subject he used as a way to address the unsettling violent behavior of his fellow citizens.

Though his intention was to reduce the impetus of the disregard for the law that was taking place, by trying to recapture the people's belief in institutions, Lincoln uses the word "suicide" as a reference to a behavior that seemed the only way he could imagine the throw-down of such a powerful nation. Hence, he put forward a reflection on violence, in its various manifestations, whether externalized or internalized. An approach to violence that was seen as a trait of the American character, especially in times when, as Richard Slotkin remarks:

The character of political and class tensions varied from section to section. In the West the conflict was between the men-on-the-make — farmers, speculators, and manufacturers, who sought to exploit the land and the law for the maximum personal profit — and the wealthier speculators who held their debts. In the plantation South the economic situation was less fluid. There the chief problem was maintaining order in an unstable political and economic situation that set impoverished planters against their slaves and against the poor whites, who had been excluded from the best lands by the dead hand of plantation economics. In the Southwest, democracy took a form similar to that in the free state West, save that ownership of slaves became the goal of the

man-on-the-make; its achievement was the mark of a man's attainment of full equality with the best in American society. The Northeast's turn toward commerce and manufacturing made that section sensitive to the challenges to its economic power posed by the other sections and by Europe. This resulted in a different set of internal tensions: those between the employer and employee (aggravated by the influx of immigrant labor) and between established men of commerce and finance and the ambitious newcomers to their field. (2000, 395-396)

This atmosphere of tension all around the United States, seemed to draw the people against themselves and concurrently the United States of America on the opposite direction of Crèvecoeur's dream of unity in the face of a multitude of cultures from which "promiscuous breed [the] now called Americans, have arisen." (2009, 42) In fact, stained by the elements of reality, Crèvecoeur's once flourishing people were withering back and "mowed down by want, hunger, and war." (2009, 43) America was invested on turning its back on anything foreign and, probably unexpectedly, this tendency bled internally, since this way to look at the foreign ultimately attacked what was the strongest of American constituents — variety.

Romanticized by European writers and thinkers who entertained fictional visions of the "New World" characters — the Indian and the Pioneer — America entailed an experience of unique and unprecedented violence, developed within a society without the political restraints of the Old World. Again, according to Slotkin:

In American mythogenesis the founding fathers were not those eighteenth-century gentlemen who composed a nation at Philadelphia. Rather, they were those who ... tore violently a nation from the implacable and opulent wilderness [and] who killed and were killed until they had mastered the

wilderness; the settlers who came after, suffering hardship and Indian warfare for the sake of a sacred mission or a simple desire for land; and the Indians themselves, both as they were and as they appeared to the settlers, for whom they were the special demonic personification of the American wilderness. Their concerns, their hopes, their terrors, their violence, and their justifications of themselves ... are the foundation stones of the mythology that informs our history. (2000, 4)

This generalized internal conflict was what Lincoln would identify as a suicidal act, since it was destroying the country from the inside out. In this sense, the president-to-be, evoked the unconquerable spirit of the American people with the idea that a felony great enough to put an end to such power could only come from the within and, as already mentioned, death to such a power could only come by suicide. Though Lincoln does not use the word “felon” in his speech, nor does he intend to accuse his listeners of a felony, the word suicide seems to be used strategically, as a passive way to place the listener in the field of a crime, in other words, a crime against the nation.

Suicide is linked to the idea of a felony since long ago. Curiously, although Samuel Johnson’s dictionary (1755) includes the word “suicide,” the most common word used at the time would be a “felo-de-se,” both words defined derogatorily and deemed with a murderous quality. But if on one hand the expression “felo-de-se” points out to the felony of the executor, regardless of who is the executed, suicide would be defined as “self murder; the horrid crime of destroying one’s self” (487). About this aspect, Andreas Bähr (2013) points out that “[r]emarkably, ‘self-murder’ is not replaced with ‘suicide,’ but rather serves as its definition,” (625) adding that:

To Johnson and to many others as well, "suicide" meant not only "destroying oneself," but rather "destroying one's self." The consequences and implications of this subtle distinction must not be underestimated. When nominalizing and essentializing the (destroyed and destroying) "self," these contemporaries gave expression to a new conviction: when killing oneself, one was not directly violating the order of God's cosmos and the commonwealth. Instead, one was violating the order of one's own morals and body and only thus violating the divine and social order. (625-626)

According to Johnson's *Dictionary*, if "suicide" refers to the murdering act, "felo-de-se" refers to the actor, the felon of self, pressing on the moral criminalization of the act and characterizing the suicidal individual as a felon, one "that committeth felony by murdering himself." (188)

It is relevant to note that the word "suicide" is rooted in the joining of the Latin word *sui* — self, with the word *cidium*, from the word *caedo*, meaning not only to kill, but also to cut down, to sever, or to throw down. Thus, a word applicable to everything, living or not, that was ceased to exist, and connected with the idea of falling. Curiously, the Greek word *apoptosis* — falling off, is connected to a cell process named Programmed Cell Death, a form of cell suicide necessary for the development of the body². Suicide, then, is also reflected in relation to the fall of the self. Coincidentally, or not, Camus cites Samuel Johnson while discussing one form of suicide closely related to the idea of "the murdering of one's self," in his work *La Chute* (1977). After finding his actions of selflessness towards others merely theatrical and hypocritical, and even finding himself unable to be healed by the mere contradiction of his former actions, the protagonist, Clamence decides to indulge in egotistic acts of vice. He then justifies this

2. Mitochondria, organelles living inside larger cells and deemed responsible for having "shaped the whole fabric of life, from energy, sex, and fertility, to cell suicide, aging, and death," (LANE 2018, 279) enforce suicide on body cells, a phenomena named "apoptosis," a Greek word for "falling off."

attitude by stating: “Nul homme n’est hypocrite dans ses plaisirs,” (1977, 71) allegedly, a quote from Johnson — (Boswell 1966, 430). If in *O Mito de Sísifo* (2005), a work that will be further discussed, Camus reflects on the termination of life by suicide, in *La Chute* he seems to discuss another form of self-destruction by means of a surrendering to the most trivial and mind degrading aspects of life. In other words, in *O Mito de Sísifo* Camus discusses the end of life altogether, while in *La Chute* he discusses the obliteration of the self. In accordance with the hero of the absurd, Clamence seems to live with the total conscience of the meaninglessness of life. After being incapable of preventing the suicide of an unknown woman, who throws herself into the Seine, he appears to give up on life, while still living. His attitude towards life, thus, sparks a reflection on how some of our choices in life may be observed as some form of living death.

The violation of social order, mentioned by Bahr can be interpreted in relation to the individual as a property of society, as stated:

... when killing themselves people were considered to be withdrawing their bodies from the body politic and to be violating the social order to such an extent that the wound could only be healed by mercilessly punishing the deed, that is, by dishonoring the corpse and — in certain cases — by forfeiting the dead person's property. Contemporaries justified these harsh punishments by referring to the order of the commonwealth (*res publica*) which was conceptualized as part of the order of the cosmos, created by God and pervaded by His spirits. Given these facts, we are safe to interpret the nominalization of "self-murder" primarily to be serving as an abstraction for the purposes of early modern secular and Canon law: the act of self-killing was made a statutory offense in a specific sense of the term as well as a religious and moral crime. (2013, 622-623)

This is a subject also reflected by Simon Critchley,

If I claim that I have the right to suicide ... then the major premise of this claim is that I enjoy complete self-possession, self-ownership or sovereignty over myself. It conceives of the relation to my possessions ... Whatever my 'self' might be, it is something that is partially my own, but also partially shared with others, either those who formed me without my choosing them, like my parents ... or those whom I chose to share my life with ... It is something of a banality to say that we are relational beings, but that doesn't stop being true. If the right to suicide flows from some idea of self-ownership, then I would be inclined to say that we do not own ourselves. (2001, 34)

In this respect, Emile Durkheim adds that "suicide varies inversely with the degree of integration of the social groups of which the individual forms a part," (2005, 167) thus following the logics of the suicide as the result of people excluding themselves from the body politic and placing this same detachment from society as the actual cause for suicide. However, one can argue the weight of society upon the individual may be seen as damaging, as well the suicidal individual may be regarded as prejudicial to society. Even though his work on the subject of suicide has tended to be criticized for lacking a closer insight on the individual's psychology, Steve Taylor contends that:

... the sources of psychological distress that give rise (among other things) to suicide, come either from excessive repression of the individual nature by the social (altruism, fatalism), or from the social nature being eclipsed by the individual (egoism, anomie). (1994, 4)

Religious views have not shunned social intakes, this time linking the social order, or civilization, with the cosmological order, the space of divinity. In this case, if God was deemed creator of all life, regardless of the religion one stands upon, propriety over one's soul by the act of suicide would not only be taken as a rebellious act but also an offense against the gift of life.

In biblical terms there is no condemnation of suicide apart from the 6th commandment forbidding killing, and the supposed speaker of the commandments — God — assuming a position of propriety over humans. In this sense, “Thou shall not kill” would also be applicable to the self as it is objectified as property of God.

Andreas Bähr reflects on suicide and specifically on the way the act has been observed focusing on an etymology that starts with closer ties to the moralization, and ultimately criminalization of the act, and progresses into being a pathology. From culture to culture and across time, nomenclature changed in a way to better refer to the act as the intellectual discourse progressed. According to Bähr “[the term]”, “Suicide” is a modern concept. In English, the wording did not emerge before the 1650s and in the Romance languages not before the second half of the eighteenth century (“suicide” in French, “suicidio” in Italian).” (2013, 620)

While the English language would most commonly use “felo-de-se,” placing the suicidal in the position of the felon, the German would use “selbstentleibung,” literally self-deprivation, or better said “deprivation of self”, or even “self-disembodiment”. This choice of words is less attentive to the social/legal aspect of the act and links to a more philosophical reasoning, denoting a preoccupation with “pathologizing and decriminalizing the act” (Bähr 2013, 620).

As it was observed, in many ways, suicide is often connected to a criminal action, not only imbedded with a murderous quality but also as an act that goes against an established order, a certain harmony whether social or spiritual. In Plato's *Phaedo* (2017, 50) Cebes questions the action of suicide, given that his master, Philolaus, had told him it was wrong to kill oneself, but that nothing had been written about it in a way that would clarify his statement. As a reply, Socrates speaks of humans being in some sort of prison, which he does not quite understand but, being a property of the Gods, and thus bounded to their will, it would be unreasonable to escape from the supposed cage, which represents the relationship between gods and humans. With this statement Socrates puts forward two distinct ideas: first the fact that, in consonance with the Christian belief, humans do not own property over themselves as they are property of a superior being — God or Gods — and that, therefore, their will should not go beyond their proprietor's. Secondly, that humans are in a sort of prison, and this "prison," we are led to understand, is our existence. (54) Conversely, some centuries after, in 1608, John Donne reflects on the matter, stating that

no rebellious grudging at God's gifts, nor other sinful concurrence, accompanies these thoughts in me, or that a brave scorn, or that a faint cowardliness begets it, whensoever any affliction assails me, methinks I have the keys of my prison in mine own hand, and no remedy presents itself so soon to my heart as mine own sword. (1982, 39)

To think of humans, as well as every living thing, as objects of a superior entity, servants, sheep, Gods' or God's herd, is a religious idea that throughout time served as a response to why would it be so wrong to terminate one's life, or any life for that matter. The idea of an abstract authority over our own lives served not only to limit choice or to

castrate will, but also promoted the weighing down of the pursuit of knowledge through an imagery of punished characters for the audacity of freedom of thought. Characters like Prometheus, stealing fire — hence knowledge — from the gods, or Icarus arrogantly attempting to go beyond his limitations, or Sisyphus for cheating death, suffer eternal punishment or death for different reasons that nonetheless share a common trait that of defying limitations associated to what Socrates calls the prison of existence. In the Christian view, this is added to the fact that killing, or violence, whether externalized or internalized, would go against one of the primal rules in the Ten Commandments. Moreover, as previously referred in Donne's statement, religion poses the matter of life as God's gift. Simon Critchley reflects on the word "gift," adding that

... suicide is prohibited because life is a gift from God. To kill oneself is to refuse that gift. But this becomes muddled if one thinks about it for a moment: if life is a gift from God, then what exactly is a gift? A gift is something one gives to another person. After the act of giving, the gift belongs to its recipient. By definition, the giver of the gift no longer has possession of the gift once it is given. So, if the prohibition against suicide is based on the idea that life is a gift from God, then life appears to be a gift with many strings attached, which entails that it is no longer a gift. Namely, a gift that we cannot reject is not a gift. In order to be a gift, life has to be capable of being refused, thrown away, re-gifted to someone else, re-sold for money or given away. If life is a gift from God, then God must allow for the possibility of suicide as the rejection of that gift. On the basis of this argument, suicide cannot be condemned. (2015, 29)

In David Vann's *Goat Mountain* (2013), the narrator mentions the Ten Commandments as being "... a list of our instincts that will never leave us." (123), a subject that will be briefly explored later. There may be, in fact, many ways to reflect on the Ten

Commandments, not only as they are regarded in Vann's work, but also as a means of control, since it plays emphasis on how to behave and concurrently how not to. By attempting to control human behavior, and in this way frustrating experience, the Ten Commandments seem to promote apathy towards the attainment of knowledge. Since, in religious terms, knowledge has been a punishable trait, so Sisyphus, as well as Icarus, and Prometheus stand as exemplifying figures for how, ultimately, the fear of punishment associated with the defying of social/ religious norms would and did limit human's drive for intellectual development.

Existence as a prison is also a recurrent philosophical reflection and directly connects to the matter of suicide, which greatly generated the ongoing discussion on the subject. In Socrates' sense what he refers to as a prison is directly connected to a superior entity, a sort of puppeteer of mankind, one that not only relieves man of choice or self-conduct, but that also, as God made man "in his own image," then the world, nature, space, and ultimately, existence, is divinized. However, for other philosophers after Socrates, this existence becomes a prison precisely when faced with the idea that it is in itself godless, and being so, it is not necessarily purposeful and can only be measured in relation to death. Existence, thus, becomes absurd so long as mankind continues to hope, in life, for an alternative to life itself.

In *O Mito de Sísifo*, Camus states: "Só há um problema filosófico verdadeiramente sério: é o suicídio. Julgar se a vida merece ou não ser vivida, é responder a uma questão fundamental da filosofia." (2005, 15) It may appear that Camus is defending suicide as a plausible solution against the purposelessness of existence, that the certainty of the human loneliness, faced with the nonexistence of God marks the act of living with a character of absurdity. A living that offers no purpose, no

reward, may very well feel like a prison, and in this sense, suicide may feel like a plausible escape, if not the only one. What Camus is really discussing is that, faced with the certainty of no purpose, the choice of not living, even though a rebellious choice, is just no more than that. In this sense, death is as purposeless as life, so one may as well face the lack of purpose while alive. In other words, suicide or the choice of living may be both seen as an expression of free will. Camus attests that the thought of suicide entails the conflict between human rationality and irrational Nature. Thus, he states: “Esse divórcio entre o homem e a sua vida, entre o actor e o seu cenário, é que é verdadeiramente o sentimento do absurdo.” (2005, 17)

As an example of this feeling, Camus evokes Sisyphus as the true hero of the absurd, since his punishment, the hopelessness of his labor, serves as a metaphor for life itself. Sisyphus’ repeated task through eternity, the resigned repetition of his gestures, and his persistence into meaninglessness, contemplate what the author defends to be a consciousness of self into a reality that does not contemplate the self. The time in between his labor, when after the rock rolls back down the hill and he is momentarily relieved of his suffering, offers Sisyphus an opportunity to realize his condition and, so Camus suggests, accept it. By this acceptance and realizing that hope is pointless, Sisyphus becomes nonpunishable in the sense that, realizing the senselessness of his condition, he comes to terms with it, accepts it, following the rock down to its point of origin, where he methodically will restart his journey up as the hero of the absurd. Again, absurdity, for this purpose, is the point of one’s recognition of the senselessness of one’s hopes and projections in the face of an existence not only senseless but desensitized to the aspirations of the living, and in this sense Camus states:

Vivemos sobre o futuro: “amanhã”, “mais tarde”, “quando tivermos uma boa situação”, “com a idade hás-de compreender”. Estas inconseqüências são admiráveis, porque enfim, trata-se de morrer. Um dia vem, no entanto, e o homem constata ou diz que tem trinta anos. Afirma assim a sua juventude. Mas, ao mesmo tempo situa-se em relação ao tempo. Toma aí o seu lugar. Reconhece que está num certo momento de uma curva que confessa ter de percorrer. Pertence ao tempo, e reconhece nesse horror que o empolga o seu pior inimigo. Amanhã, ele desejava amanhã, quando todo o seu ser lho devia recusar. Essa revolta da carne é o absurdo. (2005, 23)

Although “absurdism” is, categorically, the philosophical position that views existence, in general, as absurd, what Camus is stating is that the absurd lies within the conflict between man and Nature, between a rational man and an irrational universe. Facing this realization, freedom, so Camus states, should only be recognized in mediation with the absurdity of life and the acceptance of its transience, leading one “to live without appeal,” an attitude he directly relates to an act of courage. (2005, 63) However, this realization of absurdity being seen as an act of resisting the termination of life, does not eliminate the idea that suicide, the total annihilation of being from existence, may easily take the form of an alternative. Being, or existence, is the point of exploration of philosophy. Since existence, in this view, is absurd, suicide may elevate itself as the ultimate refusal of the absurd. This reflection becoming the reason why Camus asserts that suicide is the only real question in philosophy, not because it offers a solution but because it arms humans with the power of choice.

Philosophical approaches to the subject range from an affront to the powers of creation, an act of defiance, or ultimately the only conscious act against existence. Societies have been, throughout time, fairly unanimous in their looks on the act, frequently approaching the subject with a degree of agitation only explained by the

impossibility to find a plausible answer for an act so contradictory to life. Throughout time, the matter has been treated as a taboo, and not much research has been done on it, as Thomas Joiner states:

The last compelling theory of suicide appeared approximately fifteen years ago. The number of other prominent and coherent theories in the decades or even centuries before that can be tallied on one hand. This is a strange state of affairs for a phenomenon that kills millions. (2007, 16)

Western religion and philosophy have been responsible for most of the ways we look at it, inadvertently connected to it, and moral standards in the Western hemisphere have treated the subject as weakness in practically the same way it had been treated in the past, with emphasis on the Victorian Period. Actually, these traits were present in Victorian literature through characters, such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* — also referred to as the modern Prometheus — or Robert Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, which emphasized this drive for knowledge through the advent of science. Interestingly, in both of the mentioned works, the repented audacious characters seek resolution through their own extinction but never incurring into it by their own hands. This way, instead of killing themselves, *Frankenstein* insistently pursues his doom by hunting the monster of his creation, and *Jekyll/Hyde* leave the discussion open on who killed who by suggesting suicide, only this time as a form of killing the other half of a self. In these literary instances, there does not seem to be a concern with resolving the sin of murder but there is a noticeable effort to avoid that these characters incur on suicide. The harm their endeavors have brought to others will be resolved in a way that their dignity is somehow restored and their honor remains intact, traits that both the

writer and the reader pursue in the hero of the narrative by the time a resolution emerges.

Concurrently, in Stevenson's "The Suicide Club", a collection of stories first published in the *London Magazine* in 1878, suicide comes somewhat as the solution to the threatening feature of a depicted Londonian "wilderness", where "Suicide becomes an alternative for people who no longer want to contend with a living hell." (Menikoff 1990, 345) Curiously, Stevenson's Suicide Club members do not actually practice suicide: once in every meeting, there is a random selection of two members, one who will die and the other who will be the murderer. So, although there is this club of gentlemen gathered by a common desire to end their lives as an envisioned escape from a living hell, the result is achieved through a sort of "euthanasia", the desire to self-annihilation, not exactly through self-infliction.

In this case, as in many others, murder is understood as preferable to "self-murder", and it is not by chance that all the aforementioned literary works share a similar epoch. Although being close to eighty years apart (*Frankenstein*, 1818; *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, 1886; "The Suicide Club", 1878), and even discussing some different topics at the light of the concerns of either time, they share similar ideas on suicide. They connect suicide to mental illness, a characteristic seen as mostly common in the female character, or the result of a fragile spirit. Invested on the depiction of a powerful nation, the Victorians regarded the subject negatively, emphasizing the dishonor of the act or even ridiculing and sensationalizing it, as most news about such acts made it to the tabloids of the time. Nonetheless, it is a period that stands out for being the stage of the most important scientific considerations of the time about suicide.

The Victorian period was marked by conflicting traits not only in the human character but also in a society on the verge of drastic change, in part due to the scientific developments but also as a consequence of a vast technological development most of it at the cost of the workers' conditions. This led to drastic political changes that were manifest in an attempt to comply with a new observation of the working population, of their living and working conditions. All this within the anxieties inherent for what was then regarded as the most powerful military and economical society of the 19th century and also one that was heavily invested on maintaining an appearance of power, rectitude and discipline, in sum, all the established traits of the English imperial character. It becomes understandable why the most recognizable of literary creations from that time are narratives that either demonstrate anxiety, even a certain fear of everything out of the rigid social norms, or make use of conflicted characters to develop a critique of that same establishment.

Any attempt to find a study on the subject of suicide in the Victorian period has proven to be a difficult task, since the Victorians dodged, satirized, and punished suicide, casting the occurrence to the sphere of mental health or even indulging in assumptions about a weaker act mostly perpetrated by weak-spirited men or by women. In fact, as Barbara Gates mentions, “[t]here were many sources of information about Victorian death and Victorian murder, but none explaining Victorian suicide,” (2014, xi) adding that:

... except by the medical community, suicide was dealt with mainly through displacement. The more powerful liked to think of self-destruction as the appropriate refuge or punishment for the seemingly weaker, even when evidence suggested the contrary. Middle-class men, in particular, tended to

make suicide the province of other selves — of men belonging to other times or places, of make-believe monsters, or of women. (xv)

Arguably, this might be because of some acrimony towards a former time when, due to the traits of the Romantic period, the act seemed to be idolized. This is noticeable in artists like Thomas Chatterton, the precociously talented poet who committed suicide at the age of seventeen, in 1770, and whose character did writers, such as Goethe, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, or Keats, romanticize and from whom these same writers drew an immense influence.

