
Man and Nature in *Walden*

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To cite this article:

Qin Liu. Man and Nature in *Walden*. *International Journal of Literature and Arts*. Vol. 5, No. 4, 2017, pp. 26-30.

doi: 10.11648/j.ijla.20170504.11

Received: May 6, 2017; **Accepted:** May 15, 2017; **Published:** July 13, 2017

Abstract: Since *Walden* publication, it has been studied from a great variety of perspectives, but these studies mainly focus on Thoreau's views on nature in general, or his ecological ideas. A detailed and comprehensive study of the animals in *Walden* is rarely seen. Examining the animals in *Walden*, this paper intends to probe into Thoreau's positive philosophy of life. Through a detailed analysis of man-animal relationship in *Walden*, we are in a better position to understand Thoreau as a realist. His retreat to nature is not an escape, but an attempt to put his belief into practice, aiming to find a model for the harmonious co-existence between man and nature. The record of his simple life in *Walden* proves that man and nature can live in harmony with each other, and provides a good example for human beings to solve the spiritual and environmental crises.

Keywords: *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau, Animal, Realist

1. Introduction

Henry David Thoreau is a great American writer of transcendentalism and the pioneer of modern environmentalism. Being an ardent lover of nature, he devoted his entire life to studying the relationship between man and nature, and bequeathed a legacy of works in this field. However, he is often misunderstood as a pure romanticist and an escapist. This thesis attempts to prove that Thoreau is a realist who is deeply concerned with the social issues of his time and voluntarily experiments with his life, hoping that he can find the solutions. With the rise of spiritual crisis as well as global environmental problems, *Walden* that is his masterpiece appeals to more and more readers for Thoreau's prophetic vision of a harmonious world.

Walden was published in 1854, and it took Thoreau five years to complete. It is based on Thoreau's two-year solitary living at *Walden* Pond from 1845 to 1847. However, it is far from being a realistic account of his life at *Walden*. In fact, this book is a personal declaration of independence. It is full of wisdom and thoughts, reflecting Thoreau's meditation on the meaning and purposes of life as well as demonstrating his philosophy of life which is both romantic and realistic. Thoreau advocates a simple way of living, which manifests both an attitude towards life and the way to harmony. In

Walden, Thoreau maintains that the ultimate purpose of life is to live a true life, and suggests that people should restrain their desires and live a simple life. Meanwhile, Thoreau takes the small pond as the symbol of the whole ecosystem where he can freely commune with the universal soul and strive to establish a harmonious relationship with nature.

Walden is made up of 18 chapters, and every chapter has its own title and theme. It is a brief summary of Thoreau's twenty-six months' living experiences at *Walden* Pond. In the first Chapter "Economy", Thoreau criticizes the American lifestyle and persuades people to live a simple but free life. The second Chapter "Where I lived, and What I lived for" describes Thoreau's philosophy of life, to truly live a life rather than make a living. Chapter three "Reading" introduces the purpose and significance of reading. Chapter four "Sounds" and Chapter five "Solitude" Thoreau leads the audience to appreciate the beauty of nature, and claims that he never feels lonely in the woods. Chapter six "Visitors" describes various kinds of visitors and Thoreau's meditations upon friendship and responsibility. Chapter seven "The Bean-Field", Chapter eight "The Village" and Chapter nine "The Ponds" are the vivid descriptions of the magnificent landscape. The "Baker Farm" Chapter tells us the author's encounter with John Field to whom Thoreau suggests a simple life. Chapter eleven "Higher Laws" and the following Chapter "Brute Neighbors" are the vivid accounts of animals' life in nature, here Thoreau considers seriously the problem

of harmonious coexistence of man and animals. Chapter fourteen “Former Inhabitants and Winter Visitors” tells about the visits of Thoreau’s friends, such as Emerson and Channing. Chapter “Winter Animals” and “The Pond in Winter” concern Thoreau’s investigation of the pond, the observation of the flora and fauna in winter. The seventeen Chapter “Spring” records the vitality of plants and animals at the coming of the spring. The last Chapter “Conclusion” is a summary of Thoreau’s life at the woods and an explanation of why he eventually chooses to leave the place.

