Walking Through "November": A Leopoldian Approach Against Ecological Absence

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Abstract

This paper revisits Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*, by putting emphasis on the "November" chapter. The chapter alone is Leopold's reflection on events occurring around his plot of land. But through his musings he articulates ecological consciousness grounded on responsibility and reverence to nature. Analyzed through contemporary environmental concepts, the sub-chapters may reveal an environmental point of view that is fresh and fitting for this modern age. "If I Were the Wind" shows his talent of ecological sensitivity to the changing season cycles. The first section shall explore this talent with hopes of cultivating such sensitivity ourselves. "Axe-in-Hand" talks about human capacity to give and take life while also encouraging to be self-critical and understand environmental choices are heavily influenced by personal bias. This second section will criticize the current *cornucopian* vision of industries, the philosophy of conservations, and possible personal attempts at conservation. The last section "A Mighty Fortress" shall be analyzed with the joint concept of Deleuze and Guattari—*machinic assemblages*—in order to uncover the ecological agency of forest life. Here, diseased trees, grubs, decay itself do not function as isolated entities, but as connected elements in a dynamic ecological system. The synthesis of all three sub-chapters function as a rich remedy to this day's ecological confusion.

Keywords: Ecological Awareness, Ecocriticism, Nature-Writings, Aldo Leopold

Introduction

Aldo Leopold stands out as a figure in twentieth-century American environmental thought. Unlike Leo Marx or Rachel Carson, whose critiques often come from a clear position of ecological crises, Leopold is much quieter. His book, A Sand County Almanac (1949), is a collection of seasonal reflections from his Wisconsin farm and is widely seen on par to the cornerstones of modern environmental ethics (Frese, 2003).

While the entire book is known for blending science and philosophy, the “November” entries especially highlight Leopold’s ecological awareness.

November is often seen as a month linked to decline. But Leopold shows that even that can be meaningful. His description of nature teaches lessons about responsibility, respect, and how all life is connected. Looking back at these November essays lets us reconsider his ideas in today’s environmental context. This paper aims to address a gap in Leopold studies by exploring how his “November” contributes to current discussions on ecological resilience and adaptation, offering a view on the challenges and opportunities of human involvement in nature.

The “November” chapter of A Sand County Almanac consists of three essays: “If I Were the Wind”, “Axe-in-Hand”, and “A Mighty Fortress”. Each essay begins with an ordinary observation, autumn winds, the swing of an axe, or the sight of a decaying tree, but ends with thoughts that reach far beyond the immediate. Leopold’s strength is noticing meaning in ordinary things, using natural cycles to reflect on human duties and mistakes.

As we face climate change and loss of biodiversity, Leopold’s “November” gives us a way to think about nature as a community we belong to and care for, not just a resource to use (Bourgoin et al., 2024; Munday et al., 2025; Newbold et al., 2016; Pollock et al., 2022; Reddington et al., 2025). Feel the gentle pressure of the breeze against your skin, carrying with it stories from faraway lands. To become the wind, for Leopold, is not merely to imagine freedom of movement but to inhabit the perspective of an element that touches everything without possession. In what seems to be a leap of imagination, his writings imply a mode of ecological perception that is both humble and expansive: humble in recognizing human smallness, expansive in recognizing connections across the land. This essay, as we will see, brings what might be called a 'phenomenological ecology,' in which perception itself is the first step to ecological action.

It is important, however, not to romanticize Leopold’s reflections as mere pastoral nostalgia. His writings are not an escape into the past but a challenge to the present. When he writes about wind, he is teaching readers how to notice change. When he writes about the axe, he is exposing the biases that shape decisions. When he writes about decay, he is dismantling the illusion that ecological health means static permanence. These lessons are not confined to the Wisconsin of the 1940s, they speak directly to the globalized world of the twenty-first century, where ecological crises demand not only technological solutions but also transformations of perception and value.

Methodology

This paper will use the qualitative descriptive method to approach Aldo Leopold’s text. Within “November”, Leopold uses descriptions of nature that, while already ecologically charged, needs further elaboration in order to connect with the concept of absence. This paper will focus on important ecocritical comments that Leopold made and the qualitative descriptive method will be used to further elaborate close the points.