As a result, from Chatterton's defining act, these and other writers and poets helped spread the idea of suicide as an act of the hero's sensitive spirit and deepness of character. One of the most successful examples being the sorrowful Werther. Published in 1774, Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, drew significant attention not only in Germany, but also in other centers of influence, namely England and France. As Gates states: "according to Goethe, English poetical literature was characterized by an "earnest melancholy" that deeply marked the English character as suicidal." (2014, 23) This assumption was swift to find an echo during a time when Goethe's *Werther* had gained enough prominence to be idolized, in fact, idealized into a whole mode of being that swept Europe with what was referred to as Wertherism. England became its proclaimed land, not only because of the gloominess of the weather but also because of the Romantic literary tradition that viewed death in its various forms, preferably by suicide, as marks of an elevated spirit, a trait that also found a wide reception in western culture. In fact, it seemed that the English had put an -ism on Werther, ideologized it, called it Wertherism, since, according to the foreign statements of the time, England had become

the center stage of suicide, being the home of, not only Chatterton, but also of authors such as Edward Young, who, criticizing the national feeling, cried out:

Less base the fear of Death, than fear of Life
O Britain, infamous for suicide!
Ah in thy manners far disjoin'd
From the whole world of rationals beside! (Young 1742, 128)

These lines criticized the irrational in the age of rationalism, especially since it was also viewed as a most unpatriotic action from a proud and patriotic country. Regarded as the center of the world, Britain would seem, through the eyes of its patriots, weakened and ridiculed for its national love for self-harm.

The Victorians would deal with this as a lack of manhood, but also as a most unpatriotic depiction of character. Moreover, it was only later in the 19th century that the theme of suicide started to be discussed as a social matter, thanks to an Italian, Henry Morselli. In 1881, he published his work, *Suicide*, where for the first time it is observed “the culmination of a trend that had been developing in England since the 1860s — the increased use of statistics coupled with an interest in the social dimension of suicide.” (Gates 2014, 18). Before that, the British voices of the second half of the 19th century not only avoided the theme as one related to insanity or a weak spirit, but also punished the act as one most dishonorable and even emasculative. Thus, while Romanticism idealized suicide thus romanticizing its perpetrators, Victorianism tended to punish and ridicule the act as well as the actors.

Werther was elevated for the melancholy of his character, the depth of his feelings, and ultimately his inability to find in life a peaceful state. Quite similarly, by

the end of the 20th century, Kurt Cobain, the charismatic leader of one of the most noticeable bands in that century (Nirvana), was elevated to the status of icon, not only for his melancholy character, but ultimately for having decided his life by staring too deep into the barrel of a Remington model 11 shotgun³. Even though the grimness of his character and the tone of his common remarks sort of anticipated his ineptitude for life, when his death hit the news, the world was appalled, his followers felt lost, a whole suicidal mood rose among a generation of fans. In Cobain's case, as the years went by, the tendency evolved toward disbelief in suicide, once the conspiracy theories introduced the idea that a murder had been carefully crafted into the appearance of self-harm. In this case, his wife took the stage as a demonized figure that not only made the artist's life a living hell, but also took it upon her hands to eliminate him, even forging a suicide note, as the most sensationalist news would put forward. (Lauer 2004) From another perspective, not only Cobain but also the act itself was romanticized, having the suicide note been tastelessly turned into an item of fashion, being printed on t-shirts for the prideful displaying by the consumer society's victims (Payne 2015). In the field of cinematography, Gus Van Sant's movie, *Last Days* (2005) conveyed a different take:

Gus Van Sant staged the last days of the frontman of Nirvana and idol of a generation, Kurt Cobain, before his suicide in 1994. By refusing a fine-spun reconstitution in order to better 'understand' the act or the artist, Van Sant distances himself from Hollywood's melodramatic vision, and paints a portrait

3. An intended pun to Friedrich Nietzsche's quotation in *Beyond Good and Evil*: "... if thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee." (2002, 69) Curiously, as for Nietzsche, the abyss may relate to "... a more extensive, stranger, richer world above the surface ...," (173) it also represents the point where "There is something arbitrary in his stopping here, looking back, looking around, in his not digging any deeper here, and putting his spade away ...," (173) hence a place, somewhat, sharing the characteristics of a wilderness. In addition, in *Ecce Homo*, the author states that "... my truly abyssal thought, is always mother and sister ..." (2003, 10) a remark he makes when confessing the suffering his mother and sister had subjected him to. Wilderness as the abyss added to the abyss in relation to women adds to the representation of these themes, namely: Wilderness, Abyss, Women as subjects articulated within the construct of the fall of man.

of a man, a body, a silhouette that bends over progressively until it never stands up again. Van Sant offers an ethical portrait filled with affection vis-à-vis his subject, and the suicide is an on-screen event. Van Sant chooses to film the exterior of the house while Cobain, or Blake in the film, is in the studio, angry about a song made of samples by him; a scream is heard and its echo extends endlessly. Blake's body is seen behind a window and a naked ghost rises from his corpse slowly climbing a ladder. The ghost leaves the body: a representation of the climb to heaven and the liberation from the confined setting that imprisoned him. (Wasserman 2021, 700)

Notably, Van Sant's movie is an exception in what comes to Hollywood's views on suicide in cinematography, which have been articulated towards prevention. In this sense, as stated,

In the United States the Hays Code, created because of demand from the big studios in the 1930s (similarly to classification committees around the world), states that suicide should be avoided on screen (alongside abortion and sex). According to the Hays Code, suicide should be avoided and discouraged as a solution to problems in the scenario, unless it is absolutely necessary for the development of the plot; and it should never be justified or glorified. (Wasserman 2021, 699)

In Chatterton's case, he was a young poet on the verge of an ascending career in writing, but apart from his writing qualities, what made him a celebrity was the fact that he killed himself at the age of seventeen, with a mixture of laudanum and arsenic, two very common drugs at the time. Furthermore, he was found lying on his bed, revealing all his beauty, as he would be immortalized in Henry Wallis' painting, *The Death of Chatterton* (1856). In this sense, so does Kurt Cobain stand glorified not only for his music but also more importantly for the choice to flee from existence. Being a sort of a romantic figure

of the twentieth century, Cobain not only acts and is viewed as a modern Chatterton, but also his suicide spread some seeds into the postmodern field. Whereas Chatterton's death was the object of varied artistic forms, in the postmodern space, Cobain, his story and his message were displayed and commodified. The postmodern space swallows everything in its path, takes art and re-observes it, rearranges it, objectifies it, it is effective both for the understanding and misunderstanding of things, its capacity for branding artistic thought and ultimately for turning concepts into commodities.

Suicide has not escaped the postmodern spectrum, since it produced all sorts of romanticized ideas attached to suicide such as "The Suicide Girls"⁴ a group of specific female models, and *The Suicide Squad* (2016), a movie about a group of world-saving anti-heroes. Even the Emo⁵ punk musical movement that embodies the melancholy tone of the age of sensitivity and mixes it with the non-conformity of the punk movement, sprang up from the same melancholy and rebellious character of the eighteenth century romantics. As stated by Sam De Boise:

'Emo', an abbreviation of the word 'emotional', is a term both used to describe public emphasis on introspective displays of emotion and a pejorative phrase applied to fans of a diverse range of music. It is overwhelmingly male-dominated in terms of production and it has been suggested that the development of emo can be explained with reference to a 'crisis in masculinity'. This implies that explicit, male emotional expression is

4. "Begun in 2001 as a woman-friendly, "indie" community of sexually empowered women (never mind that the models are referred to as "girls"), SuicideGirls sells access to nude images of "alternative" beauty on its web site, Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr pages; the company also organizes traveling burlesque shows, sells video demonstrations ("How to Roll a Joint" and so forth) that are collected in a DVD called *SuicideGirls' Guide to Living*, and schedules their models for guest appearances on radio and reality television shows." (Nguyen 2013, 163)

5. "Emo is short for emotional. ... Originally, emo was short for "emocore", a strain of hardcore punk that was notable for its obsession with feelings ... Then it started to be applied to bands that weren't punk, to fashion trends, to sad-eyed kids in the back of class. It's always been mildly derisive, a term used by haters and critics to dismiss something that's overtly weepy, self-indulgent, or unironic." (Greenwald 2003, 2)

historically incompatible with the performance of Western ‘masculinity’” (2014, 225)

Thus, emo music can be mildly relatable with Romanticism as there is an emphasis on a mode of feeling as well as an ineptitude for life, at least life in society, which seems to be a common trait between the two. In addition, there is the established parallel between the aforementioned crisis in masculinity and the “... cultural anxieties about the disappearing frontier, alongside high rates of immigration and urbanization ...” (Burgett and Hendler 2020, 179). As stated, this aspect not only led to a certain sense of emasculation of the male individual, but also to a reactionary impulse that played emphases on a mode of thinking leading to “obsessions with manhood, nature, eugenics, conquest, imperialism, and hunting ...” (2020, 179). This crisis can be demonstrated in both its expressions in Vann’s narratives involving his male characters. If, in a way, these characters feel, somewhat, emasculated through the conditionings of a civilized world, they seek to obtain the “absolute freedom” invoked by Thoreau (Nash 1967, 84), by not only attempting to retreat to the wilderness, but also by dealing with it through an ethos of violence that involves the aforementioned themes of manhood, conquest, imperialism, and hunting.

Feminine otherness and the demonized woman, the genderization of the suicidal act, along with the morality surrounding it, are traits that somehow have traversed different times and find the same expression regardless of the period. In David Vann’s narratives, the specific focus of this dissertation, and with special emphasis on works such as *Legend of a Suicide*, *Caribou Island*, or *Halibut on the Moon*, women are displayed as either ineffective or insensitive in their relation toward the crisis of masculinity, or even as a source of entrapment of men’s expectations. Even when not a

present figure, women's power is a constant over the narrative of masculine struggle and their character is one of assertiveness and reconciliation with the mission of restoring normalcy and balance to family life. Having these traits associated to women, the male suicidal character is somewhat emasculated. As Gates states about the outlook of the Victorian Period, "Women were fictionalized and mythologized much as were monsters in Victorian England. They too were made into "others" — weaker vessels or demons, angels in the house or fallen angels." (2014, 125) This framework created about women and their inclination toward suicide not only gendered the act, but also worked to emasculate the male subjects who committed it. In addition, even the act of suicide, and the mode by which the suicidal chose to put an end to life, was gendered. In this respect, suicide was observed as an act of cowardice, a viable choice only for a weak spirit, and a thing for women, or effeminate, or men of a questionable character.

Should a man choose to put an end to his life, honor would still be taken into consideration. A gun or a knife would be more suited for a male suicide, while for the other sex, there was a consistent observation that "In most cases women chose poison or drowning over bloodier deaths by gun or knife, a pattern that continues today." (Gates 2014, 125). These traits and modes of observation have been maintained practically unaltered, displaying their influence in contemporary societies and, concurrently in literature, where even in David Vann's narratives this parallel between the method and the character of the protagonists becomes, perceptible, as it will be discussed in more depth in section three.

The act of self-infliction, perpetrated by the use of a fire arm or a knife, seems to show an active behavior as opposed to a seemingly more passive behavior observed in a drowning or a hanging or leaping from a building, a cliff, or a monument. In this

respect, it appears activity and passivity play an important part in the depiction of suicide, and by introducing these terms into the problematic, it becomes noticeable how suicide becomes heavily gendered to the point of being connected to sexual interaction and sexual power.

Sexual power can be instrumentalized as a trait of the horrific. In Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, a novel published in 1897, and therefore at the center of several problematics regarding gender and its positions in society, Stoker introduces not only the seemingly horror of an emancipated and powerful woman, in accordance to the New Woman⁶ of the time, but also places women in a position of power over men. In this instance, by means of a vampire's trait, where the incisive teeth of the vampire, plays the part of a phallus penetrating her victims and subjugating them to the role of a defenseless prey.

In chapter III, Jonathan Harker is visited by Dracula's wives and is lured into a web of seduction that subjugates him, posing him in a position of helplessness, which works as an exchange between predator and prey, inverting the role of man as predator and the woman as prey, as stated:

I was not alone. ... In the moonlight opposite me were three young women, ladies by their dress and manner. I thought at the time that I must be dreaming when I saw them, for, though the moonlight was behind them, they threw no shadow on the floor. ... All three had brilliant white teeth, that shone like pearl against the ruby of their voluptuous lips. There was something about them that made me uneasy, some longing and at the same time some deadly fear. I felt in my heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips. ... I was afraid to raise my eyelids, but looked out and saw perfectly under the lashes. The fair girl went on her knees, and bent over me,

6. A feminist ideal of the 19th Century, the New Women defied a male oriented society, imposing radical change in the working conditions of women, promoting changes in activities and manners and proclaiming independence, not only economical but also in ideas.

fairly gloating. There was a deliberate voluptuousness which was both thrilling and repulsive, and as she arched her neck she actually licked her lips like an animal, till I could see in the moonlight the moisture shining on the scarlet lips and on the red tongue as it lapped the white sharp teeth. Lower and lower went her head as the lips went below the range of my mouth and chin and seemed about to fasten on my throat. (Stoker 2019, 44-45)

Harker's powerlessness is shown when facing a predatory eroticism that is articulated with loss of reason and ultimately sin. Loss of reason here is paralleled with a return to wilderness, a sort of primal state. In this way, a fair woman, dressed in the manner of a lady, is displayed as an animal showing its "brilliant white teeth" and licking her voluptuous red lips before which the victim experiences a burning desire, somehow evocative of the serpent in the garden of Eden, and even the apple itself. This transference of power, for a nineteenth century reader, becomes the real terror in a novel that reflects on a scene where the unnatural and the supernatural are interchangeable.

Not only vampirism, the masculine power depicted by Dracula's wives, but also the androgyny of Dracula himself, play an important part in the throwing down of depictions of power. Adding to this fact, even the delineation of Lucy Westenra's three devoted suitors become a source of the masculine ideal. Arthur Holmwood, Lucy's fiancée, plays the part of the British noble character whose virtue only comes from his inheritance, Dr. John Seward, one of the rejected suitors, asserts his noble character through the hardships of his work and by maintaining his devotion to his loved one even after being denied her love. The third suitor, Quincy Morris, the stiff upper lipped American is chosen to display his virtue and power by being intimately connected to his weapons, indispensable accessories, for the accomplishment of his valiant actions.

American gallantry, honor, and masculine power, are intimately connected with firearms. As Richard Slotkin states: "... professionalism in the arts of violence is the hero's defining characteristic ..." (1998, 379). Thus, Quincy Morris' character works as the New World response to the threat of modernity, embodied in the vampire androgyny and even the rise of the new woman, and concurrently feminine power, shown through the character of Mina Harker. In this sense, sexuality is seen as an agent of progress that, in the American myth, has been observed as "... the source of injustice ..." (Slotkin 1998, 379). More than the other suitors, Morris' roughed individualism, chivalric masculinity, and pride, all of these traits, apparently, only possible through the possession of firearms, being one of the main traits of the American character is epitomized in a cartoonish way. Furthermore, none of the suitors is depicted as intellectually superior, when faced with the roughly manipulative Lucy Westenra, as well as with Mina Harker, and Quincy Morris, to a certain degree, is depicted as the least reasonable of the three. Morris' character can here be used as a connection with three confluent matters, namely: Sexism, Progress, and the American Gun Culture, as all of them can also be connected to death and also to suicide, thus the social expectations inherent to these subjects, are, somehow, flawed.

In her 1974 work *Feminism or Death* (2022), Françoise D'Eaubonne connects the progress and concurrent overpopulation of cities, not only with a crisis in human subsistence, but more importantly with an increase of violence acts such as rape, murder and suicide. The author views the patriarchal organization as the reason for, not only the destruction of the environment, but also for the destruction of humanity, as stated:

Practically everyone knows that the two most immediate threats of death today are overpopulation and the destruction of natural resources; fewer are

aware of the entire responsibility of the male system — the system as male (and not capitalist or socialist) — in creating these two perilous situations; but very few have yet discovered that each one of the two menaces is the logical outcome of one of the two parallel discoveries that gave power to men fifty centuries ago: reproduction, and their capability of sowing the earth as they do women. (D'Eaubonne 2022, n.p.)

The author connects masculine power with its own extinction, through a process that, connects the natural environment to man's own nature of control, not only of the planet but also of women, both viewed as a field for exploitation. In this case, the threat appears when the woman stops being a setting and starts being a character, concurrently stopping to be a fertile land, becoming herself an untamed actor of wilderness.

As Sexism and Progress can be viewed as a threat to not only the social environment, but also the natural environment altogether, the question of the Gun Culture can be a little more farfetched. Even so, it is relatable in the sense that, in the American context, weapons, firearms in particular, played a significant role in the conquest of the territory. The consequent subduing of the inhabitants of the wild country, whether animal or human, and the pushing forward of the frontier, still has a dramatic prominence in contemporaneity, since they play a very significant part in the social roles of men and women. As Jennifer Carlson argues,

With guns, carriers (mostly men) saw themselves as good men, respectable husbands, and responsible fathers not just because they can provide for their families but because, they maintained, they can provide protection. This is not to say that men had to choose to be either providers or protectors, or that these men rejected their identities as breadwinners: rather, guns provide another

“tool” in the gendered toolbox to assert their masculine identities. (2018, 166-167)

This need to assert their position, became increasingly dominant because of the evolution of social norms, as well as of the development of the work market. Working opportunities for both genders have dramatically changed as well as the nuclear family model of the mid-20th century. As the roles of men and women in the social context have become increasingly blurry, and in some cases shifting altogether, men felt the need to assert their predominance if not as providers, then as protectors of the family. If Sexism and Progress can be closely intertwined, in the sense that a predominantly male power structure regards women and nature within the same gendered scope, so the Gun Culture can be used as an assertion of masculine identity. Not only through the ethos of the winning of the West and the pushing of the frontier as a violent task that was only made possible through the use of guns, but also, once the West had been won and the wild had been tamed, the power of a gun still holds its place as a tool for the protection of a family, which as previously referred, is a male characteristic.

It seems redundant to use the term “American Gun Culture” when it appears that it is only in the American context that there is an actual Gun Culture, in other words, only in America have guns become a cultural matter, seen as embedded in the core values and constructs that make an American, as argued by Spitzer:

[The term] American gun culture ... usefully summarizes the long term sentimental attachment of many Americans to the gun, founded on (1) the presence and proliferation of guns since the earliest days of the country; (2) the connection between personal weapons ownership and the country's early struggle for survival and independence followed by the country's frontier

experience; (3) and the cultural mythology that has grown up about the gun in both frontier and modern life, as reflected in books, movies, folklore, and other forms of popular expression. (2023, 8)

Guns have made their way into the American territory, since very early. Still its relevance might be dated from the American Revolutionary wars onwards and the Second Amendment. Not only have their prevalence been a constant and almost mandatory necessity in every citizen's lives, but also have been witnesses to the development of the American character from then on. In this sense, from early days, the lack of, and apparent disinterest in a proper-armed force, have given way to and made natural the development and growth of popular militias. It was in fact such militias, responsible for their own guns and ammunition, that ended up being victorious upon what was by the time of the American Revolutionary Wars, the most powerful-armed force in the world, the British. So, not only was this made possible through the strength and character of the American people (as it was avidly regarded), but also this very character was strengthened by the use of guns.

Nowadays, the presence and importance of guns in America is still a certainty, even if not exactly for the purposes of the past. They are used mainly for the imagined necessity to protect, with special emphasis in the family context. This appears to be most commonly due to a certain romanticism, mostly connected to the figure of the cowboy, since fantasy and folklore have played a significant role in the imaginary of the gun as an extension of the cowboy. Moreover, although cowboys were a factual thing, the imagery built around them is, as Spitzer mentioned above, a subject of cultural mythology. Nevertheless, the whole imagery of the West, disseminated by popular culture, such as dime novels and Hollywood productions is a construct very far from

the truth than one would expect. When one acknowledges that the rates of death by firearms in the Western context were a residual matter, and that guns were more used to startle cattle than to shoot people, one concludes that one of the most powerful constructs on the American character was fictionalized and strengthened through time. Not only was this true as, the very logic of supply and demand was the real incentive, as Craig Rood mentions:

Guns gained prominence in American life after the Civil War due to technological advances that made guns ‘cheaper, more reliable, easier to use, and more durable.’ But they also gained prominence because gun manufacturers such as Samuel Colt ‘developed advertising campaigns that deliberately romanticized the attachment to guns.’ America’s gun culture, Pamela Haag reminds us, is largely a business that ‘developed out of an unexceptional, perpetual quest for new and larger markets.’ (2021, 52)

Besides the above-mentioned reasons, more related to the settlement of the territory, as well as protection, guns have played a significant part in the context of an agrarian society. There was a need to protection against wild animals that more than threatening the lives of individuals, threatened the lives of animals in a domestic context, as well as for hunting as a form of providing subsistence for a household that was far away from the comforts of a life in the city, and concurrently, far from the food markets. Modernity made available the products that were once unattainable, turning the advent of hunting into a sport where, especially men, sought a means of comradeship and being close to nature, as Spitzer argues: “... the reasons for hunting vary, but the primary motivations include procurement of food, pursuit of sport, and the desire to commune with and participate in nature.” (9) As nowadays the procurement of food is probably residual, the

desire to be within nature seems to be the prevalent reason for hunting as a recreational event. Interestingly, this need to commune and be close to Nature is still balanced with a relationship with nature that is only made possible, so it seems, through the presence of violence. In this way, Nature is appreciated as a place where man/hunter dominates the environment, taming the wilderness. In this sense, as the motives may have changed and necessity has given way to entertainment, the impetus of dominance is still a strong characteristic of male individuals that mediate their lives and their expectations of manliness with the presence of weapons. Ultimately, “Beyond a mere activity, hunting survives as a central component of the gun culture.” (Spitzer 2023, 9)

Both Nature and progress are interconnected with the gun culture and are sexualized subjects that, for the purposes of literature, may create a field of criticism where some of the epitomes of the American thinking can be confronted and reevaluated. In general, westerns have placed the “civilized” in confrontation with the “savage”, progress in confrontation with Nature, evolution in confrontation with wilderness, and ultimately the sexes in a discourse emulated in a relationship between the powerful and the subdued. The inversion of these positions may not be manifest in its totality, since the conqueror, as it seemingly appears in Vann’s works, more than subjugated, is turned against himself. As males can be used as a reference to power and dominance through destruction or subjugation, so females are in this sense placed into confrontation with these characteristics, by assuming the part of the subdued, the dominated, or ultimately, the destroyed. Nature is usually feminized and once its power is asserted, deprived of romanticism, and shown in its harsh features in the face of a now subdued man, thus are the powers inverted.

Thus it becomes important not only to approach the theme of Nature but, equally, to approach it considering two meanings of the subject: one is capitalized, the general terminology regarding the natural environment (Nature) and the inherent nature (nature) of the individual as, for the purpose of this study, both significances are taken into account.