This paper is going to discuss Thoreau as a realist rather than as a hermit who retreats to nature as a way of escaping the corrupt reality of his time. On the contrary, as my analysis will show, Thoreau attempts to figure out solutions to the social problems. His living in solitude at *Walden* Pond nurtures his nature consciousness and provides a peaceful place where Thoreau can meditate upon the essence of human nature and the human-nature relationship. Through his experimentation, Thoreau proves that it is possible for people to live an outwardly simple and inwardly diversified life which would help people achieve self-realization, and that it is possible for people to live harmoniously with other creatures, which will eventually lead to an environmentally friendly society.

2. Animals in *Walden*

In *Walden*, Thoreau does not observe and describe the animals as a zoologist. Instead, he gives them a spiritual and philosophical significance. He endows the animals with human characteristics. Thereupon, Thoreau often describes the similarities between animals and people he comes across. People can be just as greedy and shallow as the marmot of the prairie, or as naughty and clumsy as red squirrels, or as lazy and cunning as chickadees, or as loyal as gundogs in Thoreau’s writings.

In Thoreau’s eyes, human is just a “plain citizen” in nature, not a master over the creatures. Animals are equal with human beings as well as other non-human organisms. Human should not make interruptions and destructions to animals, plants and other organisms. As an equal member of the ecosystem, human should have respect for other organisms, and live in harmony with them as their neighbor [4]. In this chapter, I will focus on the animals in *Walden*, the diversities of animals, the human characteristics of animals, and Thoreau’s depiction of the hawk.

2.1. The Diversity of Animals

In *Walden*, Thoreau is accompanied by a diversity of animals. They live in harmony with each other, and the various activities of animals give Thoreau a new sense of the variety of nature and the meanings of life. It can be said that the diversities of animals make a diverse mode of life. What Thoreau seeks is not to encourage people to live only one mode of life, but “to brag as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up” (Thoreau 147). Thoreau would not have people all give up

their normal life to live in the woods. What Thoreau advocates is a diverse and harmonious life with nature, with humans and other living organisms included. The diversity of animals is one essential aspect of a diverse life. Thoreau himself would not live only one mode of life, which is the reason why he leaves the woods in the end. Naess also believes that “Life is a succession of different expeditions full of uncertainties and challenges. One stereotyped mode of life might incur spiritual stagnation and poverty.” [1] Hence, a diversity of life would promote the achievement of self-culture, and the modes of life should and could be as diverse as possible.

2.2. Human Characteristics of Animals

In *Walden*, Thoreau views birds and animals as equivalents to human beings. Man is “a part and parcel of nature”. Fishes, frogs and water birds, like ducks and geese, are equal inhabitants of *Walden* just as he is. He regards these non-human lives as his neighbors, and endows them with human characteristics. In his writing, these animals are referred to with human pronouns, “he” or “she” rather than “it”.

Thoreau pays great attention to the resemblance of animals to human wars. The animals’ world is not peaceful at all. Each has to fight for its survival, and the conflicts and tensions are everywhere. Only the strongest, smartest, fittest can win in the end. In the world of animals, each wants to dominate the others, once they get the dominant place, they will not let it go. Moreover, the animals cannot stop fighting all over their lives, and they are forced to live a struggling life all through their lives. Thoreau believes that the animals are fighting for a principle, a belief, just like our ancestors. They have to fight to have their essential needs satisfied. Similar to human community, animals have racial and national conflicts, and the world is also full of violence and conflicts.

The attribution of human characteristics to animals helps Thoreau to enrich and deepen his understanding of nature and the mankind, for the reason that the natural laws embodied in the animals’ activities can apply to humans as well. The close observation and persistent contemplation on the animals enables people to reap the harvest of self-culture which will be analyzed in the following chapters.

