

Ecological concern in henry david thoreau's walden (Pond) or, life in the woods.

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Abstract:

This article examines the ecological concern as revealed by Thoreau in his collection of essays titled *Walden* (pond). It also explores Thoreau's thoughts on man's spiritual consciousness in relation to nature. Thoreau's experiments and explorations for the restoration of mankind in union with nature are focused in this paper. His observations and study on the flora and fauna lead him to realise the importance of revitalisation, rebirth, and regeneration. This article emphasizes Thoreau's idea of living in harmony with nature which would result in a more purposeful, meaningful and joyous life.

Keywords : Pond, Flora, Fauna, Wilderness, Preservation, Inhabitation

Walden or Life in the Woods, published in 1854 is a collection of nature essays written by the American author, Henry David Thoreau. These essays contribute to a large extent to the world of natural sciences. Though the focus is not much on the nature itself, it is on the individual's relationship to nature. Thoreau in *Walden*, goes beyond a strict scientific appreciation of nature. *Walden* is presented by Thoreau at its best and contains all that he has to say to the world, especially the human relationship with nature.

Thoreau describes Walden Pond in vivid term: It was half a mile long and a mile and three quarters in circumference. The pond was at its greatest length and was intersected with the pond's greatest breadth exactly at the point of greatest depth and Thoreau had observed that the temperature on the 6th March, 1847, was 32 degrees in the middle of the pond and 33 near the shore. Thoreau lived at Walden Pond from July 4, 1845 to September 6, 1847. He has put his experiences in the wilderness on paper. Thoreau's experiment at Walden Pond is put forth as follows: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not when I came to die, discover that I had not lived" (Thoreau 68).

Thoreau had lived in the woods for more than two years, two months, and two days, and his experiences are condensed into a single year's cycle, enabling the configuration of *Walden* to keep in touch with the changing seasons. At the same time just after leaving Harvard University, Thoreau found his first arrowhead and began his first journal, and the two streams of propensity sprinted side by side in his nature till the end. Thoreau reveals many an aspect of the society. He despised the way his neighbour lived and compared their state to that of slaves without experiencing nature.

Thoreau's famous quote, near his cabin site at Walden Pond *Walden* is the author's exploration of the self, living in a close communion with nature. *Walden* consists of eighteen chapters. The first chapter of *Walden* is titled "Economy" which explains that the moral life of a man and his strength of knowledge are built on man's

dependence on nature. According to Thoreau, nature is the real source of man's spiritual consciousness and inspiration and it is Walden which is the truest expression of this consciousness.

The image of a morning is the main focus of Thoreau in the second chapter "Where I Lived and What I Lived For." He says, "Morning is where I am awake and there is a dawn in me" (Thoreau 68). And he further adds, "All memorable events, I should say, transpire in morning time and in a morning atmosphere.... Poetry and art are the fairest and most memorable of the actions of men, date from such an hour" (68)

To Thoreau "truth" is pragmatic, based on the study of facts and it must "flower out" in one's life. By leading the life of discovering truths, one can come in contact with 'reality'. Man can reach reality by living close to nature, which is Truth.

Site of Thoreau's cabin, 2010

His titles of the chapters "Former Inhabitants and Winter Visitors", "Winter Animals", "The Pond in Winter" suggest that winter with its retraction of life and freezing over stands for sleep or loss, awakens a man with a discovery of himself. The title "Spring" points out that Walden was dead and alive again. The awakening and the renewal of joy depend entirely on a period of self-discovery which preceded it.

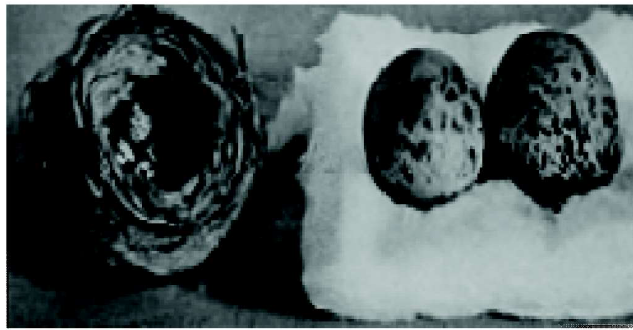
The chapter "Solitude" concentrates on communication and here Thoreau pleads that nature is the store-house of sincerity and impartiality. It is society that creates loneliness and fear which can be dispelled by contact with nature. A man is never alone if he is aware of his human relationship with nature. Solitude gives man a chance to draw closer to nature, which is the living reality. "Solitude is an affirmation of trust in the indescribable innocence and beneficence of Nature" (Thoreau 103).