The romantic period centered power in Nature as opposed to the social constructs that attributed this same power to masculinity. The Victorian period acted as the field where progressive ideas threatened the impositions of religion and society through the rise of scientific thought. These reflections resulted in a prospect where human development became a threatening trait, seemingly condemning men and criminalizing women, since the fight for equality was observed as, in the scope of some of the literature of the time, an act of transference of power that depicted men as prey and women as predators. This inversion, curiously, was perceived as a fearful subject, articulated in literature as a matter within the specter of the horrific. As these representations are common within western societies, so are they embedded in the western world's reflections about suicide.

Moral assertions on the act of self-harm can be traced back through times and reasons can be rooted in diverse sources, inferred as either an act of cowardice, related to an escape, or an act of courage. It appears at times that, regardless of the method, the act itself seems gendered. Conversely, as previously mentioned by D'Eaubonne, and as it will be discussed in the next section, so Nature is gendered, given feminine features while it is regarded as a territory for masculine exploitation and control. Moreover, in the discussion about the wild and the tamed, there comes the conflict between a spatial Nature and human nature. For the purpose of this study, it becomes important to

approach death and suicide, as well as destruction and subjugation, within the scope of these two concepts. From this perspective, if man is the aggressor of Nature, so human nature becomes the aggressor of man, in turn conquering his psyche and contributing to his self-destruction. This conflict between Nature and nature becomes central in the works of David Vann.

CHAPTER 2. Nature and nature

In the previous chapter, Romanticism, as well as Victorianism were mentioned to attest to modes of observation of suicide that find their place not only within Vann's work but also in coeval society when regarding the action of self-harm. These traits can also be found in the author's relation with the natural environment and more specifically with the sublime character of Nature, how it influences the protagonists, how it is explored as a setting as well as an internalized characteristic of the protagonists' behavior and ultimately how this Nature becomes itself a protagonist. When Nature is gendered into a mothering character, its appeal comes not only from the desire for an idealized past, but also for a return to the womb. In this sense, a return to self means not only a return to a primal state, but also to the child state where Nature becomes a motherly, authoritarian figure upon a powerless man.

Nature is a constant presence in David Vann's work, a place of escape from society, from human relationships, a place that men aspire to and where, it appears, they find an ever greater ally than they have ever found in human relationships. Within

Vann's narratives the dichotomy between the domestic sphere, a realm of femininity, and the world outside where man aspires to his inner nature, is present. Curiously, Vann's male characters are depicted as domesticated beings themselves, immaturely trying to escape the inescapable as, regardless of the environment, not only women keep determining their steps, but also, when within the wilderness, Nature works as a feminized oppressor. Furthermore, the natural environment is evoked as a space outside as well as internal to the protagonists, and this alone can be relatable to violence and destruction and thus also with suicide.

In David Vann's works under discussion, the protagonists move towards the ending of their own lives in a direction towards solitude, away from society or social interaction, using the wild natural environment as a setting for their self-extermination. In this respect one could relate the protagonists' actions with a romantic envisioning of the ending of their lives as a result of an anxiety and sense of purposelessness drawn from their own failed ability to function in society in its various forms. Fictionalized images of a self-indulgent or "weak" spirited character would seem to fit in a plot where there appears to be a desire for the pleasurable prolonging of a feeling of pain. In contrast, Edmund Burke relates this to the idea of the sublime, a feeling of heightened passion unsurpassed by any emotion which happens within the confrontation with whatever questions self-preservation, as stated:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.
(1968, 39)

Vann's characters seek to pursue a meaningful life, or ultimately the reconstruction of their failed lives, only to find that they are not capable of living up to their pre-conceptions of a life in solitude, and their internalized conceptions of Nature, when faced with the reality of the facts. This confrontation with reality is noted in "Sukkwang Island" when the narrator, observing the landscape, states: "Everything was sharply itself and nothing else." (2008, 51) The statement attests that the previously imagined about the natural space and all the images it evoked had no place in what he was witnessing. Romanticism about the natural environment, as a place of reconstruction and communion with an interior self, an inherent nature, are here chastised and brought to its rawness, putting down any expectations of reconciliation between man and what now is manifestly the punishing reality of facts.

Since, on one hand, there is a romantic approach to consider within the theme of Nature, on the other hand, there is what it is conveyed about it through the American scope. As Richard Slotkin mentions:

In America, the frontier myth was continually reshaped and revalued by the ongoing process of adjustment to American conditions. Forced by their situation to deal with frontier realities (as Europeans were not), Americans found it difficult to maintain unaltered the conventionalized images of the wilderness and its people that were the mainstays of European literature about the New World. ... Moreover, where the European stood amid the ruins of an established society and used its fragments to build a new house, the American felt himself to be the creator of something new and unprecedented. (2000, 370)

The European Romantics would regard wilderness, or the natural space, ultimately as a superior force, man diminishing, even as a godlike figure — in a sort of pantheistic view

— or more specifically as sublime in the sense of a form of beautiful in all its most horrifying characteristics. Americans grew into a natural setting that was rapidly changing and that, more than a field for observing Nature's superiority over humans, had to be constantly defied and challenged in the process of the American expansion and the perpetual throw down of the frontier.

For Americans, or Americans-to-be, as they worked with “the vocabulary of images and character types then current, among which were the American, the savage, the good Quaker, and Daniel Boone,” (Slotkin 2000, 370) the frontier was perpetually changing its features as the land was increasingly turning from wilderness into civilization. This expansive posture, which was planted within the core of the American character, entailed an ethos of violence that was justified by not only the harshness of the land, varied in all its very opposing geographic characteristics, but also by its inhabitants either animal or human. In fact, the expansion throughout the territory was always a violent one. If not for the geography that challenged the perseverance of the settlers, then the abundance of fauna also meant an abundance of predators threatening at every step of the way. Had not these factors been sufficient, the fact that this land was not actually uninhabited but, on the contrary, was populated by various Native tribes, was a fact that the newcomers could not ignore. For the new settlers, the natives of the land were observed as savages since their customs did not abide to the traits of civilization that had been for long deemed as the traits of developed people. Unwelcome by these newcomers, those who proclaimed themselves as Americans and felt themselves entitled to this new land, the natives were treated with a growing degree of disregard and ultimately violence. In this context, the western expansion and the pushing forward of the frontier, was accompanied by an ideology of violence towards

the wild nature and its “wild” inhabitants, an ideology that was deeply planted in the hearts of the Americans, manifest in almost every aspect of society ever since. Within the American framework, then, to speak of Nature, the natural space, or even Wilderness, becomes a complex subject that deserves careful reflection, as these words are hardly synonyms, and their use, very frequently, is contradictory.

If, as noted, the idea of Nature can be commonly related with the idea of motherhood, Wilderness can easily become quite the opposite. In many cases, if Nature seems like a destination, fictionalized or not, Wilderness becomes a factual thing. In other words, If Nature is more like a starting point, Wilderness should be its end, and humanly speaking, if Nature is a place of return, Wilderness is a point of no return. Even so, at the risk of digression, as this discussion progresses into this complex subject, the starting point should move around the notion of an extreme contradiction of facts, within a small word-cloud of seemingly relatable words: wilderness, Nature, forest, desert, jungle, and woods, there is enough to jar our notions. For the task at hand, the attention will be focused on only two: Nature and Wilderness.

The Wilderness Act of 1964 defines wilderness as:

... in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape... an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. An area of wilderness is further defined to mean in this Act an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which (1) generally appears to have been

affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable; (2) has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation; (3) has at least five thousand acres of land or is of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition; and (4) may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value. (2024, 2)

The Cambridge International Dictionary of English defines “Wilderness, as “an area of land that has not been cultivated⁷ or had towns and roads built on it, esp.[ecially] because it is difficult to live in as a result of its extremely cold or hot weather or bad earth.” (1995, 1644) Curiously, the first example for the use of the word refers precisely to Alaska, the main setting for Vann’s selected works. The same dictionary also adds the example, “A beautiful mountain wilderness ... the garden was a wilderness of overgrown weeds and bushes... He abided in the wilderness for forty days,” a biblical reference to Mark 1:13, “And he was there in the wilderness forty days, tempted of Satan; and was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered unto him.” In this case, the wilderness, in the passage also referred as the “Temptation of Christ”, places the newly baptized Jesus in the Judean Desert, near the Dead Sea an area devoid of vegetation and not much wildlife. If the Wilderness Act states that wilderness “is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions” (2), asserting a human intervention over the said territory, on the other hand it can also be defined as an unknown space, therefore only existing without human intervention.

7. The revised, online edition substitutes the word “cultivated” by “used to grow crops”, so to disambiguate from the various notions of culture.

Thus, wilderness can be several things, a lot, a desert, a forest, a dry place or densely fertile, a place of abandonment, an abandoned place, a threatened place, and a threatening place, a home for wild beasts and not a place for humans, its meaning changing over time as can be observed by the various distinct assertions. It was the place where, not only Christ had faced the Devil but also where Adam and Eve were sent, after being cast out of the Garden of Eden. So, up to a point, wilderness could be seen as a godless place, “a place to which one came only against one's will, and always in fear and trembling” (Cronon, 1996, 9)

Conversely, the *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* defines Nature as “All the animals, plants, rocks ... in the world and all the features, forces and processes that happen or exist independently of people ...” (1995, 942); but also “The force that is responsible for physical life and that is sometimes spoken of as a person,” (id); as well as “The type or main characteristic of something,”; and also, “A person’s character.”(id) In *Keywords for American Cultural Studies* (Burgett and Hendler 2020) Nature is defined as “the opposite of culture: the outdoors, the untamed, the wild, the timeless. It is what lies before and beyond society and civilization.” (178) It was also an abstraction used to establish a change in human characteristics, as stated:

Nature was associated with the body, the feminine, the nonwhite, and the primitive. Culture was associated with the mind, the masculine, the white, and the civilized. These associations perpetuated and justified social hierarchies that placed whiteness over blackness, man over woman, mind over body, and human over nonhuman (Burgett and Hendler 2020, 178-179)

Thus, while wilderness is a place out of civilization and even more out of the human space, Nature is not only all encompassing, within and without the human as much as the human is a part of it, but also inherently humanized and used as a mirror for comparing ideological differences in society. In addition, starting somewhere around the 19th century, not only these two words seemed to be used interchangeably, but also the notion of wilderness seemed to have changed, as William Cronon states:

The wastelands that had once seemed worthless had for some people come to seem almost beyond price. That Thoreau in 1862 could declare wildness to be the preservation of the world suggests the sea change that was going on. Wilderness had once been the antithesis of all that was orderly and good — it had been the darkness, one might say, on the far side of the garden wall — and yet now it was frequently likened to Eden itself. When John Muir arrived in the Sierra Nevada in 1869, he would declare, "No description of Heaven that I have ever heard or read of seems half so fine." He was hardly alone in expressing such emotions. One by one, various corners of the American map came to be designated as sites whose wild beauty was so spectacular that a growing number of citizens had to visit and see them for themselves (1996, 9)

Moreover, it should be reminded that wilderness does not only include land and that the trembling fear Cronon refers to also finds its place in the face of the vast aquatic world, as stated by Alain Corbin:

The interpretation of the Bible, especially the book of Genesis, the Psalms, and the book of Job, exerted a deep influence on the ways in which the sea was portrayed. Both the story of the Creation and that of the Flood coloured the world of collective imagination with their own specific features. Genesis imposed the vision of the 'great abyss', a place of unfathomable mysteries, an

uncharted liquid mass, the image of the infinite and the unimaginable over which the spirit of God moved at the dawn of Creation. This quivering expanse, which symbolized, and actually was, the unknowable, was frightful in itself. There is no sea in the Garden of Eden. There is no place within the enclosed landscape of Paradise for the watery horizon whose surface extends as far as the eye can see. To attempt to fathom the mysteries of the ocean bordered on sacrilege, like an attempt to penetrate the impenetrable nature of God ... This unconquerable element was evidence that Creation remained unfinished. The ocean was the remnant of that undifferentiated primordial substance on which form had to be imposed so that it might become part of Creation. This realm of the unfinished, a vibrating, vague extension of chaos, symbolized the disorder that preceded civilization. (1994, 1-2)

As in the case of the wilderness present in land, the realm of the sea was, through time, reevaluated, regarded as something other than a monster at the edge of the realm of humans. It had to be looked upon as something that could, somehow, be made for the purpose of humanity, as stated,

The irresistible awakening of a collective desire for the shore arises in the period from 1780 to 1840 ... This was when the coasts of the ocean began to appear as a recourse against the misdeeds of civilization, as the place where it was easiest to ... experience the dissociation of mankind's history from that of the earth. This was where the sublime beauty of the ocean and the pathos of its storms unfolded. Here, more than anywhere else, the individual found the means of encountering the elements and enjoying the brightness or transparency of the water. ... Cure-takers began rushing toward the sea-shore around 1750 in order to relieve an old anxiety: this was one of the tactical weapons used to combat melancholy and spleen. (1994, 53-55)

It seems that the orderly, humanized place, what came to be civilization, what was once a shelter from the darkness that wilderness encompassed, brought a growing disdain for the ordained life, as well as a sense of imprisonment that only a return to wilderness would relieve. In the minds of transcendentalists, such as Thoreau, Muir or Emerson, but also the romantics like Byron, Shelley, Keats, to speak of only a few, it would be within the natural world — wilderness — that Man would find their own human nature, and concurrently, their humanity.

By focusing their attention on the natural world, particularly on the wilderness as a place that plays influence on human existence, the Romantics and Transcendentalists heavily problematized the positions of “Man” and Nature. Although invoking a desire for unity between these two parts they also separated them. Within the Romantics, this idea was intensified with the connection with Pantheism, where the idea of unity, that placed Nature, thus all of existence as a sole deity, eliminated the notion of a god made at the image of a human. Nevertheless, they characterized it as an overseer — giving it eyes; as a listener — giving it ears; and feared its judgmental power over its inferiors deeming it with moral capabilities, thus endowing it with human characteristics.

On the other hand, thinkers of the Romantic Period, as well as Transcendentalists were, in part, attuned to the Aristotelian statement that “... Anyone who cannot form a community with others, or who does not need to because he is self-sufficient, is no part of a city-state-he is either a beast or a god.” (Aristotle, 1998, 5) Aristotle’s statement can be used as an example of where the Romantics and the Transcendentalists differed. The Romantics deemed humans as inferior in the face of nature, therefore no more than any other living being, more a prey than a predator, while the Transcendentalists looked at Nature — wilderness — more than a transforming place, as a transforming entity, where

humans could overcome their position in relation to society and aspire to be some sort of super-human. Similarly, the differing points between Romanticism and Transcendentalism is what William Cronon identifies as a relation between the sublime and the frontier, "... Of the two, the sublime is the older and more pervasive cultural construct ... the frontier is more peculiarly American, though it too had its European antecedents and parallels. The two converged to remake wilderness in their own image ..." (1996, 9).

It is also curious that both modes of thinking, which ultimately manifested this drive to the natural world and were aware of a certain stress because of the fast progression of an industrialized time, manifested opposing views on existence. In this sense, Transcendentalism had the belief to escape from civilization and live wholly: "to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life [to] see if [one] could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when [one] came to die, discover that [one] had not lived," (Thoreau 1985, 75). Hence, to find the meaning of life within Nature. Romanticism prized the sublime characteristics of the wild environment, not only emphasizing the subjugation of humans before the overwhelming power of Nature, but also by observing a more permeable beauty in the passionate feelings associated to death.

"Death is the mother of beauty," ... "And what is beauty?" "Terror." "Well said," ... "Beauty is rarely soft or consolatory. Quite the contrary. Genuine beauty is always quite alarming." (Tartt 2022, 63)

This sense of vulnerability in the face of the wild space is permeated by the presence of the overwhelming beauty inherent in a natural environment that seems more deadly than promotor of life. In other words, this confrontation of man with the sublime, is also

productive of a feeling that is mentioned by Camus in an apparent different context. While Burke mentions a “feeling analogous to terror,” (1968, 39) Camus mentions a “revolt of the flesh” [“Essa revolta da carne ...” (2005, 23)]. Burke mentions the sublime, Camus speaks of the absurd, and both, in some way, speak of the insignificance of human life, lack of purpose, lack of control, in the face of an irrational power, a trap for humans. Thus, independently of what humans want to escape from, whether their daily lives or their own failed ambitions, it is, all a matter of confines, all a matter of entrapment and escape. The revolt of the flesh comes with the certainty that escape is a futile idea, a construct, and that, if a metaphor is permitted, a cage locked around human existence of which the key has been swallowed. In this context, both the sublime and the absurd point out to human’s acknowledgement of their mortality and insignificance in the face of an absent superior, deified plan. Stepping on the frontier between nature and Nature, humans also recognize the conflict between life and death. This conflict can be transposed to the pushing of the frontier in the American context, not only by the need to “civilize” the “uncivilized” world, thus to assert control, but also to invest oneself with purpose.

As Richard Slotkin mentions, “The Myth of the Frontier is arguably the longest-lived of American myths, with origins in the colonial period and a powerful continuing presence in contemporaneity culture.” (1998, 15) In this sense, the frontier becomes, in contemporaneity, a myth associated with the retelling of stories about the pilgrims and first settlers that established in North America, pushing their boundaries farther into an undiscovered, untamed territory, fighting both wild animals and natives, whose customs seemed to them alien enough to be referred as savage. The wilderness is mythicized and characterized at the image of humans, again, as an inhospitable place, at least until it

becomes hospitable, if not by perseverance, by force. Actually, it was force, more specifically power, that kept tearing down the American frontier and led the powerless Natives out of lands they did not even intend to claim, only live in, that won the West. The advertisements of older times intended to sell weapons as “the gun that won the West,” transformed that object as the most blatant physical manifestation of power. In other words, in the American context, since the earliest times of colonization and more than anywhere else, guns mediated power, whether to subdue, to destroy, power to take, power over the lives of others or power over one’s own life, power in its various assertions. In this context, power might be seen as an extension of masculinity where the taming of the wild environment was its vehicle, and conversely civilization and progress, was a form of emasculation and dehumanization. Living among the complexities of civilization, and trying, somehow, to escape from a sense of organization that seemed to be increasingly marked by an apparent herd complex, men like Thoreau sought a sense of self within the wild natural space — wilderness. As Cronon states: “Combining the sacred grandeur of the sublime with the primitive simplicity of the frontier, [wilderness] is the place where we can see the world as it really is, and so know ourselves as we really are — or ought to be.” (1996, 16) In other words, men sought within the natural world, their own nature.

As Nature is deemed irrational, human nature is characterized by its opposite. Rationality, considered a “power,” arms humans with an ability for speech, reason, and understanding, largely separating humans from Nature and drawing them from the realm of instinct. Moreover, as was previously mentioned, David Vann writes about the Ten Commandments being a list of human’s unavoidable instincts, (2013, 123) subverting what is pointed out as a document that prescribes guidelines to a moral

conduct and transforming it into an instinctual conduct. In this way, not only it appears that the author intends to point to the inevitability of actions to be avoided, but especially to turn the world of reason into a world of instinct, thus transforming man into a part of Nature. Since rationality arms humans with the power of choice, the world of instinct leaves humans to be governed by irrationality, hence by Nature. In other words, it should be highlighted that, paradoxically, the closeness to Nature places the human outside human nature. (Burgett and Hendler 2020, 178)

In opposition to an instinctual life where the humans are a part of Nature, rationality places these same humans apart from it. Reflecting on their own condition, not only they accept themselves but also detach themselves from their surroundings. Added to this, “[a]n analysis of the facts of human nature can only establish that man admires and aspires, but not to what he admires and aspires.” (McDaniel 1998, 328) Conscious of their own presence in the realm of existence, thus being able to observe and perceive themselves both as actors and spectators of life, human beings center the universe in their own presence. They admire their surroundings and aspire, from the standpoint of their own selves. In this state of self, a sense of purpose grows out of the notion that human existence, the depth of a conscience and the premise of a soul, is a subject bigger than the transience of life. The drawing of a God in the map of existence, in a way, relieves humans of the anxiety related with death, but when humanity is faced with the idea of a godless existence, then it is faced with its own apparent purposelessness.

Considering the idea of Nature being a synonym of the individual character, and thus of Nature being somewhat referred to as a person, these traits gather extended significance. On the one hand there is the constant presence of what Camus calls a

“divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting,” [“Esse divórcio entre o homem e a sua vida, entre o actor e o seu cenário... (2005, 23)] leading to a crisis in life, a state where humans are faced with the certainty that they are a property of time and with that comes the revolt which grows when faced with an environment that is unresponsive to their designs and aspirations. On the other, there is the evidence of a setting that is, in itself a character. In this respect, and for the purposes of the works under discussion, Nature gains an extended significance since there are inherent characteristics shared in both humans and wilderness, shown both as characters.

According to Vann, Nature and nature are equally personified, gendered, ascribed moral qualities. At the same time, man is shown to emanate a toxic nature in constant conflict with a feminized Nature. In this respect, men are marked by contradictions in their pursuit for self, while the woman is affirmative, definite, both nurturing and punishing. If man can be seen as a parallel to civilization, trying to escape from self, the woman, can be idealized beyond Nature, as a punishing wilderness. In relation to all the previous assertions, it can be stated that it is natural that David Vann’s male characters, show in the wilderness their nature as hunters, protectors, and providers. They seek in the wilderness the harmony they did not find in conjugal life, in a life near women where, they failed precisely as protectors and providers. Their position within these constructs, is full of contradictions, and comes often with a constant trial and error of causes and consequences, which always begin and end with a repetition of romanticized traits. On the other end of the scale, are the author’s female characters being in their nature both nurturing and punishing. In other words, in the author’s narratives, a competition of forces occurs between the protagonists, between

conqueror and conquered, between civilization and wilderness, between man and woman, as two sides of a frontier line.

CHAPTER 3. – *Legend of a Suicide; Caribou Island; Halibut on the Moon. Suicide as the Last Frontier*

David Vann was born on October 19, 1966, on Adak Island, in the Aleutian Islands, Alaska. His father was serving two years in the Navy as a dentist and “he had wanted Alaska because he liked hunting and fishing, but he obviously had not known about Adak at the time of his request.” (Vann 2008, 6) Arid and inhospitable, “a small hunk of rock and snow far out on the Aleutian chain” (2008, 6), Adak is, coincidentally, the word for “father” in the nearly extinct Aleut dialect of the Aleutian Islands. This curiosity may be relevant to the depiction of the father’s character in *Legend of a Suicide*, since the aspects of the environment can be traced to the latter’s character. Vann’s early childhood was spent in Ketchikan, the sixth most populous city in the state of Alaska, with an estimate population rate of about 8,000. Their parent’s relationship did not last long and after their divorce, Vann moved to California with his mother while his father stayed in Alaska and remarried. As the first marriage, his father’s second divorce, involved a series of events, which comprised his characteristically dissatisfaction with the choices he had made in life, and a constant remorse for the steps he had taken in order to correct them. This led him into a series of depression and isolation that culminated in his suicide by shooting, while on the phone with his second ex-wife, in a house newly bought in Fairbanks, fairly devoid of any possessions. He was alleged to have said, “I love you but I’m not going to live without you” (Vann 2017).