The choice of using the qualitative descriptive method is driven by the need for an in-depth exploration of the cultural and symbolic dimensions associated with both text's sacred trees. Passages are chosen while keeping in mind a diverse representation ecocritical aspects. With a focus on extracting relevant passages and explaining how their cultural and symbolic aspects point out towards ecocriticism, this paper will hopefully offer a useful analysis.

At the same time, the study operates within the broader intellectual terrain of ecocriticism. Ecocriticism, understood as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment, provides the conceptual scaffolding for this analysis (Garrard, 2004; Glotfelty & Fromm, 1994). Leopold's writing has always occupied a central place in the ecocritical canon because it straddles literature and science, art and ecology. An ecocritical lens allows us to appreciate how Leopold's prose does not merely describe nature but shapes how nature can be thought, valued, and acted upon. This methodological choice underscores the conviction that literature is not ancillary to environmental ethics but foundational to it. Through literature, ecological imagination is cultivated, and through imagination, ecological responsibility becomes possible.

Of course, such a methodology comes with limitations. Interpretive readings are inevitably shaped by the concerns of the present moment, and no analysis can claim neutrality. This paper does not attempt to extract a definitive 'message' from Leopold but instead offers one interpretive trajectory among many. Nor does it attempt to encompass all of A Sand County Almanac, focusing instead on the "November" as a product of Leopold's ecological philosophy. These limitations, however, also serve as strengths. By narrowing the focus, the analysis allows for depth and attentiveness. By acknowledging its interpretive nature, it remains open to other readings, other contexts, and other possibilities.

Results and Discussion

"If I Were the Wind": Cultivating Ecological Sensitivity

"The wind that makes music in "November" corn is in a hurry. The stalks hum, the loose husks whisk skyward in half playful swirls, and the wind hurries on." (1949, p. 66)

Leopold is an expert at describing change. In fact, the whole first section of *A Sand County Almanac* is dedicated to communicate the change of months and seasons. The first sentence of "November", has the spirit of the whole book. It describes the incoming change of seasons– the approach of winter. Wind is the primary enforcer of change. It moves through the fields disturbing the decay. Leaves that are already down during the autumn are bothered. What is left after the wind passes are remains that are meant to be there. Here, winter approaches quickly.

This imagery seems similar to the current situation of ecological awareness. Climate change, habitat collapse, and extinction are not distant events. They were already happening in Leopold's time and still happening today. The Leopoldian "wind" may signify the reality of ecological degradation. Even so, it is a force that approaches without any intended malice. It is merely a consequence of other forces.

But seen another way, the wind in Leopold's essay is not simply meteorological. It is seasonal, cyclical, and deeply ecological. He describes how the "November" winds reveal the change in the land, stripping leaves from trees, carrying scents of decay, and announcing the transition into winter. These winds can be agents of revelation. They do not create the seasonal shift, but they make it visible, tangible, and undeniable. To acknowledge the wind, then, is to participate in this unveiling, to feel the interplay between endings and beginnings. The ordinary reader might experience the "November" wind as nuisance. Leopold would prefer for it to be seen as a force of change. The lesson seems that every gust is part of a cycle, every cycle a reminder of nature's persistence. In the "November" wind, decay and the renewal-to-come are inseparable.

"I wander over the bar to a driftwood log, where I sit and listen to the universal roar, and to the tinkle of wavelets on the shore." (1949, p. 66)

Leopold's sensitivity to rhythms resonates with older traditions of the sublime. Philosophers like Edmund Burke emphasized that the sublime arises when humans encounter forces larger than themselves; storms, mountains, or vast starry skies (Garrard, 2004). The wind has long been one such force, capable of terror and awe. Leopold's approach, however, differs from Burke in its intimacy. He does not present nature as overwhelming but as familiar. His sublime is not in magnitude but in subtlety, not in grandeur but in its capacity to connect. This can represent an different ecological move, the sublime is not only in the extraordinary but in the ordinary, not only in mountains but in breezes. The ecological implication is that reverence does not require spectacle, it requires attention.