The chapter entitled "Sounds" portrays a typical day of sounds. Thoreau goes on to criticize the train whistle that interrupts his dream. To him, the railroad symbolizes the destruction of the pastoral way of life. The following sounds he describes are audible from his cabin: the ringing of the church bells, the rattling and rumbling of carriages, the bellowing of cows, the singing

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White Pond



Bird eggs found by Thoreau which was later given to the Boston Society of Natural History



Walden in winter

of whip-poor-wills, the hooting of owls, the croaking of frogs, and the crowing and cockerels.

Memorial with a replica of Thoreau’s cabin near Walden.

Thoreau reveals that “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation” (Thoreau 9) and what he means is that what we call progress is not at all progress or success, and we confuse the ends with the means and the means

with the ends and the primitive man led a happier and fuller life than ours. But now we, a century later, are finding ourselves face to face with the very problems he foresaw and we consider him a prophet of our times.

Harmony with nature was even more necessary to Thoreau than keeping harmony with books. He was really not for solitariness because visitors were always coming to view the progress of his odd experiment at the pond. Still when Thoreau was left alone to study and observe, he was totally different from an ordinary companion, therefore, he could manage to be alone for long periods in the woods and the sky. A life of simplicity for which he argues in the first chapter “Economy” is a persistent theme throughout the book.

My purpose in going to Walden Pond was not to live cheaply nor to live dearly there, but to transact some private business with the fewest obstacles, to be hindered from accomplishing which for want of a little commonsense, a little enterprise and business talent, appeared not so sad as foolish. (Thoreau 18)

To Thoreau nature is not a mystic as she is to Wordsworth or Coleridge, but she is simply the enjoyable of companions or the pleasantest environment for a natural man. In a house or in a town he is like a caged creature. It is attributed that after swimming across the lake, Thoreau would sit in his doorway all morning, “in a wise passiveness” as Wordsworth had expressed it. The wild animals found him to be their own kind and, therefore, a mouse made friends with him, a hen partridge led her brood about his hut, and he could take a fish out of the water with his hand. Thoreau is perhaps the first to put forward the pleasure of hunting animals without a gun, of learning about them without any aspiration to kill. He was not influenced by Darwin’s conception of struggle for existence and survival of the fittest. Nature to him was not red in tooth and claw with raven; it was a gentle, and a peaceful alternative to the futile toil of man. The atmosphere of Walden is always serene and free from cloud or storm. Rain and winter come in their season but they never seem to disturb him. According to him, the rain does not wet and the winter does not chill.

Walden Pond

Since he was interested in observing and writing about nature, he decided to go to Walden Pond to live and observe nature. But he asserts that one can live a simple life in any place, if one has the mind to. Thoreau continued to live a simple life as he had lived at the pond after he returned to Concord. So we too, if we wish, can live a simple life in a village or a city. We can create our own Walden in the city of London, Bombay, or Tokyo. In Walden we can live a more purposeful, meaningful, and joyous life. That is, Thoreau tries to explain to his readers the real essence of Walden.

Thoreau’s relation to science was intense and he shared his interest in nature for its own sake. Thoreau was a student of botany and zoology and he was fond of using Latin names of plants and animals whenever he wrote about them. He sent specimens of fishes and turtles to

Aqassiz for identification. He was not interested to go beyond the description of behaviour and classification.