The three works under discussion, namely *Legend of a Suicide*, *Caribou Island*, and *Halibut on the Moon*, share the common trait of dealing mainly with suicide as a result of failed expectations associated with a life within the social construct of family and love oriented relationships. The main protagonists in these three works seem to develop a desire for self-termination within a logic of preservation of their status or what they see as the traits that should sustain the foundation of their character. In this sense, Jim, in *Legend of Suicide*, and particularly in the short story “Sukkwon Island” and *Halibut on the Moon*, seems to wallow in self-pity over his condition. At the same time he tries to keep his image of a lone hero that “... ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder,” (Campbell 1968, 30) disappearing towards a frontier that seems to manifest itself as a division between life and death. Concurrently, in *Caribou Island*, Irene acts against her husband, an enemy of her expectations, in what manifests as a display of virile domination over her male companion. In the referred novel, virility, or power, manifest as a trait of the narrative that is transversal to the telling of all of these characters’ toxic relationships. The heredity of a suicidal trait is also brought into discussion, as suicide in this respect is shown to be a recurrent trace in Irene’s past life. In addition, as was mentioned before, Gary and Irene’s story follows another real occurrence in the author’s family, in this case the murder-suicide of the parents of his father’s second wife. In the novel, Irene also kills her husband, Gary, before taking her own life.

As David Vann’s past in what relates to suicide has left him with profound scars that ultimately led him to see the act as a threat to his own preservation, his works, mainly the ones under discussion, appear as an attempt to interpret the reasons that led his father to commit suicide and to better understand the subject. In the process, the

author was, seemingly, given a chance to forgive his father and to forgive himself, as he was tormented by the idea of being somehow responsible for his father's decision. Added to this, there is also the question of the fear of heredity that has to be taken into consideration. Specifically mentioning "Sukkwan Island", Daniela Fargione states the following:

Originariamente inserito nella raccolta *Legend of a Suicide* (2008) e ora nella veste di romanzo breve, *L'Isola di Sukkwann* è una delle cinque storie che offrono versioni distinte e complementari dello stesso episodio reale intorno al quale ruota l'intera narrazione. I racconti sono saldati, all'interno di una cornice, da una medesima ossessione: David Vann aveva tredici anni al momento del suicidio del padre il quale, solo due settimane prima, lo aveva invitato a trascorrere con lui un anno in Alaska. Il senso di colpa per il rifiuto — molla, forse, di quello scellerato atto paterno — e il timore di ripetere gli stessi errori del genitore lo tormentarono per anni. Vann si interroga, dunque, sulla propria vulnerabilità genetica nell'accanito tentativo di districarsi tra la fascinazione della morte e la presunta ineluttabilità del proprio destino. (2013, 81)

In this sense, not only this novella focuses on the author's dealing with his refusal of his father's invitation to live with him in Alaska for one year, but also the whole work, expanded through the other novels, grows from a need to break down the various aspects concerning his father's violent act.

"Sukkwan Island" is shown as centerpiece of a narrative, which apparently uses the other short stories as indispensable satellites for a continuous reflection on an act that is shown here in its most vivid violence. It seems to be strategically positioned in the collection to allude to its characteristic as the core narrative surrounding the

mythification of a suicide that has shaped the lives of everyone around. In this sense the stories, prior and post the novella, appear to revolve around it and almost swirl into it as if this was the drain to where the whole narrative disappears. The use of the word “core,” also allows an etymological reflection that establishes parallels to French: “coeur” and subsequently with English: “heart.” If it may be allowed that “Sukkwan Island” can be seen as the heart of *Legend of a Suicide*, so does its detailing and sensational quality draw a parallel with Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899). There are confluent aspects related to the depiction of wilderness, its influence on the characters’ psyche, as well as diverse aspects that allude to the deterioration of the individual faced with the wild environment, proving to be a valid object for a more detailed study.

While the stories use first person narration, “Sukkwan Island” uses third person-limited narration. The recourse to this narrative strategy is useful not only for the exploration of the son’s detachment from his father’s thoughts, feelings, and actions, but also for the sense of abandonment that is created in the second part of the novella. It also draws the readers to a character whose sudden disappearance seems to leave them with a sense of loneliness that proves to be an essential feeling for the reading of the second part of the novella. In addition, the author has stated that

I thought I was going to write a story that would end in my father’s suicide, but instead the boy kills himself, and that was a complete surprise to me, something I did not see coming at all. That is one of those transformations that happens in the writing, the surprise to the author that opens up the material in a different way and makes it possible to write what I could not write before. I could not write about what my dad’s body would have looked like. It was too disturbing to think about that. I could not describe his head half blown off and the pieces of his brain on the ceiling. That was just so

gruesome. It was also so disturbing and shocking to lose him all of a sudden. I had a hard time writing about my grief right afterwards. But once it had shifted and it was the boy's body, and it was the father finding it, everything was distance. Now I could describe the grief in so much detail because I was finally making my father's death real instead of being in half denial about it. (Cazajous-Augé 2023)

If the suicidal person is said to self-objectify in order to promote its own extinction, in this case the author objectifies the character of the son, the one closest to his sensibility, in order to distance himself from the father and more effectively detail the act in its cruelest aspects. This is a device that permits a transferring of feelings useful to the depiction of the father's despair in the face of the horror that is presented to him. The rest of the stories are written in retrospective first-person narration, a device that draws the reader to a core that unfurls in "Sukkwan Island," but also puts more emphases on the biographical aspects of the narrative.

In reference to *Legend of a Suicide*, one can argue that the title of the work poses a dual interpretation between the act and the individual. It can be read as the mythification of the act, or of the individual and his elevation to the status of legend, to the level of the fantasized and mythicized entity for having ended his life in an apparent revolt against life or even as a manifesto of immortality, or its eternalization through death. All the stories contained in the work relate to suicide and death, themes that, even when not voiced, are present like a cloud covering the characters and the events, the ways of seeing and thinking about the events of their lives before and after suicide. Thus, not only is suicide liberated from its shameful mark, the suicidal is praised for the heroism of his actions.

In contrast, as the short stories depict a sort of mythicized father, drawn always from a distant memory, in “Sukkwan Island” — the novella — there is a transferring of the act to the son, thus turning this same son into the hero. Concurrently, not only is the father devoid of this quality but he is also punished by the passivity of his actions, as he is hanged and subsequently drowned, dying against his will:

Jim woke with a rope around his neck yanking him from his bunk. He tried to scream but he couldn't ... When he hit the water, it was so cold he woke and wanted them to find him and rescue him ... He threw up water involuntarily and swallowed and breathed it in again like the end it was, cold and hard and unnecessary. (Vann 2008, 208)

Death by hanging is a subject that is included both in this novella and also in the novel *Caribou Island*, and that allows an approach to suicide in light of what Maurice Blanchot mentions in *Thomas the Obscure* (1988):

Just as the man who is hanging himself, after kicking away the stool on which he stood, the final shore, rather than feeling the leap which he is making into the void feels only the rope which holds him, held to the end, held more than ever, bound as he had never been before to the existence he would like to leave (1988, 36)

Blanchot links suicide by hanging to the life one wishes to escape from, and this action is bound to the ones left behind as well. Also the rope around the neck, bidding the body, precludes any sense of freedom from the ties of life. Moreover, it is interesting to reflect on the fact that the last feeling of a hanged person is, arguably, the hard sense of attachment. In this sense, the son takes it upon his hands to go through with what the

father could not, shooting himself with the .44 Magnum, as Fargione mentions, the weapon that Dirty Harry owned (2013, 81). In contrast, the father shows to be incapable of even killing himself, being killed by being bound from the neck and drowned, clinging to life until the end, an aspect that only adds to his depiction as a weak, or at least an insecure character. In “Sukkwan Island” there seems to be a derogation of the father as the images of courage and cowardice associated to the choice to endure or deny life are inverted. In this sense, the bravery of the suicidal son is contrasted with the cowardice of the father who clings to life, fantasizing every aspect of his voyage into the wilderness.

Vann discusses suicide in various aspects, including suicide obviously related to a death that might represent the crossing of a threshold, as Campbell argues, “With the personifications of his destiny to guide and aid him, the hero goes forward in his adventure until he comes to the ‘threshold guardian’ ... Beyond them is darkness, the unknown, and danger,” (1968, 77), as well as death in life. In this way, it is not only the deeply physical aspect of the act, an image reserved for the central novella mentioned above, but also the aspect of emotional suicide portrayed in stories such as “Rhoda” (Vann 2008, 12-24) or “A Legend of Good Men” (Vann 2008, 25-35), in which the characters show an inability to relate emotionally, not only to others, but also to the space that surrounds them. But if *Legend of a Suicide* shows an organization, albeit not chronological, that moves towards the construction of an individual, in this case the son, this construction takes on specific contours in “Sukkwan Island.”

The first story, “Ichthyology,” (Vann 2008, 1-11) puts forward the characterization of the son, the development of his personality, and the description of his feelings, as well as his relation with fish and the water environment. There is the

description of his waking up to self through the observing of a fish inside a fish tank, as it will be mentioned further on in this dissertation.

This sort of externalized characterization through the depiction of fish is then juxtaposed with the father's activity while fishing and his actions in relation to fish:

My father ranged farther and farther that next year in the Osprey, changing gear for albacore off Mexico, then again for king crab in the Bering Sea. He began to sport-fish off the wide, high stern, and one day caught several large salmon, which he gutted on the spot. With the return to port and sale of the failed Osprey imminent (after two years of severe losses he could no longer even get a loan), with the IRS closing in, and with no further flights imagined, he took his .44 Magnum handgun from the cabin and walked back to stand alone on the bright silver stern under a heavy, gray-white sky and the cries of gulls, his boots slathered with the dark blood of freshly caught salmon. He may have paused for a moment to reflect, but I doubt it. His momentum was made up only of air, without the distraction of ground. He spattered himself amid the entrails of salmon, his remains picked at by gulls for several hours before my uncle came up from the engine room and found him. (10)

In this case, it seems the narrator uses signifiers to establish connections between the story that is being told and his feelings towards himself and his father. Thus, the boat's name, "Osprey," named after a maritime bird of prey, is misleading since the boat is not only depicted as a failed vessel, but also one that changes gear depending on the variety of fish available, and this connection might set the reader closer to the characterization of the father as also a failed character prone to changing his mind about the commitments he makes. The father may be seen as the osprey, "known to soar far out over the waters in vast arcs and circles, ... alone," (8) and his son and the women in his life can be seen as the fish "which he gutted on the spot," (10) as well as the victims of

his actions. The suicide in this story, the spattering of the father amid the entrails of salmon, can be seen as staining the ones around him with the repercussions of his actions. The metaphor seemingly intending to establish a parallel with the legacy he supposedly left his family.

The second story: “Rhoda,” focuses on the narrator’s feelings associated with his father’s second marriage and there seems to be a reflection on Nature, life, and death sustained by the image of the new woman in their lives. It appears she assumes various forms, being seen by the child as a strangely compelling and mysterious seducer. Depicted as having “dark, dark hair, pale skin, and a dropped eyelid that, on closer view, made her terribly beautiful,” (Vann 2008, 1) Rhoda is an instant reminder of the blind fiddler mentioned by Joseph Campbell (1968, 357) which represents death. Hence, Rhoda is seen through the eyes of the child-narrator as being strangely attractive and pleasant while at the same time showing some characteristics of dominance over the father, displayed by the strange breaking down of laughter during the wedding: “She laughed out loud, right there in the middle of the service in front of everyone, at the same moment that she was slipping my father’s ring onto his finger,” (Vann 2008, 12) and also by the final characterization:

Rhoda walked up behind him and put her white fingers on the back of his neck. When the bird did come, its head to the side, beak open and feathers ruffling, I saw Rhoda close her one eye that would. I saw her neck arch back, whipping through the air, and wings rise from her. I heard the shot and screamed. My father jumped sideways from me and swung the barrel around until it pointed at my chest. This was only instinct, he would explain later. I had startled him. But Rhoda came toward me, held my face in her hands and pulled it close to her own, wanting to know. “What’s going on in there?” she

asked. She pulled me so close I saw into her shuttered eye, the light-brown edge curving and perfect against the white, its landscape bottomless, its center blocked from view. (Vann 2008, 24)

In a parallel with the image of the blind fiddler, there is a noticeable dreamlike quality in the whole story, or at least the mere fantasied representation of a child's memory of events, which are manifested not only in slight changes of details throughout the story, but ultimately in the depiction of Rhoda. Either establishing a parallel with the bird that is being shot or with the depiction of a divine figure that touches her loved one's neck while growing wings, possibly as an incarnation of death taking away its victim. Moreover, there is the image of the father pointing the gun at the son adding another layer to the representation of guilt, which adds to the aforementioned dreamlike quality of the narration, even though it is never manifestly stated that it is the narration of a dream. In the case of a dream there is a connection to be made between the narrator, the child, and the woman as she is pointed out to be someone strangely seductive, adding another possible interpretation, as Campbell suggests:

The unfortunate father is the first radical intrusion of another order of reality into the beatitude of this earthly restatement of the excellence of the situation within the womb: he, therefore, is experienced primarily as an enemy. To him is transferred the charge of aggression that was originally attached to the "bad," or absent mother, while the desire attaching to the "good," or present, nourishing, and protecting mother, she herself (normally) retains. This fateful infantile distribution of death (thanatos: destrudo) and love (eros: libido) impulses builds the foundation of the now celebrated Oedipus complex ... (1968, 6)

The (absent) father from whom the child tirelessly seeks the foundation of his character is seen as the strange figure in the triangle while also retaining the characteristics of an enemy in the child's subconscious. In turn, the woman, even not being the biological mother, is given the quality of a substitute and restorer of balance in the relationship between father and son. Still, she also retains the quality of the bearer of the father's decline, since she is given the features of death. While "the dependent child and its mother constitute for months after the catastrophe of birth a dual unit, not only physically but also psychologically," (Campbell 1968, 6) in this story, Rhoda ultimately shows her shapeshifting qualities by staring deeply into the child's eyes and, in a contradiction to his expectations of psychological harmony, questions his psyche, by asking him: "What's going on in there?" (Vann 2008, 24) Hence, not only this shows her ignorance and predatory curiosity about the child's thoughts but also, added to the image of the eye's center being blocked from view, describes her as a person whose interior self — nature — is secluded. As such, her movements during the moment of the shooting of the bird, also serve as a presage of the father's future actions.

The aim is not to see, but to realize that one is, that essence; then one is free to wander as that essence in the world. Furthermore: the world too is of that essence. The essence of oneself and the essence of the world: these two are one. Hence separateness, withdrawal, is no longer necessary. Wherever the hero may wander, whatever he may do, he is ever in the presence of his own essence — for he has the perfected eye to see. There is no separateness. Thus, just as the way of social participation may lead in the end to a realization of the All in the individual, so that of exile brings the hero to the Self in all. (Campbell 1968, 386)

As shapeshifter, not only through her actions but also through the description of her shuttered eye, which mirrors a bottomless environment, Rhoda alludes to a cosmological unity that places the individual and Nature as one and the same. This unity not only places her in between two worlds — life and death — but it also places the father at both ends of the gun, both as predator and prey.

Another side of parenthood is depicted in “A Legend of Good Men” (Vann 2008, 25-35) through the narrator’s memories of the men in her mother’s life, particularly after his father’s suicide. In this case, if the latter story deals with dreams, this one arguably deals with myth. One significant thing to explore is the title of the story itself. Again, by using the term “Legend,” the author places the figure of men in relation with a mythicized being that seems not to belong in the field of reality. Consequently, there is the legend of the suicide — the felon, and the legend of the good men. In contrast with the figure of the absent father, these men’s presence is manifested in brief encounters that end at the first sign of a serious connection with the mother. Characterized as “good men,” they pose the threat of being actual suitors, which the mother chooses to abandon, debatably because she is defending herself from being abandoned again. The men in the lives of this mother and son are described as being

... a lot like the circuses that passed through our town. They’d move in quickly and unpack everything they owned, as if they had come to stay. They’d tempt us with brightly colored objects — flowers, balloons, remote-controlled race cars — perform tricks with their beards and hands, call us funny names like snip, my little squash plant, ding-dong, and apple pie, and yell their stories at us day and night. Then they’d vanish, and we’d find no sign left, no mention even, as if we’d simply imagined them. (Vann 2008, 26)

Narrated through the son's eyes and in flashback, all the men show distinctive characteristics associated with male archetypes: the king, the warrior, the magician, and the lover, although what stands out is the transience of these relationships and how much the family of two has been accustomed to dismiss the men in their lives to the realm of the past. Even then it is noticeable that the mother is in a search for someone that might be just no more than an image. This becomes apparent through the description of her interest on a specific 35-mm slide from a trip to Legoland in Denmark where:

... twenty or thirty Lego horses and Lego men all piled up on the porch of a Lego palace while the very large and human gardener came by with a lawn mower ... Something about that picture just delighted my mother. Quaint little Europe was a part of it, perhaps, but all those men dumped unceremoniously, along with their horses, had its appeal, too. (Vann 2008, 30)

On a concluding sequence, the boy breaks into his own house, since he has forgotten his key at school. While describing the house like it was not his own, he notices in the boy's room:

The box full of Playboys, Penthouses, Hustlers, and trash novels with "Adults Only" on the cover suggested that this boy was some kind of pervert, and why he kept so many pictures of his father in this same box but not on his desk or on his walls didn't make much sense. (Vann 2008, 34)

Keeping his father's pictures together with the adult magazines might indicate that his feelings towards his father have been kept secret. In other words, he wishes to hide his father's death just as much as he wants to hide his perversions, or even that he sees his

father's action as a perversion. The question of perversion remains a matter put forward through the personal opinion of the narrator-boy, and possibly connected with virility. In this case, the son keeps his father's pictures, hence his memory, alongside the symbols his subconscious identifies as being a part of the world of men, here seen as the detainers of the virility he seeks for himself. As stated by Alain Corbin: "Nos romances licenciosos ... a virilidade da personagem masculina parece inesgotável," (2020, 25) and curiously this same virility is connected to Nature as Corbin argues:

Quando o homem ejacula, 'é de certa maneira a Natureza em estado bruto que se exprime'. Durante este processo irreprimível, mecânico, que escapa a qualquer acção da vontade e que se acompanha de um esquecimento total de todas as sensações que não as sentidas pela circulação e projecção do esperma, o homem manifesta no mais alto ponto aquilo que constitui a sua virilidade (2020, 26)

Another aspect of the boy's keeping of his father's memory is shown through the presence of guns that are kept inside his closet, an aspect emphasized as difficult to explain to a distant observer, as stated:

The guns in his closet — a Browning .22-caliber rifle, a .30-.30 Winchester carbine, a .300 Winchester Magnum with scope, a Winchester Model 25 .12-gauge pump shotgun, a Sheridan "Blue-Streak" pellet rifle, and a Ruger .44 Magnum handgun — were difficult to explain. Where had he gotten them all? (Vann 2008, 34)

Both items of violence and extensions of his father, these guns are another symbol of the boy's search for a connection with his father that is not related with his view of suicide as

an act of cowardice. In other words, both the pornographic literature and the guns are connected to an imagery of virility that may be seen as a compensation for the weakening view of his father as a suicidal.

In the story, both the preference of the boy for one of her mother's suitors: John, a police officer who teaches him to drive and takes him hunting, and the keeping of his father's memory inside the box where he keeps his pornographic literature, along with the guns he keeps inside the closet, might be seen as signs of his search for a sense of virile masculinity that was interrupted with his father's death. In addition, this search for a masculine appeal is related to Nature through the display of power that both images evoke.

Both "Ketchikan" (209-228) and "The Higher Blue" (229-237), the two final stories of the collection, are told from an adult perspective in a conclusive tone. In other words, if *Legend of a Suicide* can be interpreted as a search for meaning related to the suicide of the father, these two stories work as epilogues to this same search. "Ketchikan" tells the story of the thirty-year-old narrator, Roy Fenn, and his trip to Ketchikan, the town where he had lived with his father as a young boy. The adult's return to the town of his childhood can relate to a sense of nostalgia along with the realization of an impossibility of going back to the same place in time which is expected to be crystallized in a physical space. The narrator describes the town as "the place of ghosts," ... "where my dead father had first gone astray, the place where this father and his suicide and his cheating and his lies and my pity for him, also, might finally be put to rest." (Vann 2008, 209) Concurrently this is the place that humanizes the father and where a new understanding of this subject is brought to surface. The conflict of the man between his life and the desire to live a different one is made clear:

My father loved something about Alaska. Though frustrated himself, he had many friends who lived the kinds of lives he imagined. One was a man named Healy who lived a hundred miles off the Parks Highway at a point between Anchorage and Fairbanks where the highway cross-sected nothing. No other human habitation as far as any horizon ... in my father Healy vanished, became him, and he knew freedom ... Over a couch, Healy had draped the hides of black bears, brown bears, mountain goats, deer, caribou, and my father would touch these with one hand but keep the other in his pocket. At this point, he would have lost words, too broken any longer to praise. I touched these hides, also, forgotten by my father but watching him, feeling a child's portion of regret, desire, longing, my father's longing ... After a long drive home very late, during which I slept, my father would rise again early to drill out the tiny infected nerves of teeth, fill cavities, make molds, instruct and squint and see his whole life reduced to something cramped and small. (Vann 2008, 213)

Through the resource of images, the passage deeply points to the sense of loss and failure the father feels when confronted with the life his friend Healy lives. If Alaska as a scenery had been almost a constant throughout the narrative, it is only here the narrator addresses it clearly in connection with his father who loved something about Alaska, an abstract love, beyond tangible. It frustrated him that, although he lived in the territory, he didn't quite live it. The only thing he could do was to be a visitor of his imagined life, something he would do by visiting his friend Healy, the character that represented some sort of healing, perhaps for his soul. In fact, if throughout the narrative the father is depicted for his darkest features and for his heavy presence within absence, this first part of "Ketchikan" is marked by the soulfulness of the images created.