3. Thoreau’s Realistic Ideas on Harmonious Coexistence of Man and Animals

Thoreau has realized through his close observation of animals that man and animals, different as they are, exist in one ecosphere and are closely connected to each other. He firmly believes that man and animals can harmoniously coexist on the same earth. His realistic ideas of harmonious coexistence of mankind and animals are of great importance to the modern readers. In this part, Thoreau’s views are to be analyzed in three aspects, all of which are inseparable from each other, and the omission of any one of them would do

harm to the harmonious coexistence of human and animals, and, in a broader sense, the omission of any one of the would ruin the whole ecosystem balance.

3.1. Recognition of Animals' Values

As an indispensable part of nature, animals have their intrinsic values which should not be judged from their economic interests to human beings. In *Walden*, Thoreau gives a vivid description of the beauty and liveliness of animals. The existence of animals adds color and vigor to the earth. Thoreau enjoys being with animals, and animals provide him with happiness and sweet remedy for a soul. The animals come and go give him "much entertainment by their manoeuvres." [2]. He "was amused by watching the motions of the various animals which were baited by" the ears of sweet corn he threw out of his house.

Animal's value also exists for providing a model and pattern for the development of the individual. We can get deep inspiration when we see an ugly caterpillar transforms into a beautiful butterfly and a gluttonous maggot becomes a fly, animals need far less than human beings, they can "content themselves with a drop or two of the honey or some other sweet liquid." Human beings should learn from animals, and it would be less troublesome to get one's necessary food as simple a diet as animals', animals need very little to survive. Uncooked foods can satisfy their hunger, and their own furs are the best clothes to keep warm. Compared with human beings, animals lead a free and simple life. Indeed, it is the mode of life Thoreau advocates. He calls for simplicity in life to realize self-value with the help of nature. He suggests that people should get rid of unnecessary material requirements to pursue the real spiritual improvements. Besides its intrinsic values, animals exist as divine entities as well. Animals are incarnations of beauty and perfection. Wandering in the wildness and talking with animals, people would be exhilarated by the beauty and liveliness of nature.

Through Thoreau's experiment at *Walden Pond*, we know that animals have their own intrinsic values, and they are divine entities of the earth which are not judged by their economic or scientific benefits to humans. To be in harmony with animals, we should treat them as individual entities not as subordinates to human beings.

3.2. Respect the Rights of Animals

Thoreau advocates a perfect harmony between mankind and nature. He believes that man and animals are not enemies, they are friends and equal inhabitants of the earth. He criticizes the human-centered attitude towards nature. In his opinion, human beings are higher animals, who have a sophisticated brain and can influence other non-human life. But that does not mean that they can dominate the world. As one of the earliest animal conservationists, Thoreau suggests that it is a savage thing for humans to eat their own species. He equals man's eating animals with man's eating each other. In his opinion, people should stop eating animals to develop

from brutes to civilized mankind. Animals have thoughts, souls and rights, and they are worth being respected. Animals are living organisms in the whole ecosystem, in which they have equal rights as humans. However, they are not made for mankind, and their values cannot be measured by their usefulness to human purposes. They should be respected as parts of the whole ecosystem. In no way can we achieve a perfect harmony without consideration and respect for animals.

In *Walden*, Thoreau pleads for the rights of animals. He sees animals as equal part of nature, and frequently compares the similarities between man and animals. The only difference between animals and people lies in that people have thoughts. However, people cannot dominate nature by their pure thoughts, humans' sophisticated intelligence does not make them the leader of nature; on the contrary, people should live in harmony with other inhabitants of nature, and show respect for their rights. Animals, as an equal part of earth, should enjoy equal living rights and space as human beings. The relationship between man and animals should be that of equal brotherhood and sisterhood. The human-centered attitudes toward nature would destroy the natural harmony and mankind would also suffer from it [5]. In other words, if humans do harm to nature and animals, humans are doing harm to themselves. Everything in the world is interrelated and interdependent, thus people should respect nonhuman individuals as parts of the whole ecosystem for the sustainable development of the world.