Attention, in fact, is the heart of Leopold's essay. His reflections are about perceiving the mundane. He notices what the wind reveals: the timing of migrations, the state of the soil, the resilience of grasses, the frailty of dying leaves. This noticing is ecological sensitivity (Liszka, 2003). Contemporary environmental science often warns of the dangers of "shifting baseline syndrome," where each generation forgets the richness of past ecosystems and normalizes decline. Leopold's attentiveness to the wind resists this forgetting. By anchoring himself to seasonal cycles, he preserves memory of continuity and change. His "November" winds remind us that perception itself is a form of conservation.

The relevance of this lesson today is evident. Climate change disrupts seasonal cycles, making winds less predictable, seasons less stable. To cultivate ecological sensitivity now is to attend not only to cycles but to their disruption. Leopold's attentiveness provides a model: by listening to the wind, by noticing its changes, humans can attune themselves to ecological shifts before they become crises.

"Axe-in-Hand": Human Agency, Bias, and Responsibility

While "If I Were the Wind" focuses on imagination and sensitivity, "Axe-in-Hand" is about taking action. For Leopold, the axe is more than just a tool—it represents the power people have to change the environment with one swing. The essay seems straightforward, as Leopold describes cutting trees on his land, but it actually explores deeper questions about human choices, personal bias, and the responsibility that

comes with making decisions about nature. The axe stands for both power and responsibility, with effects that go beyond just one place.

"If a drouthy summer follows my removal of the birch's shade, the hotter soil may offset the lesser competition for water, and my pine be none the better for my bias." (1949, p. 70)

Leopold makes clear that every swing of the axe is shaped by choice. One tree is felled because it shades a favored plant, another because it blocks a view, another because it is deemed weak or expendable. Rarely is the decision purely ecological or scientific. Instead, it is shaped by taste, preference, and prejudice. "The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away," in this case it is the landowner who both gives and takes, who decides which lives endure and which are ended. The axe thus embodies what philosophers of technology call instrumental agency: the power to transform the world in ways that reflect human priorities. For Leopold, this agency demands self-critique. Every choice is biased, every bias consequential. To wield the axe is to confront not only wood and steel but one's own ethical responsibility.

The honesty with which Leopold acknowledges bias is striking. Many conservationists of his era cloaked decision-making in the language of utility, presenting environmental choices as objective or inevitable. Leopold strips away this veneer. He confesses that even in his own small-scale acts of cutting, personal bias is decisive. A crooked tree irritates him; down it goes. A tree with sentimental value is spared. He recognizes that preference, not necessity, often rules. This candor is not meant to excuse bias but to expose it. By naming bias, he invites readers to interrogate their own. The lesson is clear: environmental decisions are never value-free. Whether made with an axe, a plow, or an industrial machine, they reflect cultural assumptions, economic incentives, and personal desires.

This recognition of bias leads Leopold to critique what is called the "cornucopian vision" of industry, the belief that nature's abundance is infinite and that technological ingenuity can solve any scarcity (Garrard, 2004). With every swing of his axe, he reminds himself that life is finite, that removal is irreversible, and that bias unchecked leads to degradation. In contrast to industrial optimism, Leopold emphasizes restraint. The axe in hand is a reminder of limits, a call to humility. By dramatizing his own small-scale choices, he critiques the large-scale illusions of his time—illusions that persist in the present. The cornucopian dream, which still animates industrial agriculture and extractive capitalism, depends on forgetting the consequences of each cut. Leopold resists this forgetting by personalizing it. He refuses to imagine himself above bias, and in doing so he suggests that honesty about bias is the first step toward ecological responsibility.

The essay also anticipates contemporary environmental philosophy's recognition of scale. One person with one axe seems insignificant compared to global industry, yet Leopold insists on the moral significance of even small acts. The axe symbolizes the intimate scale of ecological agency. Each cut matters. Each choice reshapes the land. This is not to deny the massive power of industrial machines, but to insist that

responsibility begins locally, in the hand that grips the handle. In this sense, "Axe-in-Hand" resonates with Wendell Berry's insistence that global environmental crises are rooted in local failures of care. The forest is degraded not only by distant corporations but by the countless individual decisions made with tools in hand.