Healy lives “where the road cross-sected nothing,” (Vann 2008, 213) hence the farthest one could be from any mark of civilization. He lived there with his family in the manner of the old pioneers, unaffected even by time. The father would touch the symbols of this wilderness, but would keep one hand in his pocket, like he was holding back from the same life he would long for, each hand touching one side of a frontier where he stood in between. It seems that it is in this timelessness, this environment of crystallized images that the father’s idealized life is set. Curiously, his feelings are evocative of the relation to time that is mentioned by Camus. In this context, time and place, respectively in reference to the absurd and the sublime, play a very important part in the construction of this character’s internal voice. In other words, the idea of a failed life is related to a feeling of loss directly linked with time and with an idea of decay that will, in his mind, be compensated by his accelerated extinction, thus suicide. In this sense, Alaska, the fantasy of a life in the wilderness and the ambition to live a rugged individualist life are symbols of the character’s struggle against time and decay. The narrator uses his child’s memories to evoke the distance between father and son when an ancestral longing was born, as if to attest to an absence that was there even before any physical separation. He then concludes by bringing the father back to a life that seemed meaningless faced with his desires, a life that he feels as being lesser, a sort of a living death.

The short story begins with the narrator stating “At Thirty, I rode the Alaskan ferry ... to the town of my childhood ...,” (Vann 2008, 209) which relates to Camus’ statement, previously mentioned. The connection evokes the idea of a time in which the son now understands the father as his equal, as a partaker of a certain common anxiety. Through the now adult son’s eyes the father is shown as more reachable. The son’s

search for the father does not limit itself to a visit to Alaska. The place this father chose to live, and where he came to die, was also the place where his life had taken a turn that seemingly grew from this desire for change but was seen by the narrator as the catalyst for a series of events that led to his accelerated extinction. The pursuit of lost time, in this context, also involves a relation with the aforementioned virility and (N)nature in its purest forms.

In the town of Ketchikan, the son not only searches for his father, but also for his father's lover, a now middle aged-woman living a married life with a husband who never knew of her romance with another man. With this search, the narrator seems to want to bring back together all the pieces that made his father, following the traces of the latter's desires.

The town is unavoidably depicted as a male place, a place where "Most had shotguns within reach ... Most did not feel strange and solitary at all, but hassled and trapped, limited, cheated." (Vann 2008, 210) To approach his father's old lover, the son first approaches one of these men, the husband, Bill. There is also a social aspect involved, as getting back to the town of his childhood, the narrator also shows his desire to trace a memory of his family and his ancestry, hence to state his presence in the territory. Expecting that his family's name would be remembered, he is frustrated with the realization that the locals show no recollection of their mark on the place:

"My grandfather caught a big halibut once — two hundred and fifty or sixty pounds. There was a picture of the three of us on the front page of the paper, three generations standing next to one very large fish." Bill chuckled. "Does that sound familiar at all?" I asked. "Could be," Bill said, wiping the corners of his mouth with his handkerchief. "Could be." "Well," I said. I was

unsatisfied. I felt displaced by the fact that no one really remembered us in this small town. (Vann 2008, 216)

The conversation between the two men takes place in what seems to be a salmon nursery where a multitude of smaller fish are kept. Salmon is a species of fish that swims against the current for higher water and for this purpose, to simulate its habitat, a series of tanks at different heights are linked with pipes to permit a water circulation that promotes movement. The presence of the salmon in these conditions works complementarily with the conversation between them. Again, the dialogue interposes various signifiers that maintain a discourse with the subject of virility along with the loss of power that encompasses the losing of these same symbols. Bill, “the kind of coherent drunk who told everything to anyone,” (Vann 2008, 214) shows himself as a man that has lost his self-respect, introducing himself not by his name but by his need for a job. The character shows the amount of his loss, not through a display of self-indulgence but by the account of his past self. Bill had been a lumberjack, a line of work that is connected to a significant depiction of manliness and virility although, he states, it was not a good business anymore, casting the profession to the past. While the two men observe the young salmon, anxiously throwing their bodies to the upper tanks, “solid and earnest, single-minded, pure muscle decaying yet elegant in its movement,” (Vann 2008, 215) Bill adds: “I came here when I was twenty-two. That was in 1946. I arrived on the ferry in a red Ford pickup. Even the hubcaps were painted red.” Bill shook his head. “I was pretty interesting then. I wore cowboy boots.” (Vann 2008, 216) A sort of a modern cowboy, back then, with his stallion and his boots, Bill is scorned by the narrator, who mockingly states that maybe all it takes to be a man is a pair of boots and red hubcaps. Bill’s answer points to the frailty of these symbols, stating that, “They

came with some other things, too, unfortunately. You'd have to be a drunk and have no money and marry a woman you met here, mostly because you were scared." (Vann 2008, 217) The image of the cowboy is here deconstructed perspicaciously when Bill adds alcohol, economic condition, and women, still pieces of the cowboy's constructed image, but finalizes it by adding that the reason why they seek women was not due to a need for dominance, or protection, but for fear. Thus, the character places dominance, hence virility, in the hands of women. When asked to elaborate, Bill avoids an answer, changing subject and asking Roy if he had ever seen one of those salmons jump off the tank. Again, the situation parallels the idea of the rugged individual with the courage to confront the unknown territory.

The salmon, all muscle and intent, its whole life dedicated to the movement against the current, against momentum, stays in the current nonetheless, never attempting to jump into unknown territory. If Bill asks the question in order to answer the latter's question, his logic points to a critique of the constructed image that the American individual crossing to the unknown space is ultimately a false idea. Moreover, the eventual leap of the salmon out of the tank, a movement which involves the courage to confront the other side of the tangible to face the possibility of death, creates a path to the construction of a frontier between life and death and the beyond life as another wilderness.

In fact, through various instances, the story specifically deals with virility, manhood. The subject is apparent through the story of Bill, a character whose loss of power is emphasized through his self-depiction, the job he undertook as a lumberjack, and the economic power he possessed in the past as opposed to his present condition, old, with no job (having to work even after his retirement), living in a trailer with his

bitter wife and having replaced his red pickup truck for a rusted Chevy Monza. All this is represented metaphorically in the dialogue between him and the narrator in the salmon nursery. In addition, the memory about Healy puts forward the same subject in contrast with Nature, where the “figura da virilidade ... participava de uma estética, a do sublime, em sintonia com a atracção dos românticos pela magnificência, com a experiência dos limites, com a poética do entusiasmo, da revolta e da renúncia ...” (Corbin 2020, 14). In this sense, Healy is seen as a virile figure, consequently denying the virility of his friend, Jim Fenn, the narrator’s father. The nature of man, as well as the relation with Nature, are used as objects of the discourse where virility is related with manhood, and is not only placed in confrontation through Bill’s wife but also through the mention of Kate. She is a fisherwoman the narrator had talked with just before he had left who was working on a tug out of Seattle and who had told him the story of an enormous halibut only she would approach,

It was her crews turn to fish, to pull up twelve hundred pounds of halibut to feed crews from all the tugs, and when they had pulled this great fish to the surface, they shot it six times through the head with a .45 caliber pistol before winching it from the waters onto the deck. Even shot through and drowning in the open air, it’s tiny brain pierced and huge, mythical lungs exploded, the halibut was too strong to approach. This woman, Kate, drew the lot to clean and fillet. After waiting an hour, she began with a long knife to slice [it] into thick steaks. (Vann 2008, 211)

If her position in an apparent “world of men” is posed by her profession, the fact that it was her hands that fed her crew and the adjacent tugs’, places her in the position of the protector, assuming power over her fellow male colleagues. But virility is also reflected

upon in relation with suicide. In this case, the salmon seems to be placed as a counterpart of the cowboy, as the subject who defies the law, represented by the current. Although constantly conquering an inhospitable territory, leap after leap, it ultimately does not defy the space beyond its horizon. In this sense, a leap beyond the walls of the tank would be seen as the ultimate act of transgression, being the space beyond those walls the ultimate unknown, thus death.

In the last story, “The Higher Blue” (Vann 2008, 229-240) the narrator goes back to his past, fantasizing a relationship between a teenager and his father, one that never took place. Then the relationship between a father and a son, alternates between the present and the past, where the father seems to be depicted not quite as an adult, both by the mother and the narrator. In this sense, the humanization of the character entails the reinforcement of the idea that this subject is emasculated in the face of the women in his life. This is apparent in his preoccupation with buying a gift for his current girlfriend, a matter that made him nervous because “no gift meant no girlfriend, no girlfriend meant landing once again like minestrone, landing once again like that meant a lifetime of guilt, shame, and general self-hatred ...” (Vann 2008, 235). Faced with himself, the father-to-be was powerless, a feature that is detailed as follows:

The bachelor, prefiguring my existence, was living on his own, measuring out his life by soup can and frozen waffle carton. Were it not for the persistence of habit and a metal gravy bowl never washed but used over and over, kept warm on the stove, life as I know it might never have begun. Hunched and dim-sighted, bent over tomes of anatomy, periodontics, endodontics, and the other dental sciences, clenching a jaw that was understood but underused, locked in realms of fluorescence and linoleum, dreaming only of sunny wilderness, of rod and gun and the clomping of trail-worn boots, this creature inspired pity in

a woman who herself had no domestic talents but had the sense, at least, to eat out occasionally. “I bought him one dinner at a Chinese restaurant, served him one cup of coffee and a bowl of mint-chip ice cream at my apartment, and he was mine,” my mother told me. The creature began to walk upright, lose his pallor, see occasionally the light of day, sample rich foods from many lands, and dream of things softer and more varied than his own leathery boots. The creature was given a name. He was called Honey. “The first two years were good. Then he took me for granted. I gave him a life, and he was so pleased, he started giving it to others ... The thing called Honey, which had learned to walk, see, sample, and dream, walked farther, saw more, sampled extravagantly, then dreamed about it, over and over. The thing was told to stop walking, but the thing kept walking. The thing became inflated and soared over the city, lighter than air. “I gave him a can opener the day I divorced him,” my mother said. “He didn’t know what it was for ... (Vann 2008, 233)

Because of his ex-wife, the father had been given the privilege of growing into a man. Before he had met her he was no more than a creature she had taught to walk upright and to whom she had shown a world more varied than the fantasy of a “sunny wilderness.” The statement attests to a premise of evolution by taking him out of the wilderness and shown him how to walk upright. In addition, the idea of the attainment of knowledge here brought forward by the premise of evolution relates to the idea of sin or even to the Promethean problematic of the attainment of knowledge expressed by the statement: “The thing was told to stop walking, but the thing kept walking.” (Vann 2008, 233) In relation to the aspect of creation, in this case Eve creates Adam, and it is Adam that eats the forbidden fruit. The positions of Civilization Vs Wilderness are also explained in the contrast between woman and man as the latter is here shown to be a product of the wild environment, tamed by civilization, or the woman.

Even after his death, the husband is brought back to the woman who had taken care of him and whose words suggest a perpetuation of the dominance of the woman over the father:

Currently the father is a small slab of granite planted near my mother's cottage, in a field of wild grass and ice plant by the sea. Mother likes to have him near and claims their conversations have improved. "I don't have to be angry anymore," she says. "I can feel sorry for him now and do the old-woman-rich-with-memories-and-longing routine. Though occasionally I give it a rest." (Vann 2008, 237)

Although this story ends in the present, with the father shown as no more a person but a place of rest, there is a strong suggestion of his presence at a different level, not only by the simple fact that the memory of his existence permeates the thoughts and even lives of these characters, but also by the statement that "sometimes, when among the upper currents I catch the hint of a hopeful, insistent flapping, I almost imagine the father has come finally to life." (237) This suggests that, in life, the father had never really lived and poses him as finally alive as a part of Nature. The story seems to discuss suicide through the light of not death but of a sort of a becoming that involves the hero as an entity whose nature becomes Nature.

In *Caribou Island* (2011), the subject of virility is brought forward through the depiction of the four couples present in the novel, and whose relations show different aspects of this trait. Again, the novel fictionalizes Jim Fenn, this time living with his fiancée, Rhoda, both living in her hometown, near Caribou Island, on the Kenai Peninsula, Alaska. In real life, Vann's father second wife had been through her parents' case of murder-suicide. In this case, Gary and Irene, Rhoda's parents, seem to be drawn

from the latter, but also, as the author states, “Irene is me, basically. I had those terrible headaches, I have some of those views of men that she has of Gary, and her frustrations about his vacancy and his impatience, and yet I’m also Gary. But I felt close to her struggle.” (Roper 2011)

In this sense, since Irene is the suicidal character in this novel, the author repeats the pattern of placing himself inside the suicidal’s mind, seemingly as an attempt to humanize it. Curiously, this trait goes against what Critchley states, drawing from Freud: “... in order to kill ourselves we have to turn ourselves into objects. More precisely, we have to turn ourselves into objects that we hate.” (2015, 48) As the statement points out to the objectification of the suicidal, the author seems to be focused on bringing the suicide into the realm of the humanized.

As previously mentioned, four couples are introduced in the novel, being them Gary and Irene, a middle-aged, newly-retired couple, their children, Rhoda and Mark, the first engaged and the second married, respectively to Jim and Karen, and Carl and Monique, both tourists to the place. The couples’ dynamics explore the subject of virility as well as genderization. While Irene is haunted by the thought of having given her life away for the fantasies of her estranged husband, Rhoda anxiously tries to find a stable ground within the promise of a marriage with a successful orthodontist (Jim), who in turn is constantly trying to escape the grapples of a married life. Mark, a fisherman, and Karen, a waitress, lead a life in harmony and carelessness, as long as the marijuana does not end. Carl, a student, is a passive observer of his girlfriend Monique, a woman whose interest in him is no more than the possibility of her assertion of power over another man. The difference between the two is shown through their contrasting personalities. While Carl is too insecure, Monique is very much of the opposite:

“Monique walked out from the guest room, with Carl following behind. She was tall and kind of glamorous ... Carl was out of his league, though, insecure and hopeless” (Vann 2011, 108). “[A]cting like she owned the world ...” (Vann 2011, 109), Monique treats her partner, Carl, like a child, as is shown through the following dialogue: “... Shiraz, please, Monique said. And just some juice or water for Carl. He doesn't drink. Thanks, Monique, Carl said. What? You don't drink. Yeah, but I'm not six years old. Now's not the time to make a stand for your manhood.” (Vann 2011, 108) Not only she embodies the powerful member in her relationship with Carl, but she also displays her predatory character in her relationship with Jim Fenn:

I've never been paid for sex, Monique said. The idea of being paid is kind of turning me on. I think I might do things I wouldn't otherwise do, too, and that turns me on even more.

Money? Jim asked.

Yeah, money. That'll make it interesting, I think. It has to be a decent amount, though. Go get five thousand in hundreds. That will get me through the afternoon, I think.

... I think we'll start today by parading you around in a dog collar. You're going to crawl around and beg before I let you start paying me. Don't come back without a dog collar.

What the fuck?

Fine, she said. I'm getting dressed. And she walked back into the bedroom.

What's happening here? Jim asked.

I'm getting dressed, Monique said. Then were driving to the bank...

... I'm telling Rhoda everything, she said.

... She looked up and smiled at him. Fists, she said. Are you thinking of hitting me? Would it make you feel better to fight? She stood up, smiling bigger now, and took a couple steps forward then kicked him, too fast for him to do anything about it. Her long leg out straight, her boot in his stomach, and he was falling backward into the hallway. He curled up and couldn't breathe.

She stepped over him. I'll be in the car. (Vann 2011, 143)

In contrast, Jim and Rhoda's relationship is marked by her need for a partner and his reluctance to commit. In his view, only faith, fame or power could justify a meaningful life, and a life of commitment, involving a career, a wife and children would only distance the individual from a purposeful existence, arguably one which would make mortality less definite.

The question, really, was what his life was about. He didn't believe in God, and he wasn't in the right field to become famous or powerful. Those were the three biggies: faith, fame, and power. They could justify a life, perhaps, or at least make you think your life meant something. All the crap about being a good guy, treating people well, and spending time with family was only crap because it had nothing to anchor it. There was no cosmic scorecard. Having kids seemed to work for some people, but not really. They were lying, because they'd lost their lives and it was too late. And money, by itself, didn't mean anything. So all that was left was sex, and money could help with that. (Vann 2011, 161)

Jim excludes himself from a chance of purpose through what he identifies as "the three biggies," since faith and fame are out of his prospects and power is connected to money. Sex, in this case, even if not stated as such, comes as another form of power through the aspect of virility, one aspect that Corbin connects also with Nature, as stated previously. On the other hand, the way he connects to sex, as a sort of surrendering to the carnal aspects of life, is evocative of the way Clamence, in *La Chute*, deals with what he feels is an absurd life. In this sense, Jim is not only questioning commitment in the light of

the absurdity of life but he is also surrendering to this same absurdity through a surrendering to a life of vice.

As Jim's connection with Rhoda is mostly due to the fact that she "was safe, though, and available," (Vann 2011, 159) Rhoda is characterized as being more insecure about his feelings towards her, asking him: "Am I accidental and unchosen? ... Is it just because I'm here, and available? No. I love you. You know that. Rhoda propped up and looked into his eyes. Really? she asked. Can you promise me that?" (Vann 2011, 176). Moreover, in contrast with Jim's idea of success, Rhoda feels fulfilled with the prospect of marriage and living in the place she was born, in her dream house, both symbols of stability. In this sense, not only her ambitions are not too far from her mother's but also Jim is not very different from Gary, since both men seek for safety through the women they chose to partner with, a trait that is common with Bill's when discussing the need of men needing women, mostly because they were scared.

While in the Carl-Monique relationship, power is asserted by the woman, in opposition to the relationship between Rhoda and Jim, Mark and Karen seem to be careless about their positions in the relational context, in fact, they don't seem to be interested in any sort of commitment. Mark works seasonally as a fisherman and is mostly unemployed when out of the fishing season while Karen is a waitress for the local coffee shop. Both sluggish and unambitious, they concentrate their lives on having menial jobs who can provide them just enough for paying for their leisure, which consists mostly on hanging out with friends and doing drugs. As Mark states: "No need for change, he said, when you got something good" (Vann 2011, 56). Showing a careless, almost childlike character, they seem to represent what Vann identifies as "the kids ... in Alaska, who were already doing drugs at thirteen." (Vann 2008, 10) This

carelessness seems to also extend to their sexual relationship, one that partakes with an overall need for instant gratification, at any cost, stifling any chance of a deeper connection.

Karen went semi-catatonic, her usual. She had been raised on much weaker pot, and the Alaskan stuff hit her hard. So Mark felt free to check out Monique as much as he liked. She was tall and had short dark hair in a kind of European-looking bob, like the woman who modeled for Clinique. This got Mark hard, the fact that this woman beside him, her nipples hard and skin deserving of comparisons to alabaster and marble and such, looked like a model. He reached out to touch her neck. (Vann 2011, 16)

Not only their detachment from a responsible life is noticeable through their relationship and the choices they made in the professional environment, but it also extends to other people's feelings and problems, even when it comes to their own family:

Karen laughed. Mark swooped over for a kiss and a quick grab.

Rhoda picked up her chair and sat again. I hate to interrupt the love fest, and I'm sure you're both fine with just doing it on the floor right in front of me, but I actually came here for a reason.

Speak your pain, Sister Rhoda, Mark said, and Karen giggled.

Rhoda ignored this. Mom is in a lot of pain, and Dad doesn't believe there's anything wrong, because the X ray didn't show anything.

Hm, Mark said.

What I'm asking is that you go by a few times a day and check on Mom. You live practically next door. I'm forty minutes away.

I'd love to, but Im working. Out again tomorrow and the next day. And Karen's working, too.

Okay, Rhoda said. Forget it, then.

I want to help, but I have to work.

Okay, okay, Rhoda said. I understand. You've been an unreliable fuck all your life.

Feel the love, Mark said.

Wanna get high? Karen asked. (Vann 2011, 56-57)

As Mark's personality is marked by a childish behavior that encompasses every aspect of his life, so his display of virility is noticeable through the social interaction with his friends, a childlike sort of display of manhood that is criticized by his sister, Rhoda: "She waited through another fifteen minutes of crude gestures and obscenities, doughnuts and collisions, the life of the penis." (Vann 2011, 226). On the other hand, not only Karen seems to act the same, but she also shows signs of psychological damage, an aspect that becomes noticeable in the following passage:

Karen ... mumbled to herself. Whisperings and head jerks, low grumbles, aha expressions, the whole bit, like a full conversation with another person. Carl sitting in the seat beside her, only a few feet away, completely ignored. He wondered whether she was on something, or damaged in some way. He hadn't noticed this about her before. But he didn't want to interrupt. (Vann 2011, 164)

Although apparently happy with the simple life they lead, they also seem to be defeated by the environment they have grown up in, just as it happens in the story "Ketchikan," where the characters are also trapped, limited and cheated.

In the case of Gary and Irene, it becomes clear that the outwardly stable relationship in the narrative is actually no relationship at all. Gary is seen as responsible for having created a sort of relationship that was founded by the necessity of a distancing from society, and that this same distancing has contaminated their personal life. In this case, as their children have grown into adulthood and were withdrawn from

the domestic environment of the family house, the parents' life together has been overtaken by the prevailing silence and distance between them. Added to this, Gary's dream of a life away from civilization has grown into something Irene observes as his way of finally abandoning her:

Gary had seemed so promising. A doctoral student, bright enough to get into Berkeley ... Alaska was just an idea. A year off from school, a little break so he could get some distance on his dissertation, some needed perspective. They would go to the frontier, soak up the wilderness. She hadn't quite believed they would really go. But Gary was running away. That's what she hadn't understood. He never had any intention of returning to California. (Vann 2011, 88)

Feeling somehow manipulated into living her partner's life and consequently being deprived of her own choices, Irene ultimately asserts power over her life by putting an end to it. However, if the subject of suicide is here put forward, Irene's story also extends to the subject of heredity:

My mother was not real. She was an early dream, a hope. She was a place. Snowy, like here, and cold. A wooden house on a hill above a river. An overcast day, the old white paint of the buildings made brighter somehow by the trapped light, and I was coming home from school. Ten years old, walking by myself, walking through dirty patches of snow in the yard, walking up to the narrow porch. I can't remember how my thoughts went then, can't remember who I was or what I felt like. All of that is gone, erased. I opened our front door and found my mother hanging from the rafters. (Vann 2011, 1)

The opening lines of *Caribou Island* start with Irene's childhood memory of her own mother and how she had died. A story she is passing down to her own daughter, situating their history in the realm of time by the sharing of memories. Irene's life story and her relationship with death becoming part of a legacy passed down through generations. Instead of being defined by her human characteristics, Irene's mother is observed as a place or a feature of Nature as a way to enhance her daughter's feelings about motherhood. Being an orphan from an early age, Irene's memories of her own mother are scarce and marked by the violence of her death, thus she fictionalizes her as a feature of Nature. In *Caribou Island*, not only this natural environment is the place where Irene chooses to die the same way her mother has died, it is also the place where she uses her virile character over her husband.