3.3. Being Neighbor of Animals

At *Walden*, Thoreau regards himself as a neighbor to the animals rather than cage animals to be his neighbors. He holds the view that animals are not only wild creatures, but part of mountains, rivers, and part of nature. He realizes through his own experiences that animals have feelings, souls and minds. They are conscious, and able to suffer or even to feel pain. Thoreau once said that a rabbit would make a cry as woeful as a child. He wishes to establish a harmonious relationship with animals, and considers himself the neighbor of those animals.

Thoreau shares his house and bean field with forest animals, like mice, squirrels, robins, etc. He enjoys observing their activities and living with them. As a matter of fact, the animal neighbors help Thoreau gain a deeper understanding of nature while enriching his life. Under the companion of animals, Thoreau fulfills self-exploration, self-realization, and self-development through nature. Animals are not his enemies but his true friends and intimate neighbors.

The different characters of his animal neighbors add to the liveliness of nature. By living closely with animals, Thoreau comes to understand the human nature. To Thoreau, animals' world is a mirror of human community, from which we could reflect on ourselves and get a deep understanding of life. Nature, in Thoreau's eyes, is full of wisdom. Being neighbor with animals is conducive to man's self-culture through nature, for the reason that animals are indispensable parts of nature.

Being neighbor of animals is salutary for the harmonious coexistence of man and animals [6]. Thoreau advocates that human beings should treat animals as equals, never trying to dominate over them or taming them for social or economic purposes. Animals are not subordinate to human beings; instead, they are our neighbors who share the common residence.

4. Thoreau's Exploration of Models for Harmony Between Man and Nature

Thoreau was determined to stay away from the crowds, the noises, the society, the religion and the public opinions to ponder over the existing social and spiritual crisis, and to find a proper mode of life for the people. By living with animals and plants at *Walden Pond*, Thoreau intermingles with nature. He intends to find the model for the harmony between man and nature, and to solve the conflicts between man and nature.

4.1. Biocentric Equality---Foundation for Harmonious Relationship

The term biocentric equality was first brought up by Arne Naess in his article "The Shallow and the Deep, Lone-Range Ecology Movement" in 1973. It means that all things in the ecosystem are equal in their intrinsic value. All organisms and entities are parts of the interrelated whole, so they should have equal rights to live in the ecosphere. It is a kind of complete equality which could extend to the whole ecosphere. According to Arne Naess and George Sessions, the deep ecology's religious roots originate from many different religions, but its philosophical roots can be "found in ecocentrism and social criticism of Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Robinson Jeffers, and Aldous Huxley" [3]

To Thoreau, the *Walden Pond* is a living web that includes all organisms, human or nonhuman. It is endowed with beauty and dynamics. The book is abundant with the beautiful descriptions of the nature. As he went to the woods, Thoreau found a completely different world. He became neighbors of different kinds of plants and animals. All things contribute to the beauty and liveliness of the nature. The sight of a vast range of trees and flowers, the sounds of different kinds of birds and animals, the beautiful landscape of ponds and farms constitute a marvelous picture of harmony. All things at *Walden* have inseparable rights to live, to blossom and to reach their own fullness. Each living organism is interdependent on each other, and everything is equal in the web of ecosphere.

The biocentric equality also finds its expression in Thoreau's objection to man's interruption and destruction of nature. At *Walden*, Thoreau witnesses man's ruthless damages on nature. People cut down trees for money, catch fish for food, kill different kinds of animal for their meat or fur. The luxuriant trees surrounding the *Walden* have gone, the woods are laid waste. Thoreau records the change of *Walden Pond* with pity.

In Thoreau's minds, the natural beauty of *Walden Pond* was ruined because of man's greediness. The disruptive human action has done great harm to the lake, and would eventually damage the whole ecosphere. This conveys clearly his idea that all things in the world are interdependent, and human beings have no rights to exploit the earth for their own economical or social purposes, otherwise, people would be punished for their own wrongdoings. Human beings should respect all organisms and entities in nature, and they all have equal rights to live and grow. Biocentric or ecocentric equality is the foundation for the harmony between man and nature.