Yet Leopold is no sentimentalist. He does not call for abandoning the axe. He accepts that humans must act, must cut, must take. The question is not whether we act but how, and with what awareness. This pragmatic stance separates him from purely preservationist traditions that sometimes imagined a return to untouched wilderness. Leopold's axe is a reminder that humans are always already entangled in ecological processes. The task is not to withdraw but to act with honesty and restraint, acknowledging bias, recognizing limits, and cultivating reverence. In this way, "Axe-in-Hand" is not anti-technology but post-illusion. It accepts human agency while demanding that it be tempered by humility.

Contemporary relevance is clear. The cornucopian optimism Leopold critiques has only intensified. Industrial agriculture, fossil fuel extraction, and genetic engineering all rely on the assumption of endless abundance and human supremacy. The biases that guide these industries are less personal but no less powerful: profit margins, market demand, political expediency. Leopold's insistence on self-critique is urgently needed. If individuals with axes must examine their biases, so too must corporations with machines. The recognition that all environmental choices are value-laden is the first step toward honest discourse. Without it, conservation risks becoming rhetoric that masks exploitation.

"A Mighty Fortress" Ecological Agency and Assemblages

In his final "November" essay, "A Mighty Fortress", Aldo Leopold looks at subjects many might overlook: diseased trees and decay. The title, which usually suggests strength and stability, is used with a sense of irony. Instead of finding lasting grandeur, Leopold describes rot, insects, and breakdown. But in this setting, he shares a key insight: life is not about separate, strong individuals, but about connections where even decay leads to new creation. Nature's real strength comes from these changing relationships, not from unchanging walls. Seeing this way means rethinking how we view the natural world.

Leopold describes the fallen, diseased tree with careful attention. Where others might see only waste or weakness, he perceives continuity and connection. The tree is not merely dead matter; it is habitat, nourishment, and transformation. Grubs bore into its wood, fungi break down its tissues, soils absorb its nutrients. Each act of consumption is also an act of contribution, feeding cycles that sustain the forest. Decay, far from being the opposite of life, is its precondition. The tree lives on in the lives it enables. This recognition resists the anthropocentric tendency to value only growth, strength, and productivity. Leopold insists that weakness and death are not failures but essential components of ecological wholeness.

To articulate this vision, it is fruitful to place Leopold in dialogue with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, whose concept of the machinic assemblage describes systems of heterogeneous elements interacting in non-hierarchical ways (Ueno, 2019). For Deleuze and Guattari, an assemblage is not a static structure but a dynamic

process, a coming together of parts that maintain their difference even as they produce new functions. Leopold's diseased tree exemplifies such an assemblage. The tree, the grubs, the fungi, the soil, the birds that feed on the grubs—all remain distinct, yet their interactions create an ecological whole. The fortress is not the tree standing alone but the network that continues after its fall. By reading Leopold through Deleuze and Guattari, we see how his prose anticipates systems thinking, moving beyond organism-centered views to embrace relational ontology.

Leopold's insistence on the ecological agency of decay also challenges cultural narratives of purity and progress. In industrial and cultural discourse, disease is often imagined as defect, rot as failure, and decay as decline. Leopold overturns these assumptions. He recognizes that the grubs and fungi are not enemies of the forest but integral participants. To remove them would be to collapse the system. This inversion has ethical consequences. It asks humans to revise their categories, to see value not only in the strong and productive but also in the weak and decomposing. In ecological terms, this is recognition of resilience: ecosystems thrive not because they resist disturbance but because they incorporate it. The fortress is mighty not because it is unchanging but because it changes.

From the perspective of contemporary ecocriticism, "A Mighty Fortress" offers a crucial corrective to ecological confusion. Modern discourse often swings between extremes: romanticizing nature as pure and balanced or condemning it as fragile and doomed. Leopold's fortress resists both extremes. It presents nature as resilient but not invulnerable, dynamic but not indestructible. This balanced vision helps to reframe ecological crises. Climate change, biodiversity loss, and deforestation are catastrophic not because ecosystems cannot incorporate disturbance, but because the scale and pace of human disturbance exceed ecological thresholds. By highlighting the creative role of decay, Leopold clarifies that the problem is not disturbance itself but imbalance. His fortress metaphor therefore provides a language for resilience without complacency.