The couple's relationship with hunting is articulated with Gary's fantasy of ancient times, mostly connected, with his studies: "For Gary, this idea was Scandinavian, connecting to his studies, to *Beowulf* and "The Seafarer," a warrior society crossing the whale road into fjords in a new land, founding small inbred fishing villages" (Vann 2011, 89). This is the context of a great part of their lives. Thus, the only weapons they use for hunting are non-firing weapons, specifically the bow and arrow. This weapon gains a significant value when articulated with the aforementioned power attributed to the teeth of the female vampire penetrating Harker's neck in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, as Cristopher Craft mentions: "... virile Jonathan Harker enjoys a 'feminine' passivity and awaits a delicious penetration from a woman whose demonism is figured as the power to penetrate" (1984, 109). In this case, Irene's weapon of choice for the killing of her husband can be seen the same way. By penetrating him with an arrow,

Irene is also asserting her virile power over the man under which she has always been a passive figure.

Halibut on the Moon (2019) is a novel about the last days of a man suffering from severe depression. In this case, Jim Fenn flies from Alaska to San Francisco, the place he grew up in, for an appointment with his therapist and a brief visit to his parents and children. Having already spoken up about his intentions to commit suicide to his family, Jim is, by doctor's orders, constantly accompanied by his younger brother Gary, a character that is his opposite. In this case, there is a deep relation with the halibut, that works as a metaphor for the protagonist's feelings. Alaska is seen as a resting place for a character whose anxiety is a constant during the whole of his stay in the civilized space of San Francisco. The novel deals, using the subjects of depression and suicide, with the dichotomy between Civilization and Wilderness, as well as with the frontier within an innovative context. There is a comparison between the West, exemplified by California, and the Last Frontier, embodied by Alaska, but there is also a prevalent idea about life and death as frontiers placed within both places. In this sense, Alaska, the last stronghold of the frontier thesis, is also the place where there is an imagined frontier articulated with death. California, in this context, is a place where life itself is ridiculed and given the features of a prison. A place where Jim feels trapped in the social and familial environment that surrounds him.

In this novel, specifically, a necessity for virile validation through the use of guns and the domination of the wild environment becomes noticeable. The depressed Jim engages in a personal counting of all the animals he had killed throughout his life, a reflection he seems to start in order to distract his mind from self-indulgent thoughts. Soon both his brother, Gary, and his close friend, John Lampson, whom he went to visit,

engage in the same activity in what shows to be an easy and somewhat eager display of social interaction, but also Jim's need to understand his life:

Thousands of things he's killed. All that walks or flies or swims. He should count, maybe even write it down. ... He begins at the top. Things I have killed: Gray squirrels. He should note how many. But so hard to guess. A hundred? ... "So I have gray squirrels and ground squirrels so far, estimated at two hundred gray and a hundred ground." ... "Okay. A little weird to list bears after squirrels, but whatever. I only killed brown bears, no black or polar, so that's easy. And I know it was only three. How many moose though?" "About ten?" "Maybe just list all the species first," John says. "Then fill in the numbers later." ... "So you got mountain goats," Gary says. "And Dall rams. Caribou, wolverine." "Don't mix families," John says. "Once you say caribou, we should do all the deer." "Okay," Jim says. "Elk, mule deer, white-tails, antelope, along with caribou." "Cats next," John says. "You got a lynx, just one, right?" ... "Bobcat," Jim says. "Mountain lion. And dogs next. Coyote, timber wolf, red fox, stray dogs." "Rabbits and jackrabbits," ... "Mallard, wood, blue, canvas-back, bufflehead, ruddy, that's about all we wanted to shoot." "But we shot others anyway." "Yeah, I guess add wigeons, teals, mergansers, and who knows what else." "Move on to geese," John says. "Snow geese, Canadian, and you shot emperors up on Adak, right?" ... "Yeah. And sea lions, seals, and found a dead otter. Not sure whether that counts. If there's such a thing as karma, I don't know what kind of solution they'll come up with for me. No bug is low enough." "We haven't even started on the fish," Gary says. "And you've still got so many birds: quail, doves, pheasant, grouse, turkeys, all the blue and scrub jays, flickers, random songbirds. And snakes, lizards, gophers, moles, bats, insects, maybe other things too. Ever shoot a worm?" Jim's list is already too long. (Vann 2019, 207-209)

Not only the three men's interaction is possible through a resource to memory that is only mediated by killing, thus validating their masculinity through the power they

manifest over the wild environment, but they also seem to reflect on how the amount of killing adds up to the meaning of their lives, particularly in Jim's case.

Mediated by this reflection on power through the taking of the lives of animals, Jim's real numbers is the sum of his failures, which involve women, progeny and money.

He lays his forehead on the desk. "I don't know why I'm doing this," he says. "I can't remember now why I thought it would matter." "To take account of your life," John says. "To see how it all adds up." "But it doesn't equal anything. Adding or subtracting a hundred birds or squirrels has no effect." "Did you think it would?" Gary asks. "Yeah, I did. But only a few numbers matter. Two divorces. Two kids. Two careers. Three hundred sixty-five owed to the IRS. Two nights here so far, long nights. Two men for Rhoda, and I'm not the one. Subtracted. One shot. One empty house waiting. One life and then none." (Vann 2019, 210)

In the end, Jim mentions one shot, arguably saying that from all the shots he had fired in his life, from all the victims he had made, only one shot and one victim mattered, and that was himself.

Since suicide had a prominent part in the author's life there is also a history of violence in his family through the permanent relation with hunting and firearms. In his works, particularly in the ones under discussion, there is an emphasis on the use of weapons as a mediation of education, virility, and ultimately the display of love. Moreover, these same weapons are instrumental to the foundation of the individuals' character as well as the sustainers of their mark on the territory that surrounds them. Their relation with Nature and the Wilderness is shown to be a necessary sustainer of purpose that is facilitated through an ideology of dominance and mastery over the

natural space. This dominance not only is shown in relation to the environment, but also in the relation with others through a display of virility, which, in most cases but not all, is shown as a trait of manliness.

For the author, "... firearms were a mark of manhood — until the day they became a symbol of tragedy." (Vann 2017) Growing up, firearms were familiar to him since a very young age, since the tradition had determined that manhood was a thing to be noticed and the growing up ceremonies, more than commemorating the different ages, were marked through the passing down of guns, that grew in size and power to accommodate their new owner. A Pellet gun at age 7, a low caliber gun at age 8, until, by his ninth birthday

[a].30-30 Winchester lever-action carbine, the rifle used in all the westerns, [his father going] down on one knee when he presented it ... holding it in both hands, as if it were a ceremonial sword. "This is the rifle I learned on," he said. "This is what we pass down through the family. The rifle I hunted with when I was a boy, the rifle I shot my first buck with, the rifle you'll shoot your first buck with. It's a good gun, an honest gun, with only a peep sight, no scope. You won't be shooting long range, and you'll need to hit the buck behind the shoulder." (Vann 2017)

As previously discussed, the gun culture in America is invariably related with gender and with male prevalence as a mediator of power not only over the environment, but also in relation to women, as these ceremonials never happened with women growing up. While Vann went through these rituals, his younger sister was never a part of it.

In the author's childhood memories there is a noticeable prevalence of these symbols as a mark of what is expected of males, and even within the depiction of the

weapon of choice or the selected type of hunting, there is a prevalence of these expected symbols. In the case of the 30.30 Winchester, a rifle passed down as if someone is being knighted, the father speaks of it as the most important teaching passed down across generations in his family. The rifle entails a model of character — honesty; an idea of twisted nobility — facing matters at close range, but from the back, “... behind the shoulder;” meant to harm only bucks, male deer, never a doe, never a fawn.

His father was fairly detached, characterized with a personality that denounced severe depression, as it becomes clear in *Halibut on the Moon*, as well as a set of behavioral characteristics that did not offer any sense of protection to a child, guns and hunting seeming to offer all the vocabulary he needed, or should we say, the only way he knew how to educate his son. This vocabulary down to the opposition between the American and the savage. The perspective of the American as the colonist, the civilized, the predator, the man, as opposed to the savage, the buck, the wild animal or the untamed space — wilderness — or even, going back to D’Eaubonne’s perspective, the woman.⁸ Moreover, as the prey of choice during the family hunting was the buck, therefore the deer, it is also curious to relate this aspect with the fact that the word wilderness derives from the Old English “wild deor” added to the suffix: “ness”, hence wild deer + ness, meaning “land inhabited by wild animals.” Thus, the hunting of the deer is evocative of the hunting — taming — of wilderness.

Unable to ascertain control over his own life, Vann’s father seemed to find some sense of control within the context of hunting, where his moral standards, and the power he held in his hands were manifested through something other than human qualities. Having failed his ideology of man as a provider and protector of the family, the father

8. As Carolyn Merchant states in the foreword to Françoise D’Eaubonne’s *Feminism or Death*, “It was the male system, not capitalism or socialism, that gave men the power to sow both the earth (fertility) and women (fecundity).” (2022)

became the true menace. As an attempt of self-reconstruction he resorted to the moral standards he was educated with, and that were manifest in the imagined morality of a gun, thus using the vocabulary he was most intimate with and letting a weapon speak for himself.

After his father's suicide, the author stopped hunting and eventually sold all his father's guns, even though, as he states, "once I sold them, I was surprised by the terrible feeling I had, like I had sold off a part of my father. I had so little of him left." (Vann 2017) This quote reinforces the idea that his relationship with his father was, more than anything else, mediated by the hunting environment and the use of firearms, since firearms were an extension of his father. Writing then comes as a way not only to keep his father's figure alive, but also allows the author to bring his feelings about their relationship beyond what should be noted as an incessant ideology of violence. As the author states in *Legend of a Suicide*,

After my father killed himself, my sister felt a drop on her cheek on a cloudless day and knew that it was his way of saying good-bye to her. My mother saw him vividly in a dream, again saying good-bye. But nothing happened for me. Just a void. So this book is my attempt to reach him again, to bring him back to life. (Vann 2008, 272)

In this sense, writing functions as a sort of therapy, which is in accordance to works on the matter, such as Michael White's and David Epston's, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*, as stated:

What do persons do with ... experience in order to give it meaning and to make sense out of their lives? How is lived experience given expression? ...

social scientists embracing the text analogy responded by arguing that, in order to make sense of our lives and to express ourselves, experience must be “storied” and it is this storying that determines the meaning ascribed to experience. (1991, 9-10)

His father’s suicide left the young Vann in a state of violent stupor. As the author states: “I don't think I'll ever entirely understand that year. I told everyone my father died of cancer. I didn't have a real conversation with anyone about it. Instead, I shot things. A year of the most basic brutality, a year I'm lucky to have escaped from without hurting anyone.” (2017) There is not only a certain shame regarding his father’s ultimate action, that leads him to avoid saying the truth, telling others that his father has died of cancer, but also an inherent rage towards what had happened. It is that rage that ultimately leads him to use his father’s gun not only to shoot objects, but also to have people in the crossairs. This way the young Vann seems to feel close to his dead father, using the most open language device that they had while he evaluates the possibility of power over life and death, and how thin is the line between both. Verbal language is here ineffective as opposed to the language of guns, the same guns that are the total mediators of control not only of self but also of external factors. This transference of language and power becomes the defining character of the author’s writing, with a special incidence in the three referenced works. As Foucault explains, power exists always in the relation between two parts as also “communicating is always a certain way of acting upon another person or persons,” (2000, 337) and in this case David Vann’s writing not only carries on the idea of power or control as it is balanced from one character to another, but also plays with the notion of communication whether formulated through speech or through the use of guns.

Although there is this open discourse about the factual in the author's life, a characteristic that may seem quite invasive insofar as it almost blurs the intrinsic value of the works, one should never forget the fact that these are works of fiction that came to life due to the author's need to process the violent death of his father. Writing comes to the author as a coping mechanism for an occurrence that is extremely hard to convey and that is here structured and made possible in its various forms through the resource of fiction. In other words, it is possible to understand that a brutally realistic event such as the suicide of his father had to be fictionalized to be made intelligible. Here, in a way, fiction makes nonfiction plausible.

Through fiction, in Vann's work, there is a prevalence of symbols that tend to revolve around family relations whose harmony is commonly shown as being held by extremely thin lines that once broken are immediately shown in its most violent manifestations. Family is presented as a microcosms of existence as well as a reminder of the boundaries between life and death, construction and destruction, chaos and cosmos, the latter "... an aesthetic device for organizing spatial relationships, cosmos was seen as the opposite of chaos, a figure of order and harmony and the sum total of human experience." (Scott 2021, 92) Conversely, "[w]ilderness had once been the antithesis of all that was orderly and good -it had been the darkness, one might say, on the far side of the garden wall ..." (Cronon 1996, 9) — thus, chaos — "and yet now it was frequently likened to Eden itself" (9) — cosmos. As human nature is constantly defied and called upon in the narrative, the natural environment, or descriptive images of the space around the characters, is used as a form of driving the reader closer to their presumed interior monologues and feelings. The bareness of a landscape or the

harshness of the weather, among other examples, are evocative of the individual's inherent characteristics.

As there is a prevalence of a description of the natural environment as a strategy for the deepening of the characters' inherent complexities, there is also a repetition of other symbols namely through descriptions of animals or inanimate objects both to trace the characters' feelings or to evoke images of inevitability. In this regard it is important to illustrate some of these examples.

On fish

Apart from hunting, David Vann's father, Jim Vann, also used to fish, an activity the author has also maintained over the years up to present times. In the author's narratives, the wilderness both terrestrial and aquatic is not only a place of return to simpler times but also a field of comparison with individuals and society. The abundance of sea life, for instance, is frequently used as a way to make the author establish these connections, since specific species of fish deeply connect with human characteristics and representations. Apart from using sea life as a mirror for complex ideas and feelings, so is the body of water, its density and its gravitational qualities used to evoke these same human complexities. In this sense, if the lightness and temperature of the water are purposeful ideas, so is its pressure. Moreover, water is seen as a place of birth and a premise of evolution. Relating the moment of birth, the narrator in "Ichthyology" states that

She was certain, with what my father always described as an animal, instinctive fear, that the moment I was borne aloft, I would perish. She placed me in an ordinary white bathtub filled with cold water, and there I survived. Flourished, even. My orange, blotchy skin gradually calmed to a healthy baby pink, my limbs unlocked, and I flailed my legs in the waters until she lifted me out and we both slept. (Vann 2008, 1-2)

Concurrently, in the same story, land and even evolution are observed negatively:

I played on my knees on the weathered boards of the dock, and once saw a terrifying creature crawl from a rusty tin can that had been knocked on its side. Repulsed by those barbarous legs, I howled and went over backward into the water. I was fished out soon enough, and thrown in a hot shower, but I didn't forget what I had seen. No one had told me about lizards — I honestly never had dreamed of reptiles — but on first sight I knew they were a step in the wrong direction. (Vann 2008, 3)

In this passage, not only the earth is felt as malevolent, a place of creatures developing in the wrong direction, but also the water is seen as a safe place, where the threatened child goes back into to escape the lizard. But as water can be observed as an escape — freedom — it can also represent an enclosure under which an enormous pressure the individual is trapped.

With a prevalence in *Legend of a Suicide* and *Halibut on the Moon*, but also in other works not here taken into consideration, such as *Aquarium* (2015), there is a recourse to fish as a form of depicting the characters' feelings. In the latter, Caitlin, a twelve-year-old estranged from the social world, spends her time after school in the public aquarium, where she finds within the different types of fish she observes, not only a parallel to

society and social interactions but also a recognition of herself within this same society.

This aspect is noticeable also in “Ichtiology,” where the child-narrator, observes a fish tank stating that

Everything in human life was to be found in that tank. Yellow-and-black angelfish floated delicately by, all glamour and glitz, while behind them trailed their waste in streamers. Suckers at the bottom of the tank ate this waste, spat it out in disgust, and roved on, still hungry. (Vann 2008, 7)

Still observing it, he experiences a first recognition of self

I pressed my hands and face close to the glass and gazed into the mute black core of one of those silvery eyes. I felt as if I, too, were floating, gently rocking, oddly out of place, and in that flicker of a moment I caught myself feeling the rocking and, perceiving myself perceiving, realized that I was I. (Vann 2008, 5)

This captive and irrational fish, ignorant of the vastness of the world and the insignificance of their setting, become an element of the first consciousness of self in the child. Not only fish are used to establish a parallel between internal factors, but also aspects of society. In the novel *Halibut on the Moon*, the halibut is a fish whose physical description is evocative of a sustainer of great amounts of pressure:

Just think of all the other halibut who lay flat on the bottom of the ocean all their lives and died there in a place far more frightening than the moon,

hundreds of feet down under colossal pressure, the pressure of having a mountain stacked on top of you, and no light, and so cold ... (Vann 2019, 67)

The protagonist, Jim, the already mentioned suicidal character suffering from depression, fantasizes about astronauts taking a halibut to the moon, stating that the fish would be the perfect astronaut. In his view, it is a flat fish living at the bottom of the ocean, and for that reason used to sustaining the pressure of a whole world over it, and thus it would support any kind of pressure while going to the moon. The halibut is used to establish a parallel with the character's depression and the constant pressure he feels from the world around him. Jim also fantasizes about liberation from what he feels is a constant heaviness, through the image of the halibut being freed from gravity, when he would find final peace, even when faced with the fact that this peace represented death, as the character also states:

They didn't mean for it to survive. It was supposed to have one beautiful flight, is all. That's all any of us are meant to have. None of us survive ... It's not missing oxygen yet, has just been immersed, healthy and strong and now absolutely free ... It sees only emptiness above, undistracted ... (Vann 2019, 67)

Since the novel depicts Jim's last days before his suicide, a decision he has made clear to his brother and his therapist, it is noticeable throughout his story about the halibut that there is in Jim a desire to be freed of depression and the pressure of his corporeal self. He confirms this by stating that his body and its heaviness is unrecognizable to himself. "This is not my body." (Vann 2019, 23) While this character views death as an escape from a pressure metaphorically expressed in the water, Jim, in "Sukkwan Island"

(Vann 2008), dies an entrapping death by choking and drowning, his body eventually being filled with the pressure of the ocean bringing him down.

Not only the halibut can be seen as Jim's counterpart in *Halibut on the Moon*, but also the salmon, as it was mentioned before, serves to establish connections with characters. The most significant relation with the salmon is with the mythicized figure of the rugged individualist and his association with the frontier principles, present throughout in *Legend of a Suicide*, but particularly in the main story, "Sukkwan Island". The setting is articulated beyond the frontier represented by the strength of the current that continuously pushes the salmon away from its destination and is observed as the place beyond the current, out of the view of the salmon. For Bill it is pointless to live against the current if the individual never accomplishes on going beyond what is just in front of him, into the actual wilderness. In contrast to the impetus of dominance associated with the notion of rugged individualism, "[w]ilderness is the place where, symbolically at least, we try to withhold our power to dominate." (Cronon 1996, 23)

The frontier and wilderness representations acquire another level of significance when articulated with death. The leap of the salmon out of the tank ultimately results in its loss of control, so it would come to its demise. Thus, the suicides of Vann's protagonists may be seen not as an escape from life but, in fact, a courageous act of asserting their power into going into the wilderness, here represented by death, and also the ultimate frontier, in a sort of action ruled by momentum.

On momentum

Momentum. That's the most important word in our lives. We have to follow momentum, even if we know what's coming isn't good. You can't fight it.

Like trying to swim upriver. If you struggle, you're faced the wrong way and see even less of what's coming (Vann 2019, 17)

Though the word can be used in other contexts, momentum is evocative of a force that is uncontrolled by human efforts. In physics, momentum is the product of the mass and velocity of an object. It is not a common word, but among the three works under discussion, there is eighteen entries. The insistent repetition of a word such as this could be ascribed to an aesthetic preference, the mere savoring of a sequence of letters ordered to compose a word perfectly balanced between vowels and consonants, not too hard, not too vibrant, and evocative of moment, one spent in tranquility, attuned to its phonetic formulation. An entire essay could be written on the word momentum. For the task at hand, it seems the reason for this insistence owes more to physics than to the field of aesthetics.

Heavily marked by the occurrences in their lives and the weight of history that sets upon their backs, like the pressure on the halibut, Vann's characters live with trauma. They are victims of specific characteristics of their personal lives as well as the common characteristics of human life. Inherent in the author's narratives is the clear notion that life is trauma and that trauma is the very physics of these characters as they move through it as inanimately as any other part of the scenery that surrounds them. This is the logic that lets the reader understand the very scenery as another character, and both characters and the space around them as equals.

In this sense, the author uses the word either in relation to an object: "Rhoda's beaten-up Datsun B210 didn't belong off pavement. She was careful to keep momentum up hills but could feel her tires slipping in the mud," (Vann 2011, 11) or objectifying the characters as victims of the involuntary movement — momentum of their lives:

The momentum of who she had become with Gary, the momentum of who she had become in Alaska, the momentum that made it somehow impossible to just stop right now and go back to the house. How had that happened? (Vann 2011, 269)

In what concerns movement and direction, there is no apparent difference between the “beaten-up Datsun and the beaten-up subject. Referring to the word, it seems the author depicts his characters as if they were devoid of choice and that their plans have been obstructed by life in motion, like a wave over which they had no control. In *Halibut on the Moon*, the author comes even closer to this notion as Jim speaks of momentum, as a force over which nothing animate or inanimate has control, whose only design is to set things in motion and against which it is meaningless to fight, as mentioned above.

Sisyphus rolls an immense rock uphill, his labor is immense, and the pressure on his body more than any human body could take. The force he takes from himself is, proportionally, the force that makes the rock move uphill. The strength one body loses is the strength another gains. In the end, the strength he is completely drained of is the one used to feed the momentum of the rock downhill. As was previously discussed, Sisyphus, his body armed with the power of will, having tricked death itself, is faced with the eternal task of being, somewhat mechanized for the purpose of the absurd circularity of action-reaction. Thus, the force he masters is a mere sustenance for purposelessness. It is important to remember that his punishment, more than rolling a rock uphill, is to live eternally, that his labor is no more about mass, weight and velocity than it is about time. The sadistic irony is in furnishing Sisyphus with a life devoid of things to be lived for, thus turning life into labor. The captive faces a choice, he can

either rebel and deny his labor, refuse life, or accept the absurdity of his condition, stop swimming upriver, start being the rock.