4.2. Voluntary Simplicity of Life---On the Way to Harmony

Thoreau's simplicity is a kind of voluntary simplicity which he chooses for himself. Voluntary simplicity requires both inner and outer relinquishment on material wealth and comfort. It means to be inwardly sincere and honest to live a simplified life, and to refrain outwardly from worldly enjoyment. To Thoreau, there are two kinds of simplicity, the philosopher's and the savage's. He favors an "outwardly simple, but inwardly complex" style of life, or the philosopher's simple life of wisdom. It is a style of life that lives harmoniously with nature and has minimum impacts on other kinds of species.

Thoreau's life at *Walden Pond* is an experiment with simple life. With the development of society, the material life of people becomes much better. However, people could not fully enjoy their life; instead, they have to work even harder to make more money. In *Walden*, He encourages people to abandon the redundant material possessions and pursue the true spiritual life. To Thoreau, the simplicity has two meanings. On the one hand, it calls for people to get rid of greedy requirements for material things. On the other hand, it encourages people to pursue rich spiritual enjoyment by simple means.

Hence, he builds his own cabin and furnishes his house on his own, eats the food he grows, and seldom has any material possessions. In this way, he has a clear observation towards the society. He realizes that it is materialism that causes people to exploit nature excessively. Meanwhile, he suggests that people should adopt a correct attitude towards mankind and nature. The biggest misfortune of humans is to become slaves to the material things and themselves.

4.3. Self-culture Through Nature---Ideal Result

In *Walden*, Thoreau complains that human beings have lost their true identity. They are too preoccupied with endless work and useless worries, but they ignore the true cultivation of the self. In *Walden*, he writes, "the oldest Egyptian or Hindoo philosopher raised a corner of the veil from the statue of divinity and I gaze upon as fresh a glory as he did, since it was I in him that was then so bold, and it is he in me that now reviews the vision." [2]. It is evident that we have to lift the veil from the statue of the divinity to realize self-culture, to find the true self.

Thoreau believes that nature is friendly and receptive to human beings, and it would help people to cultivate themselves if man and nature can live in harmony. Thoreau selects nature as the best approach to realize his self-culture, hoping to achieve self-culture through the communion and union with nature. He intends to counterbalance the disappointments of bitter reality with the help of nature, for he firmly believes that the fallen self in the material world can be saved by returning to nature to recover its innocence.

In fact, Thoreau's life is a process of constant seeking after self-culture, and the authentic and innocent nature contributes to his achievement of self-culture. He believes that the innocent and pure nature would show mankind a way back to an authentic and true life which would help mankind to find the true nature of man. For the reason that nature is not only symbolic in reflecting the spiritual part of a man, but also offers a good way towards self-culture by liberating people from the material and spiritual burdens of society Thoreau advocates that people should get close to nature and be inspired by nature. Only in this way can human fulfill self-culture, and then to live an authentic and meaningful lives. It requires constant and conscious efforts of human beings to form the union between the individual self and the universal self, embodied in nature. In other words, to live a full life by forming a harmonious relationship with nature is the ultimate and ideal result.

5. Conclusion

Thoreau is a naturalist and a realist, who has devoted all his life to finding a proper lifestyle for human existence. His retreat to the woods is an exploration of the essence of life. His solitary living at the woods is a great experiment on establishing a harmonious society.

Thoreau's masterpiece *Walden* is an eloquent account of Thoreau's meditation on the coexistence of man and nature. Being a keen observer of plants and animals at *Walden*, Thoreau not only discovers the inner connection of animals and human race, but also the mode of living for the harmony between man and nature through his living experiences with animals.

Based on the above analysis, we can conclude that Thoreau's ideas and explorations in *Walden* point out the way to a harmonious society. Thus it is worthwhile to reread Thoreau's *Walden* from the perspective of the relationship

between animals and human beings, and to better grasp the essence of his philosophy.

Acknowledgements

This work is supported by Top-notch Academic Programs Project of Jiangsu Higher Education Institutions, the project of Science Research of Yancheng Normal University (No. 14YCKW031), the project of Development and Reform Research of Yancheng Normal University (No. 14YCFZ011).

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