White Pond

Thoreau did not advocate the abandonment of physical advantages produced by modern science. But to the contrary he pointed out that we were not making the best possible use of them. They have often turned out to be as he believed "improved means to unimproved ends." For example, we go to great lengths to install a cable across the Atlantic Ocean and then use it to inquire whether "Princess Adelaide has the Whooping cough" rather than to communicate great ideas. We build a railroad to get to the city an hour faster and then waste the hour when we get there. He advises us to make the proper use of science and its advancements. He spends his time examining his thoughts towards higher moral and intellectual standards and also towards a very straightforward and reverential celebration of nature. He is particularly energized about the character, appearance and characteristics of Walden Pond and much of his book describes the pond and praises its uniqueness. In "Autumn" he talks about the countryside and writes down his observations about geography of Walden Pond and its neighbouring ponds, that is, the Flint's Pond, White Pond, and Goose Pond. Although Flint Pond is the largest, Thoreau's favourites are Walden and White Ponds, which he says are lovelier than diamonds.

Bird eggs found by Thoreau which was later given to the Boston Society of Natural History

Walden may also be read as an account of the flora and fauna of Concord. A large portion of time Thoreau spent in observing and studying the birds, animals, flowers, trees and the progress of the different seasons. He also discusses the life of the wild animals which are his neighbours. A description of the nesting habits of partridges is followed by a fascinating account of a massive battle between red and black ants and he examines under a microscope the black ant killing the two smaller red ones. He also amuses himself by watching wildlife during winter. He narrates his observations of owls, hares, red squirrels, mice and various birds as they hunt, sing, and eat the leftovers and corn he put out for them.

Thoreau also records his encounters with many hunters, loggers, and other manual labourers who come to the pond. "Former Inhabitants and Winter Visitors" is dedicated to people who once lived near the pond. He also mentions about some of his closest friends and intellectual partners who frequently paid visits to Thoreau. Though he places a higher value on natural observation than anything else, he also gives a special place to knowledge and careful intellectual argument which he feels is best undertaken in a natural setting like Walden. He thinks about books on nature as religious texts.

The major themes of Walden are revitalization, rebirth, and regeneration. Although he lived near the pond for more than two years, he tenaciously telescoped the two years into one in his book *Walden* not only for artistic

and creative unity but also for emphasizing the theme of renewal. *Walden* starts with Thoreau's going out to the pond in the spring and then he stays there through the summer, the autumn, and the winter ending with the renewal of life in the spring. This is the major pattern of the book and woven into it are all sorts of superfluities of this seasonal pattern, when he speaks in "Economy" of the American Indians who through bask fire regularly destroyed their dress so that they could begin anew. Besides in this "Conclusion" he speaks of the strange insect that buried itself in the wood of an apple-tree table for sixty years and then suddenly came to life or also the pond itself which each year went dormant under its winter covering ice only to come alive again each spring. When each time Thoreau reiterates the image of renewal, he emphasizes his hope and belief that mankind will inevitably renew his spirit **Walden in winter** and be led to greater accomplishments not physical but spiritual and sacred accomplishments.

Walden, as a creative work of art, is often pointed out as the earliest example of modern American prose. The sentences are straightforward, concise and to the point. There is no mid-Victorian rambling and, therefore, the words are precise, sensual, and concrete with no vagueness and intangibility. His use of figurative language should be emphasized and appreciated. One can find in *Walden* all types of figure of speech, from epizeuxis to meiosis or less exotic figures from similes to puns. Puns in turn lead to the subject of humour in *Walden*. It is a "critical humour" which is not there to simply lighten the pages and makes us laugh as with the humour of Jonathan Swift but it is there to make us think and reflect upon nature. We may laugh when we read "the head monkey at Paris puts on a traveller's cap and all the monkey in the America do the same," but our laughter is touched with the knowledge that Thoreau in more ways than one is making monkeys of us all.

The flora and fauna he describes are inevitably American though he writes about them in universal terms so that one does not need guides and references to read the birds and flowers of the north-eastern United States to understand his work. To conclude as John Updike wrote in *The Guardian* in 2004:

A century and a half after its publication *Walden* has become such a totem of the back-to-nature, preservationist, anti-business, civil-disobedience mindset, and Thoreau so vivid a protestor, so perfect a crank and hermit saint, that the book risks being as revered and unread as the Bible.

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