In this context, and to a certain extent, Vann's characters seem to be somewhat divided into these two categories: the heroes of the absurd and the rebels, or the Sisyphuses and the Rocks. Momentum being mass, velocity, pressure, time, a hill, and life. In the author's view, it seems not only the scenery is as alive as the characters, but also everything is part of a scenery, humbled at the face of a purpose that does not relate to characters. The pervasive ideology here about the extended use of the idea of momentum is that of absolute powerlessness. And in this sense, conveying the idea of power here contextualized as self-termination, in Vann's narratives, the gun "... brings the pieces back together. It's like a power to bend time and event, the only thing that can fight momentum." (Vann 2019, 179)

In "Sukkwan Island" Jim drives an inflatable boat through an inlet among the various small islands on the coast of the Pacific Ocean. With him he carries his dead son, talks to him as if he was alive, refusing to exclude him from life, now that his son has finally spoken up, through suicide. When he was thirteen years old, David Vann's father asked him to live with him for a year in his newly bought house in Fairbanks, Alaska. As stated, young Vann had "wanted to spend time with him, but ... was afraid of his despair. ... [he] wanted badly to say yes, but ... could feel a terrible momentum to what [his] life would become in Alaska." (Vann 2017) Two weeks later his father killed himself. "Sukkwan Island", then, becomes an exercise about what would have happened had the son said yes to the father's invitation. An exercise on the possibility of the son saving the father. If, in the first part of the novella, the narrator watches the father through the eyes of the son, in the second part, after the son shoots himself in the head,

the father seems as inanimate a body as the dead son he drags, moving in a stream of unconsciousness, the inaugural journey of a voyage that will end with his death, powerless at the hands of chance — momentum. Conversely, as the father-son relationship evolves throughout the narrative, in both parts, regardless of the son being alive or dead, he is the one who asserts power. As the narrator describes the condition of the dead son—

... he got to the door and looked down and saw his son. His son's body and not really his son because the head was missing. Torn and rough, red, with dark slicked hair along the edge and blood splattered everywhere. He stepped back because looking straight down he saw that he was stepping on a piece that had come free, a piece of his son's head. A piece of bone. (Vann 2008, 156)

—he details it almost as the result of an explosion. Concurrently, while Jim, in *Halibut on the Moon*, mentions the gun bringing the pieces back together, he also establishes a parallel between the explosion and the consequent scattering the weapon would produce, and his idea of order. In this sense, he seems to make a connection between chaos — the scattering, where “the aesthetics of the sublime ... mak[es] the observer feel small and powerless” (Scott 2021, 2) and cosmos — the bringing back, where balanced nature is also the landscape of human stewardship and dominion, hearkening back to Eden (Scott 2021, 1). As the gun scatters, so it brings the pieces back together. Thus, the word “pieces” is used with a dual meaning, the bodily pieces and a more abstract use conveying pieces as a sort of sense, or a regaining of power, the absolute negation of momentum. Earlier on, the conclusion of the first part is connected through a sort of mediation between powerlessness and power. Thus, the father

... walked over to Roy and handed him the pistol, then put on his coat and boots and went out. Roy watched him go until he'd disappeared into the trees, then he looked at the pistol in his hand. The hammer was back and he could see the copper shell in there. He eased the hammer down with the pistol pointed away from him and then he pulled the hammer back again, raised the barrel to his head, and fired. (Vann 2008, 153)

The loss of power is embodied in the character of the father by not being able to take the final step, as well as by placing the symbol of power into his son's hands before disappearing into the trees, like he was being swallowed by the wilderness. Through this action, of letting go, he lets momentum come forth and allows himself to be, affirmatively, devoid of power. Meanwhile, the son eases the gun, that is his father's assertion of power, then he rearms the gun, assuming property over his actions, in other words, taking this power into his own hands and affirming it. As momentum conquers the father making him not responsible for his own actions, it cannot corrupt the son once the latter affirms his power over momentum. Moreover, this affirmative position of the son, can also be observed as him taking responsibility over his father's actions.

As it is mentioned later on in the collection, in the short story "Ketchikan," "If only a life could be bent into the shape of another's, momentum diminished," (Vann 2008, 244) there is the idea of the son assuming the father's responsibility, thus adding the portion of his existence that may turn the father's impotency into potency. In "Ketchikan," on describing a child feeling its father's "portion of regret, desire, longing," (Vann 2008, 244) there exists a reflection on the possibility of lives and feelings being shared through generations and in this way being powerful, or should we say rational enough to overcome the ever pervading irrationality of existence. The

passage in “Ketchikan” brings forth a reflection on the connection between generations, and may also allow a link to the idea that the son has intended to kill a generation.

In this context, momentum is mentioned, not merely to emphasize the passivity of the characters but also to reassert the power of Nature over the individual and this same individual’s ineptitude to escape or overcome this power. Momentum is heavily brought forward in *Caribou Island*, as Gary and Irene’s life together is unveiled throughout the narrative. When they cross a lake in a storm to transport logs for the construction of their cabin in the wilderness, the force of the elements making their journey perilous and abrupt is shown in contrast with the apparent quietness of their life together, mirroring their internal conflict.

Gary didn’t go fast, no more than five or ten miles per hour, but this was straight into wind waves with a flat front, and every wave was a hard blast of spray that drenched them entirely.

Irene turned away from the waves, facing back toward Gary, but he was looking backward, also, steering by reference to the shore they had left, slowly receding into the distance. (2011, 16)

Throughout their life together, Gary felt his ambitions had been mortgaged by the growing of his family and the consequent family responsibilities, and Irene felt the same way by trying constantly to please her husband, by blindly complying to his will, she had also been deprived of any ambition. When their retired life begins, both feel the weight of the momentum of their lives pressing them to a new phase. In Gary’s view, their relationship started with a certain romanticism enabling him to overcome his academic delusions:

His first attraction to Irene had been instinct. He was in grad school at Berkeley, becoming a medievalist, but he was outclassed and he knew it. Couldn't keep up with the others. He was fine on the primary texts but couldn't keep up on the secondary documents, long histories and registers, almanacs, journals, all in Middle English. Religious documents in Middle English, Old English, and Latin. Then all the criticism, keeping up with current books and articles. It was just too much. And he didn't have French or Old French, which was a big problem. A friend in the program introduced him to Irene, at a group dinner in a cheap restaurant. She had long blond hair then, blue eyes. She looked like something from an Icelandic saga. She didn't talk in jargon. A preschool teacher, still in education, but not intimidating. He felt he could breathe, finally. She was safe. (Vann 2011, 63)

Feeling undervalued in relation to his college peers, Gary feels safer beside Irene, not only because her intelligence did not intimidate him, but also because she embodied someone out of his phantasies. As the first lines of *Beowulf*, the only ones he knows by heart, call out for "Gar-Dena", the Spear-Danes, Gary sees in blue-eyed, blonde-haired, Irene an embodiment of that ancient figure.

Silent and distant, Gary constantly tries to accommodate an idea of intellectualism with a sense of pragmatism directed to the ambition of a simpler life. Actually, he constantly abandons his studies before deepening the subjects, leading him to go no farther beyond the first lines of his literary works of choice. Likewise, by never accomplishing his cabin in the manner he first idealized it, merely by never preparing himself for the task he had undertaken, lead him to never reach the life he had proposed himself. This is something he never admits, while instead blaming the sole person he had chosen and the exact simple qualities he had once appreciated for being the reason of what he feels as the waning of his life. In what they both feel as a final phase of their

lives, both see themselves in the very present space where they are no longer tumbling by the momentum of their lives and start realizing themselves. This realization, the clear presence of self, turns out being a painful experience for both, manifesting itself in different ways. Gary's depression over a sense of loss is depicted through his detachment from his former life, Irene's depression is manifested in the form of a severe headache that inhibits her every movement or ability to think clearly.

The characters here mentioned and the form they view their lives and ultimately how they chose to repair what is seen as their frustrations, seem to move in a direction of rebellion over what they identify as the involuntary movement of their lives. In this sense, they exercise their power by rebelling against life in the only way they see as a valid one. Once faced with the idea that, confronted with the absurdity of their efforts, they feel devoid of control, suicide appears as a confrontation between Nature and the individual.

Walden Inverted

No foundation, even. And no plans, no experience, no permits, no advice welcome. Gary wanted to just do it, as if the two of them were the first to come upon this wilderness. (Vann 2011, 8)

In Shakespeare's pastoral comedy, *As you Like It* (1623), a duke and the remainder of his men are exiled into the forest, after his brother has occupied the duchy. Escaping another treacherous brother, a different man flees to this same forest accompanied by his trustful servant. In this same forest the exiled duke's daughter

changes her name from Rosalyn to Ganymede, and with it her gender, in her pursuit for her loved one's proof of a reciprocal affection. Besides the richness of the several plots within one plot, there is a sole place that reorganizes society, turns the greed and rancor of brothers into loving admiration for their siblings, transforms their hate into reconciliation, and makes a love possible, regardless of class and gender: Nature. In Shakespeare, as well as in pastoral literature, Nature was a place not only of reconciliation but of reorganization, where humanity found itself among God's garden. In his play, the forest was in itself a refuge the depiction of which would entice the audience to feel comfortably protected from the natural roughness of the elements.

This too seems apparent in Daniel Defoe's novel, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) In this case, Crusoe's detachment from civilization was due to a shipwreck. The character sees himself stranded on a remote and uninhabited island which demands a knowledge of survival that he does not possess, since he has never before been away from social contact. Thus providing for himself in total isolation becomes the cause of great despair. As the story evolves, and the character is gradually shown as becoming more apt when dealing with the environment that surrounds him, his anxieties about overcoming his situation and returning to society are not forgotten, but are attenuated. The process of overcoming the hardship of his condition is accomplished through work, organization and a newly found servitude to God.

It is noticeable that there was in Defoe a preoccupation with enticing the reader with the humanizing of his character. To this effect, the reinforcement of social and spiritual norms within a wild environment were part of a compound of ideas that would serve his purpose as a writer. In this sense the morality inherent in Crusoe's story include a sort of *Bildungsroman* where the master is self-facing his human nature within

the wilderness. This maturing of the character is accompanied by the building of civilization characterized by the construction of his various and attentively described abodes, animal enclosures, farming, modes of transportation, clothe making and so forth, standing as something of a proof of the author's knowledge of what fantasies the imaginary of the readers fed on. Though there is an emphasis on the restitution of social norms and social organization portrayed by the character's anguished situation, that trait is accompanied by an appeal to Nature that serves as a tool for a reader facing the material of fiction. This appeal, then, communicates with the fictionalized notion of being a master of oneself away from civilization. As in Shakespeare's play, or in the works under discussion, though there is an apparent repelling of civilization, this feeling involves, not its turning down, but its reconstruction for egotistic purposes. The working of civilization in fiction, then, does not evolve into its total denial, but into the dream of its coming back to simpler terms.

In *Our National Parks* (1901), John Muir exhorts the good fortune of the Sierra bear for inhabiting a place "... fair as Eden ... in which one might expect to meet angels rather than bears," (1901, 172) thus comparing wilderness to Eden itself. In turn, Henry David Thoreau, more than searching for God's abode on earth, and even stating that, "Olympus is but the outside of the earth everywhere," (Thoreau 1985, 71) seemed to seek within humanity a better way to relate with Nature "for a man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone." (Thoreau 1985, 69) His 1854 work, *Walden or, Life in the Woods* is a testimony of that search. Thoreau explains his ideas about a home being where one feels at home: "Wherever I sat, there I might live, and the landscape radiated from me accordingly." (1985, 68) According to the statement, if for one part Thoreau places himself alongside the bear in Muir's text, the

latter being described as living “everywhere at home,” (1901, 172) for the other he puts forward the idea that the landscape of Nature can radiate from within oneself. Even though both men were well acquainted with the natural space, both tended to romanticize living in the outdoors, viewing the wild space as something sacred. Thoreau praises his hut, thus the place where he manifests his humanity in the wild space, emphasizing even its frailty and simplicity, somehow in accordance with the magnificence of the surrounding place where it stands. More than a cabin in the woods, Thoreau’s cabin stands as a humble frame for the greatness of the surrounding space, a place of which he speaks of not as a place of refuge from the outside, but a place of refuge within the outside:

When first I took up my abode in the woods, that is, began to spend my nights as well as days there, which, by accident, was on Independence Day, or the fourth of July, 1845, my house was not finished for winter, but was merely a defense against the rain, without plastering or chimney, the walls being of rough weather stained boards, with wide chinks, which made it cool at night. The upright white hewn studs and freshly planed door and window casings gave it a clean and airy look, especially in the morning, when its timbers were saturated with dew, so that I fancied that by noon some sweet gum would exude from them. To my imagination it retained throughout the day more or less of this auroral character, reminding me of a certain house on a mountain which I had visited the year before. This was an airy and unplastered cabin, fit to entertain a travelling god, and where a goddess might trail her garments. The winds which passed over my dwelling were such as sweep over the ridges of mountains, bearing the broken strains, or celestial parts only, of terrestrial music. The morning wind forever blows, the poem of creation is uninterrupted; but few are the ears that hear it. ... This frame, so slightly clad, was a sort of crystallization around me, and reacted on the builder. It was suggestive somewhat as a picture in outlines. I did not need to go out doors to

take the air, for the atmosphere within had lost none of its freshness. It was not so much within doors as behind a door where I sat, even in the rainiest weather. ... I found myself suddenly neighbor to the birds; not by having imprisoned one, but having caged myself near them. (1985, 71)

Thoreau places himself as a part of the scenery that surrounds him, in an attempt to perceive himself as a part of it, but this seems to come from a romantic construct that grows from an attempt to disguise his inaptitude in building an effective shelter for his survival in the wild environment. In fact, more than the wild place where it stands, whether a jungle, a forest, or a desert, or deserted island, the cabin, the abode of mankind stands as the testimony of his resistance to the wild, a proof of the habitability of the inhabitable, a reminder of where the heart is, even in the most inhospitable of places. Even if the disposition towards the natural space is of reconcile and communion, as in the pastorals, for the romantics, or the transcendentalists, there is, nonetheless, a need of mastery from man over the untamed. The mark of this mastery would be the construction of a house, a place where the human not only makes himself king and god of his reign, but also where civilization sets another step forward upon the kingdom of the wild.

Regardless of how it is observed in literature, this mark of civilization shows up not only as a necessity of humanity, but in fact an unavoidable mark of the human presence on earth. In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), the presence of the dark, in all its formulations, is contrasted with the white, in a parallel between the uncivilized and the civilized, or the wild and the tamed. Conrad's critical view challenges these assumptions, subtly pointing out to the uncertainty of the place where the idea of human and inhuman stand. Traveling to the "Heart of Darkness", either the

core (Fr: couer), of an inhuman place, or the place where a monstrous white figure stands, the main character, Marlow, encounters

...a hut of reeds, [with] an inclined and melancholy pole, with the unrecognizable tatters of what have been a flag of some sort flying from it, and a neatly stacked wood-pile ... a torn curtain of red twill hung in the doorway of the hut, and flapped sadly ... The dwelling was dismantled; but we could see a white man had lived there not very long ago. There remained a rude table — a plank on two posts; a heap of rubbish reposed in a dark corner, and by the door ... a book. (Conrad 1994, 53-54)

The hut, belonging to Harlequin, a character that links the distinction between rational and irrational, stands as an undying mark of its builder. Humbled by the densely invasive character of the jungle, the abode does not detain any marks of human control from the outside but the flag marking the conquest of man over the place is reduced to shreds. The conqueror conquered by the wild. Once inside, the signs it casts, either the melancholy movement of a once inflamed character signaled by the curtain, a rough table, a book, are there to establish a contrast between two worlds.

In one way or the other, all these works deal with the idea of the conflict between the civilized and the uncivilized, emphasizing the shelter, the hut, the cabin or the human-made construction in its various forms as symbols of the footsteps of humanity over the untamed space. For literary purposes, the symbolic value of the house gains prominence when making the narrative reasonable and to permit the reader with a sense of respite, what Gaston Bachelard means as places detaining “the value of a shell.” (2011, 10) In his seminal work *The Poetics of Space* (1957), Bachelard brings forward a new criteria of psychoanalyzing space which he names topoanalysis, namely,

the “localization of our memories ... the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives.” (2011, 8) He relates the significance of the house with two useful notions for the discussion of the works under analysis: firstly, the maternal features of the house, a significance that can easily be related with the aforementioned shell value, or should one add, womb value. Secondly, the fact that our daydreams bring us back to the protective environment the house provides: “... when memories of other places we have lived in come back to us, we travel to the land of Motionless Childhood, motionless the way all Immemorial things are.” (Bachelard 2011, 5-6)

Concurrently, in David Vann’s works, the characters are explored in circumstances where dreams have failed them and where the total absence of any possible reveries, the abode of nightmares has taken reign. In this sense, the cabin or hut takes prominence as the place where these same characters, after setting away from civilization, choose to end their lives.

In “Sukkwon Island,” the cabin “was weathered and gray but not very old. Its roof was steeply peaked to keep off the snow and the entire cabin and its front porch were raised six feet off the ground. It had only a narrow door and two small windows ...” (Vann 2008, 41). In *Caribou Island*, Gary tries to fulfill his long life dream of building a log cabin, a dream that represented the closing of a circle in his life but whose construction resembled more and more like the failure of all his life’s expectations. Rather than a shelter, built in the manner of the old pioneers, the cabin’s roughness and ridiculous aspect offered no shelter at all. In *Halibut on the Moon*, Jim retreats to his newly bought house in Alaska, this time, not a cabin but an expansive place, in which the darkness, emptiness and silence seemed to mirror the legacy of a lifetime. Thus, not only these constructions are shown as metaphors for the characters’

human constructions, and in the case of *Caribou Island*, also the structure of a long-life relationship, but they illustrate the whole social environment these same characters want to escape from, but end up reproducing.

As Thoreau praises the frailty of his cabin for serving as a frame for the natural surroundings that welcome him, he pleasantly mentions the wind coming through the gap between the boards of his cabin as a reminder of his condition of being caged among Nature. One cannot ignore the romanticism of his references about what he perceives as wilderness and even forget how close this place he calls wild was so close to the next town. The Nature Thoreau praises serves him as a link to reflections on a life not lived and as a hope of fulfillment, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately ... when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. (1985, 75) One could find, though, that it does not matter much where Thoreau is, or how far from civilization he builds his frail hut. The focus on the natural space is, then, an expectation of a certain kind of compensation, a search for some sense in the absurdity of existence:

... we live meanly, like ants; though the fable tells us that we were long ago changed into men; like pygmies we fight with cranes; it is error upon error, and clout upon clout, and our best virtue has for its occasion a superfluous and evitable wretchedness. Our life is frittered away by detail. (Thoreau 1985, 76)

Thoreau’s reference to ants strengthens the idea of an existence dedicated to an irrational circularity, like the eternal movement of Sisyphus an elegy to absurdity. This idea is intensified with the statement that human life is wasted on minor tasks (“frittered away by detail”), or even purposeless tasks.

What Thoreau observes is that, if life is, in itself absurd, civilization, its institutions and its rules only intensify this absurdity. They only tighten the gap between

the boards, locking the air out, condemning the individual to suffocation. “In the midst of this chopping sea of civilized life, such are the clouds and storms and quick-sands ... that a man has to live, if he would not founder and go to the bottom ... by dead reckoning” (Thoreau 1985, 76). Nature and existence, thus, cannot be observed apart. In turn, Socrates also speaks of a prison, this time as a reference to existence, as previously mentioned. In his case, as it was the spirit of the times, one could infer that he would choose death before exile from society, and so he seemed to have done. For the philosopher, society seemed to be a source of purpose instead of an elegy to absurdity. In other words, absurdity would be then found in anything that was away from the rational world of humans. Though the all-encompassing existence was observed by him as a cage, it was then a matter of blurring the sight of the bars through the strengthening of a purpose, one that could be found in social life and the enlargement of civilization.

Vann’s stories discuss the promise of closure through death. Closure functions as a kind of harmony, of bringing back the pieces of what seem like lives and individuals broken down. Bearing this in mind, regardless of the features of civilization, Nature or existence in general, either freeing or entrapping, there stands the idea about freedom through the extreme of the suicidal act. In one way or another, David Vann’s houses in the wild, being the scenes of suicide stand as part of the promise of this closure. Since the suicides take place inside these constructions, seen also as symbols of civilization within Nature, there is an implicit critique on the impossibility of humans living within Nature without recurring to the traits of civilization that make human survival possible. Vann’s characters fulfill, in a rather violent way, Thoreau’s expectations about the wilderness, since they too seek to be freed of the horror of a life not lived.

In “Sukkwan Island,” Jim aspires for a new beginning in the wilderness in order to be away from a civilization he observes as a treacherous place. His hut represents the possibility of a simpler life, enhanced by the fantasy of a simpler past that exists before the complications and responsibilities of a life in civilization:

The world was originally a great field, and the earth flat. And every beast roamed upon the field and had no name, and every bigger thing ate every smaller thing, and no one felt bad about it. Then man came, and he hunched up around the edges of the world hairy and stupid and weak, and he multiplied and grew so numerous and twisted and murderous with wanting that the edges of the world began to warp. ... Everything after that gets too complicated to tell. Somewhere in there was guilt, and divorce, and money, and the IRS, and it all went to hell. (Vann 2008, 36)

In contrast with Nature, the hut’s bareness and unwelcoming features symbolize Jim’s internal natural space, the place that spark all his internal conflicts and lead him to thoughtless actions, as we follow the narrator’s depiction:

Roy when he went in smelled cedar and wetness and dirt and smoke and it took a few minutes for his eyes to adjust properly to see more than the windows and begin to see the beams above and how high the ceiling went and the rough look of the planks for the walls and floor with their sawed-through knot-holes ... (Vann 2008, 42)

This place is also heavily contrasted with Nature when it becomes noticeable that there is a change in Jim’s behavior when inside:

The ceiling vaulted out from Roy and the floor hardened beneath him and his mind wallowed until finally he drifted off, then came back because he realized he was hearing his father weeping quietly, the sounds sucked in and hidden. The room so small and Roy didn't know if he could pretend not to be hearing ... (Vann 2008, 49-50)

The characteristics of this hut are shared in *Halibut on the Moon*, with the house in which Jim has isolated himself for his last night. In this case, although Jim's house in Ketchikan serves a similar ambition of living away from the metropolis, in "a new house on a ridge far from neighbors, living in darkness at the edge of the arctic," (Vann 2019, 2) thus apart from the civilized world, its main purpose is not of a promoter of life but a promoter of death:

There's no stereo, no TV. No couch, no comfortable chairs. Nothing hanging on any wall. No one living here. Only a kitchen that extends to the wide-open living room with a fireplace at the other end, made of green stone he brought from the ranch in California, a reminder of home. Upstairs three bedrooms, all empty, and their bathrooms and a hallway. A place that can make sense only if it's filled. (Vann 2019, 250-251)

In other words, if in "Sukkwan Island" Jim intends to go beyond the frontier of civilization, in *Halibut on the Moon*, he intends to go beyond the frontier of life, thus into the wild space of death. In *Caribou Island*, Gary and Irene's hut, ultimately Gary's own dream, ends up being a faithful depiction of the couple's failure and frailty of a life together, a physical monument of a life lost to absurdity. "Like ruins, some cabin from a hundred years ago, burned out, its roof missing. A big hole for the front window. Rough logs covered in snow. Thin logs, like sticks." (Vann 2011, 234) In one way or another,

these characters' constructions in the wild stand as a sign of their mastery over the space while mirroring their inhabitants and stand as metaphors for what ultimately led them to their own demises.