In practical terms, Leopold's vision encourages new attitudes toward conservation. Traditional conservation often sought to eliminate disease, suppress fire, and prevent disturbance. Leopold shows that such efforts may undermine ecological health. To conserve is not to freeze systems in static harmony but to support their dynamic processes. Modern conservation biology echoes this insight in practices such as controlled burns, rewilding, and allowing natural succession. Leopold's reflections foreshadow these strategies, offering philosophical grounding for what science would later confirm. His fortress is a guide not for control but for cooperation.

Finally, "A Mighty Fortress" completes the trajectory of the "November" chapter. If "If I Were the Wind" cultivates sensitivity to cycles and "Axe-in-Hand" explores human responsibility, "A Mighty Fortress" expands the frame to include nonhuman agency. Together, the three essays form a comprehensive ecological ethic: perceive with humility, act with honesty, and revere the agency of all beings, even in decay. The November winds, the swing of the axe, and the fortress of rot are not separate but interwoven. They remind us that ecological wisdom is not abstract but grounded in the ordinary, in winds and trees and grubs. To attend to them is to cultivate an ethic that can

guide us in an age of ecological confusion.

Conclusion

At first, the November essays in Aldo Leopold's A Sand County Almanac might seem like simple stories from rural Wisconsin. They focus more on everyday things rather than dramatic landscapes. But through these ordinary moments, Leopold shares an ecological ethic that still matters today. His writing teaches us how to notice, act, and show respect for nature.

From "If I Were the Wind", we learn the importance of sensitivity. Leopold's imaginative identification with the wind cultivates an attentiveness to cycles of change, reminding us that perception itself is ecological action. To notice seasonal rhythms is to resist forgetfulness, to anchor ourselves in patterns that modern life often obscures. His wind is not a resource to be harnessed but a relation to be honored. By aligning ourselves with the wind, we practice humility, recognizing that our place in the world is small, fleeting, and entangled with forces beyond our control. In an age of climate disruption, when winds carry the consequences of human industry across continents, Leopold's invitation to perceive like the wind is both poetic and prophetic.

From "Axe-in-Hand", we confront the ethical dimension of agency. The axe is not simply a tool for cutting wood; it is a symbol of human power to alter landscapes. Leopold's candid acknowledgment of his own biases in wielding the axe challenges the myth of neutral decision-making. Every cut, every choice, reflects values, preferences, and prejudices. This recognition demands honesty and humility. It critiques the cornucopian optimism of industries that imagine resources as infinite, while also questioning conservation philosophies that hide bias behind utilitarian calculations. Leopold's lesson is not to abandon the axe, but to use it with self-awareness, restraint, and reverence. His reflection anticipates today's debates about the moral weight of consumption, energy use, and technological intervention. The axe in hand remains, even now, a metaphor for our ecological agency.

From "A Mighty Fortress", we discover the agency of the nonhuman. Where others might see disease and decay as failures, Leopold sees processes of renewal. The fortress of the forest is mighty not because it resists disturbance, but because it incorporates it. Grubs, fungi, and rot are not enemies but participants in the cycle of life. By honoring decay, Leopold anticipates contemporary ecological theories of resilience and disturbance. He shows that strength lies not in permanence but in transformation, not in isolation but in relation. His vision expands reverence beyond the majestic to include the humble and overlooked. In recognizing the sanctity of rot, Leopold dissolves the boundary between life and death, strength and weakness, purity and pollution. The fortress of ecology is built from relations, not walls.

In today's world of accelerating ecological crises, Leopold's "November" remains a remedy for confusion. It reminds us that the path forward is not only about technological innovation or political reform, but also about cultivating perception, humility, and reverence. The wind, the axe, and the fortress are not relics of Leopold's Wisconsin—they are enduring symbols of ecological truth. To learn from them is to resist despair, to reorient our values, and to recover a sense of responsibility for the community of life. In the end, Leopold's "November" is not a nostalgic reflection but a

prophetic guide. It teaches that wisdom begins in the ordinary, that responsibility begins in honesty, and that reverence begins in recognizing the agency of all beings. These lessons, grounded in the rhythms of November, remain as mighty a fortress as any we could hope to build against the confusion of our ecological age.

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