The Last Frontier

Already Alaska beckons on the north, and, pointing to her wealth of natural resources, asks the nation on what new terms the new age will deal with her. (Turner, 1963)

Capitalized and mythicized, “The Great Frontier,” whether a subject of the past or a matter for the ever-present future, stands crystalized as an unavoidable element of the American construct. In the material of fiction that, by various ways and in various forms, serves as the mold of this character — the American — even when not manifest, there is always a sort of conversation with the frontier. American history has dealt very factually with this frontier in the sense that its process of westernization, or what Walter Prescott Webb would probably call the metropolizing of the territory⁹, involved an unavoidable facing up with the reality of overcoming the wild unknown. A process that involved the transformation that, as Turner mentions found the European “strip[ped] off the garments of civilization and array[ed] ... in the hunting shirt and moccasin,” (Turner 1963, viii) and produced the American. In the making of this new man, the frontier becomes more than a mark in the physical plane and gains its prominence in the character of a whole nation.

9. “... the Metropolis ... refers to the Community of Western Europe ...” (Webb 1986, xiii)

To think of the frontier in American history involves the certainty that it will never stop running ahead of its follower and that it will never stop absorbing things in its path. The process of forcing the constantly present threat of the wild, manifested in the territory and its inhabitants not only empowered the individual but also invested in this same individual the idea that what is good and orderly comes from his own hands. Not only this sentiment persists through time but, in addition, there is the constant calling for a past that relates deeply with an inbred characteristic of a whole people, as Webb argues:

A moment's thought should convince a reasonable person that the Great Frontier has practically disappeared, and it is doubtful that any new frontier can be compared with the old one in magnitude, in influence, or in importance. Nor is there much probability that mankind can within the foreseeable future hope to discover a comparable equivalent. Therefore, most of the talk about new frontiers may be thought of as nostalgia. Man, in his vain search for the lost ingredient, is like the individual trying to recapture the exciting and pleasurable experiences of his childhood. He may return to the scene of them only to find it radically changed ... The man has not returned to the scene of his youth but only to the place where it was. And so is it with the frontier to which man cannot return. He may go to the place where it was, but it is not there when he arrives. Instead of emptiness he finds homes and people; instead of forests he finds farms or stumps or burnt-over land; instead of fertile land lush with the duff and compost of thousands of seasons of leaf-falling, he finds eroded gullies, denuded hillsides, and deserts on the march. He is not free to ride the divides that form the watersheds, to fish in the streams or to take game, or to build a log cabin, or to live by a campfire in solitude. ... Unable to find a frontier, and having such a keen desire for it, man builds up the illusion that it must exist somewhere. He is seized with hallucinations and substitutes them for reality. (1986, 282-283)

Thus, related with the frontier, there is a longing, not only for the inexorable fantasy of a past that relates directly to self, but also that this frontier is an envisioning of the future, which by its inherent characteristics is never to be attained. Going beyond its geographic representation, the frontier stands as the ever unreachable plane. Speaking of lines between opposing points, Isaiah Bowman mentions, “If the border appeals to a man it is because there is a border in his own mind.” (1931, 5)

Hardly ever mentioning it, Vann reflects on the matter of the frontier, establishing various connections, some of them relating to the American construct, others pointing to death. The writer articulates the space, setting the narratives, either in Alaska, where “under the classification of geographic frontiers, a writer seizes on ...,” (Webb 1986, 285) or in California, the place where the westernization has come to an end. Nevertheless, as John Sherman Long argues, “the geographical environments of the Great Plains and Alaska have little in common, except blizzards. As frontiers of civilization, however, the two regions provide an interesting study in comparison and contrast.” (1971, 302) Whereas “reports of the Great Plains resulted in a cartographic designation of the area as the ‘Great American Desert, explorers branded Alaska as an icebox.” (Long 1971, 302) If, therefore, there is a reference to the great plains as a desert, this desert persists in what is referred to as an “icebox” when, regardless of their distinctive features, both share the idea of a not cultivated, unlivable, place. Wilderness is given the features of a desert, for its uninhabitable characteristic, due to its poor accessibility, or harshness of its environment.

In the case of California, the setting represents the closing of the frontier, a detachment from wilderness, therefore an ending to individualism and an unavoidable

beginning of life in society. In addition, although wilderness was for some time observed as a treacherous place, the feeling gradually changed, as it was mentioned before, when the Sublime brought forth an appreciation for the untamed environment. In this sense, the wilderness became part of mythology, even of legend, a circumstance that might be connected with the way Vann places the theme of suicide. Beyond physicality, the place of the wilderness, as well as the frontier, also acquires a temporal quality paramount in Vann's narratives. It appears that the author is working both with physical space and psychological place when dealing with the subjects of American mythology — Wilderness, Frontier, Pioneer, Rugged Individualism.

While building an adjoining section of the hunting cabin, in "Sukkwan Island," the narrator states that: "It looked like the frontier, like the real thing, except not as sturdy," (Vann 2008, 78) thus relating an emotion of accomplishment with an idealized physical parallel translated in the abstract image of the frontier. Although he is referring the wooden construction the protagonists are building, he recurs to abstractionism, turning a feeling into a physical subject, thus connecting the "frontier" with a sentiment of happiness or accomplishment. In another instance, after the son's death, the narrator places the father in a sort of relief once he is distracted from his grief when faced with another construct of a distant time in history:

This coastline of banded rock and deadfall and dark sand seemed ancient to Jim, prehistoric. As he hiked along it quietly for hours, hearing only the sound of his boots and an occasional bird and the wind and small waves coming in, it seemed as if he might be the only man, come out to see what was in the world. He mused on this and walked more cat-like, hopping from stone to stone, and he longed for this simplicity, this innocence. (Vann 2008, 158)

Images such as the cabin or the natural space where human interaction is infrequent spur fictionalizations about distant times that are connected to a feeling of simplicity and innocence that brings the protagonist to a certain childlike state. This longing for innocence, for a simple past is afterwards articulated by Jim's desire for a social life, specifically beside a partner. The realization that what he always searched for in the idealized space of the wilderness and the idea of a pioneering life were constructed images, leads him to state:

What was it about the frontier that made him feel nothing else was really living? It made no sense, because he didn't like to be uncomfortable and couldn't stand to be alone. Every moment of every day now he wanted to see someone. He wanted a woman, any woman. Landscape meant nothing to him if he had to see it alone. (Vann 2008, 161)

For Jim, the frontier seemed to only show its appeal only when longed for, when observed in the imaginary field, in a place protected by commodities and the nearness of social life. In other words, the character's statement alludes to the possibility of him only having a desire for what was not within his grasp.

The closing of the West places the freedom inherent in rugged individualism in the past, condemns this same individual to society and to a life in the metropolis. In the works under discussion, California serves as the social space, the place of the metropolis, and also the place where the past is shown in its most striking features specifically because of its absence. Both the character — Jim — and the setting are articulated as figures disjointed from present times, both featured as already dead. In chapter four of *Halibut on the Moon*, this shock between present and past becomes extremely vivid when the protagonists attempt to go on a hunting trip.

It's a paradise, this place. He can see that now. Oak trees and shade, narrow winding lanes, all newly paved by the rich, and so much open space. Not wild, not a place to hunt ... "A wooden fence meant only for looks, just one heavy log low and one high, very easy to duck between. (Vann 2019, 44)

The place once remembered for its wild features is now shown as a "paradise ... all newly paved by the rich," (Vann 2019, 44) the same that own the open space where they had intended to hunt as they used to. Unavoidably there is a confrontation with the owner of the land, a man who, as is noticed by Jim, is unarmed, much to the dismay of the former:

"What will happen?" David asks in a whisper that is too loud. "Nothing," Jim says. "Nothing ever happens." He steps toward the man, to bring fate closer, to speed things up. The man should be carrying a shotgun or rifle, out to protect his land, but he has nothing "So they will have to use their fists or sticks and stones, beating each other to bloody pulps until one gives out." (Vann 2019, 51)

Not only the geography has changed, being attributed traces of modernity that do not correspond to the protagonist's expectations, but also social relations have changed. In this case, a defender of his territory presents himself unarmed and thus is depicted as a fragile man. Jim's disappointment makes him state that nothing ever happens, thus pointing to how uninteresting the present shows itself in comparison with a past related with frontier living and the wild West. As matters in the past were dealt with force, and ultimately resolved with death, modern times and a life of leisure and comfort within a geography delimited by fences is here put in contrast with a rugged life in an

environment where the horizon seemed to stretch limitlessly. For Jim, his inability to relate with the social world is specifically related with modernity and the consequent erasure of past times where the simplicity of the customs was much more related with the natural world, or at least that is how he views it. As Jim looks at himself from an outsider's perspective, already objectifying himself, within the process previously mentioned by Critchley, he comes to observe that, within society, he has become poisonous:

The solution would be to strip him bare of possessions and set him walking in an earlier time, before fences or roads, let him walk from here to the other coast, three thousand miles, and by then the poison might be out of him. He needs something as extreme as that, something as elemental and basic and external. He can be fixed only from outside, by doing. Thoughts have failed. (Vann 2019, 47)

The question of the man stripped of his possessions relates to Turner's when what he calls "the garments of civilization" (1963, viii) are observed as a source of this poison. In addition, it is understood throughout the text that this poison is seen as the capacity for thought. For Jim, rationality has failed and the solution should be to revert progress.

More than a conquest of the wilderness, but in fact a return to the wilderness is what is mainly articulated in David Vann's narratives, when reflecting on the question of human thought, and should we infer, humanity altogether. Looked upon as predatory beings, humans differ from other predators by being armed not with claws or fangs but with intellects. A return to wilderness would not only free humans from their sickness but would also disarm them of their predatory qualities, thus rendering them humble when facing the natural space. As was discussed, wilderness, in Vann's narratives, not

only relates to a desired place but also to a desired time and in this sense, both space and time are in the realm of the unattainable. Both for Jim in *Legend of a Suicide* and *Halibut on the Moon*, and Gary in *Caribou Island*, wilderness, its historical reference and its concretization are fantasized features that share no relation with reality, as observed by Cronon,

... one of the most striking proofs of the cultural invention of wilderness is its thoroughgoing erasure of the history from which it sprang. In virtually all of its manifestations, wilderness represents a flight from history. Seen as the original garden, it is a place outside of time, from which human beings had to be ejected before the fallen world of history could properly begin ... (1996, 16)

As the wilderness is a place beyond history and the register of humanity, and wilderness is understood to be a place beyond human interaction altogether, humanity's return to the wilderness could only signify its erasure. In other words, either there is wilderness or there is humanity.

In the works here discussed, California represents the end of the frontier and the conquest of the wild space in favor of civilization, since the metropolization of the territory could only signify the extinction of wilderness for the appearing of the history of humanity. Concurrently, Alaska's status as the Last Frontier, relates directly to California's loss of status as the farthest point in the process of westernization. At the same time, the unearthliness of its features as well as its almost uninhabitability, reinforces the sense that this place is still a last refuge within the realm of the wild. Nevertheless, if the frontier between civilization and wilderness can be seen in its brightest features in the territory of Alaska, it also becomes the setting for a frontier

between life and death of the human characters. As these characters long for a return to the wilderness they seem to fail to understand that, if the frontier can never stop being constantly out of reach, so the wilderness can never stop being away from the eyes of humanity. In this sense, the duel between wilderness and civilization, both ends of a line we call the frontier, becomes a duel of man against himself. In this context, it can be observed that if human life is in itself humanity's weapon upon Nature, so death can be Nature's weapon upon humanity.

CONCLUSION

For the social animal one calls human, for the living organism empowered with the weapon of reason, death, whether in the general sense or in reference to the death of another, is a perilous thing to live with. If death is in itself a hard occurrence for humanity, it can be easily understood that suicide — the willing acceleration of the ever unavoidable, the voluntary pursuit of the ultimate, unconquerable, predator of life — can be a subject of incessant controversy. Regardless of assumptions related to how the living are left with the task of living with suicide, it is safe to say that what strikes thinkers as a probing thing related to it is how easy such an apparently morbid subject can be related to freedom.

Camus argues that suicide is the only question of philosophy, specifically because of its roots in the subject of free will. Life and death, what is and what is not, the author states, can be the only issue worthy of philosophical debate. In his argument, what matters is not the duality between two worlds and where one should decide to stand. What matters is the choice. Recognizing the issue of choice one should also recognize a contradiction in Camus' discourse, as the author attributes courage only to the ones that endure the absurdity of life, thus figuratively referring to suicide as an unworthy escape.

As the matter is choice, the courage, should it have to exist, should start and end with the recognition that between being and not being there is an alternative. However, issues like courage and cowardice are constructs rooted in ideas such as power, resistance, free will or even manhood, and virility. What comes after the recognition of choice is only uneventful innocuity. Recurring to Socrates' cage of existence, the

subject seems to be the acknowledgment that within life and death lies the ultimate act of freedom a rational being is capable of conceiving, that is suicide. If death is the predator of life, the only way to defeat death is to deprive it of its predatory character by oneself being the predator.

Debatably, as an affront to that same freedom comes the criminalizing of suicide whether by the laws of religion or the laws of society. As religion introduces the logics of all living beings as property, suicide is taken as an offense to the offering of life from a God, a master. Concurrently, social norms place humans as parts of a well-oiled machine for the purposes of a superior scheme, from whence an escape from life will be regarded as a sort of dissidence. In both cases, property over one's self seems to be the main point.

American history informs us of a violent struggle for the attainment and sustaining of so-called freedom. In this context, its pursuit entails a discourse between the individual and society, self and the other, usually in opposing sides. The wilderness, for this new character, the American, was articulated within the category of otherness, encompassing its predatory or resistant character. Thus, the drive into the wilderness entailed a sense of freedom always mediated by domination and control. On the other hand, for the American, freedom also meant resistance to civil institutions and the grapples of society. This way, freedom means both the power to subdue, and the power to resist. Freedom, then, is strongly connected to the other side of a line to be crossed, whether physically, socially, or psychologically, with the constant presence of a frontier standing between the existing choices. For the American, to speak of a frontier is to add a layer of significance that extends to the core of the construction of a whole character.

The myth of the frontier, the search for a better land, for the paradise on earth, for the edge of the known world, is always present when discussing freedom.

Nature is a proof of life, a premise to existence, the concern of the living subject. Nature should be everything there is, unconcerned about social norms. Nature is not only around humans. Humans are also part of Nature. In addition, nature is a word that comes up when recalling the most basic characteristics of humans as living beings. It is in the nature of predators to pursue preys, it is the nature of sparrows to nest during the spring, it is the nature of humans to take advantage of reason for the pursuit of choice. The wilderness is the outer human, and it can be understood as the irrational, the edge of the known world. There is only wilderness where there are no humans. As for humans, Nature is life, so it does not necessarily mean that wilderness is death, but it can be said that it is a life beyond.

The American Frontier meant the division between two spaces: socially, Civilization and Savagery; physically, the sowed and the unsowed; literarily, Humanity and God; religiously, God and the Godless; philosophically, Life and Death. Reflecting on the American culture, and regarding these statements as well as the foundation of the American construct, life and death can be conveyed within the myth of the frontier.

David Vann, an author who discusses suicide through the scope of his personal experience, mythicizes the issue and its subjects while at the same time seemingly deconstructing the romanticism about the act. The author's writing stems from an apparent need to rationalize what he felt as an irrational action, putting forward the belief that his father's suicide could have easily been an accident. His father "had a 44 Magnum pistol with a hair trigger you just lightly tap and it goes off. It was so easy to kill himself with that. It did not give him time to have second thoughts about it."

(Cazajous-Augé 2023, 4). This reflection seems manifest in “Sukkwan Island”, since the son’s death is articulated in a way that leaves open the possibility of an accident. In contrast, *Halibut on the Moon*, written roughly ten years after the latter, details the father’s suicide not as an accident but more like a decision beyond all rationality: “... he feels none of the drama he had imagined, feels nothing in fact, and he knows he won’t do it, won’t pull the trigger, and then he does.” (Vann 2019, 260) While rationalizing the events in an apparent pursuit for making sense of an action that is stigmatized for its lack of reason, the author also seems to develop a discourse attuned to the mythology around the frontier. In this sense, a suicidal person is transformed from a coward into a hero whose courage is manifest in his choice to confront the frontier in all its manifestations and to go beyond it.

As Howard Kushner mentions, “the frontier served as insurance against anxieties of emasculation,” (1992, 61) an argument supported by the fact that its mythicizing was always marked by the absence of women. Which leads to the reflection that the frontier was always articulated with the fantasy around a world made of men and for men, arguably one in which the epitome of masculinity resided in its own destruction. In this sense, as Kushner most accurately mentions, “... whatever else the frontier heroes accomplish, they ensure their own extinction.” (1992, 60)

In their own way, Roy Fenn, Irene and Jim Fenn search for power, manifest in the ideology of virility and seemingly accomplishing it by their conquering of their own deaths. In “Sukkwan Island”, Roy Fenn conquers his control over an uncontrolled father by taking upon his hands what the father should have accomplished, while the concluding short story, “The Higher Blue”, describes a father alive, through the son’s projections, within the natural world (Vann 2008, 229-237). In *Caribou Island*, Irene

adds the layer of phallic power manifest by the use of an arrow to pierce/penetrate her husband. Jim Fenn's power is ultimately manifest in *Halibut on the Moon*, since in this novel the character goes beyond reason in a final pursuit for what can be understood as the last frontier. Suicide in these Vann's works — and debatably in general — is, then, an action of power. Although suicide/death is at the core of the three works under discussion, they also share a prevailing idea that is powerfully connected to life. The pull to the natural environment entails a constructed idea of communion with self through Nature, which in turn is related to the pursuit of happiness. In this sense, a line can be drawn, connecting several ideas comprising the American ideal. If these characters — sickened by the social environment — seek ailment in the natural space, there is an implicit feeling of happiness, also rooted in a sense of purpose, which was destroyed within the mechanized routine of a life in civilization. Thus, happiness, purpose, and ultimately destiny become one line of thought. In turn, this line of thought relates to the frontier in the sense that it is in that place, whether physical or psychological, that the panorama of American mythology lives.

It is difficult to contend that in the framework of American mythology, a place where there is no space for weakness, there would be a place for suicide. When Lincoln's patriotic speech admits the word, it curiously uses it as the other end for immortality — "As a nation of free men we must live through all time or die by suicide." (1989, 15). Moreover, the choice between immortality and a willing death is not only connected to patriotism but it is ultimately connected to freedom. Men are not immortal, but myths may be, and that is why not only the construction of freedom is linked to an everlasting life of purpose but also with death through the freedom of

choice. Either way, the American stands protected from any threat through his depiction of a free and brave man.

Regarding the works under discussion, both Jim in *Legend of a Suicide* and *Halibut on the Moon*, and Irene in *Caribou Island*, are faced with a loss of control over their lives that ultimately represents a loss of power. The characters' actions are directed to the regaining of this loss by all means necessary. As suicide is shown as their solution for passivity and a fight against momentum, Nature and the wilderness also represent their fictionalization of the last stronghold of power. This fictionalized image of the natural world is attuned to the construction of the idea of the conquering of the wilderness and the pushing of the frontier as well as with the transcendentalist sensibility. One can also argue that the pull to the natural world as a place of origin and reconstruction is not only attuned with the mastery of man over the wilderness as it is attuned with the recovering of humanity under the premises of the natural world. Whether in civilization or in the wilderness the human subject is concentrated in the sustaining of its power. Bearing this in mind, both Jim and Gary's drive into the wilderness encompass the aforementioned desire to recover the constituent parts that make up the virile character. Their journey into the wilderness implies their departure from civilization and, consequently, from the world of women. Contradicting their expectations, they show a dependency on women, since in Gary's case, he needs his wife to build the cabin, while Jim shows that his isolation in Nature is useless without the presence of a woman, something that can be confirmed by his statements: "He wanted a woman, any woman. Landscape meant nothing to him if he had to see it alone" (Vann 2008, 161) and "I love you but I'm not going to live without you" (Vann 2019, 260).

Irene's ultimate act of selflessness implies not only the death of her husband but also her own. Although a threat to life, her action implies a restitution of her honor and virile character. While defeating the one who threatens her power she also reaffirms her own by somehow incarnating the fictionalized depiction of the Spear-Dane, in accordance to the first lines of *Beowulf*. The reasons that lead to her final action are shown to be heavily influenced by the environment that surrounds her, as her escalating lack of reason encompasses the fury of the elements and the traits of a punishing Nature. In this sense, it is clear that Nature influences her physical and mental health, driving her human nature into its own demise. As the short stories in *Legend of a Suicide* seem to develop a discourse directed at the restitution of the father's manliness, through the gathering of pieces of his character, the novella "Sukkwan Island" details the son depriving the father of power by taking suicide upon his own hands. In *Halibut on the Moon*, the father's power is restored through his suicide. In both cases, their surroundings and ultimately their isolation into the wilderness play a major influence in their decision to end their lives.

The characters in the works under discussion show a desire to take refuge from civilization in the imagined place of the wilderness. It is in the direction of that fictionalized space that they intend to find the solution to their loss of power and control over their lives. Once the wilderness becomes visible as a place that does not fit in the ambitions of humanity and is otherwise shown as a threat to human survival, the subject is faced with yet another predator to his survival in the territory. In this context, the wilderness and humanity make up for two ends of a dual between Nature and nature.

Wilderness is the place beyond the frontier at the edge of the known world, and in Vann's writing it is a place where the individual aspires to an alternative life but only

encounters death. As previously mentioned, if Nature is life, the wilderness is something beyond. Vann's suicidal characters show an ultimate desire to conquer that thing beyond, to be stronger than the salmon and jump over the edge, to be even stronger than they were in life and conquer their power in death. While their death might be seen as an act of weakness, these characters depart into the unknown wilderness of the beyond life, actually restituting balance to the place of the living, thus affirming their courage and power through death/suicide.

Still today, suicide is too frequently regarded as an act of cowardice. Somehow, in the confused minds of the ones who stay behind, it seems easier to accommodate the idea that a suicidal person is someone who fears life and chooses the dishonorable exit instead of "enduring" the privilege of existence. Besides being deemed as cowards, the suicidal characters are criticized for an apparent lack of concern about the ones who are left to deal with the violent death of a loved one. While the deaths of Vann's characters might be seen as an act of weakness, it is shown that these characters depart into the unknown wilderness of the beyond life, not only intending to retribute balance to the place of the living, but also to recover their power and courage through death, becoming themselves the wilderness.

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