

Revisiting Thoreau: Nature and Natural in the Literary Imagination

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Abstract

Thoreau's corpus of writings celebrates nature and the natural. Nature, for Thoreau, is a spiritual vehicle and a living entity. He considers "man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society" (2000, p. 627). As a foundational text for environmentalism and ecocriticism, Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) accentuates the importance of nature as an inalienable entity for the human existence. His influential essay "Walking" (1862) demonstrates the significance of nature for the "physical, mental, and spiritual" well-being of human beings. Another essay "Paradise (to be) Regained" (1843) critiques the technological advancement at the cost of nature and manipulation of the natural ecosystem. This paper seeks to locate nature and the natural in the literary imagination of Thoreau's three influential texts *Walden*, "Walking", and "Paradise (to be) Regained".

Keywords: Thoreau, Nature-writing, Ecocriticism, *Walden*, Transcendentalism

Ecocriticism or the branch of literary criticism that examines the relationship between human beings and nature was formally established in 1970s. However, its original impetus had already been provided in the latter half of the 19th century by Henry David Thoreau (1817 - 1862). In 1857, reflecting on his theoretical position on environment justice he wrote in a journal: "true art is but the expression of our love of nature"(p. 460). His oeuvre and life philosophy constitute the foundational moment for the environmental awareness and ecocriticism. His corpus of writings celebrates nature and the

natural landscape. The theorization of his first-hand experiences and empirical observations of nature and the wilderness near Walden Pond provides the theoretical framework for environmental criticism.

In this paper I will locate nature and the natural in the literary imagination of Thoreau's three influential texts *Walden* (1854), "Walking" (1862), and "Paradise (to be) Regained" (1843). Besides, I will also examine the ways his writings intersect with ecocriticism and environmentalism and enrich our understanding of environmental justice.

Thoreau's environmental position challenges the conventional anthropocentrism that defines man's relationship with nature. Anthropocentrism legitimatizes the human beings' exploitation of nature and animals as it believes that man is God's image, he is not part of the nature, rather all the animals and nature have been part of God's design to serve man's purpose and needs (White, p. 9). For instance, Lynn White, Jr. argues that our environmental catastrophe is rooted in anthropocentrism, "an ethic that makes human interests central" and legitimatizes man's dominance over nature and the animals (Hiltner, p. 2). However, Thoreau contests this hypothesis. His seminal text *Walden* subverts the anthropocentric tradition of the West and the account of his two years and two months stay in the forest near the Concord Pond redefines the relationship between nature and man. Nature and animals for Thoreau are not subservient to human beings rather they are inalienable entities for the human existence. As he writes: I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wilderness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil, - to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of the Nature, rather than a member of society ("Walking", p. 161).

Similarly, Thoreau's theorization of his lived experiences of his two years and two months stay in forests near the Concord Pond problematizes the conventional understanding of wilderness and forests. Conventionally, forest and wilderness have been defined in demonic terms to human beings. Civilized society has considered wilderness and forests as alien places, as antithesis to human settlements. However, this demonization has been a late construction. For instance, Ken Hiltner argues that since the medieval period "forests were generally imagined as dark and foreboding places, the home of wild animals and criminals" and "dangerous places, inhabited by very dangerous people outside the reach of law" (p. xiv). However, Thoreau rejects this demonic construction of the nature. He repetitively argues that "wild places, like forest

and mountains” are “sublime and precious” (Hiltner, p. xiv). For instance, *Walden* describes the forests and wilderness as appealing and welcoming. Besides, he defines wilderness not as antithetical to the concept of beauty rather than in terms of the beautiful. As he writes, “all good things are wild and free” (“Walking”, p. 197). Also, he is against the taming of the tigers and tanning of the animals and believes that the wild nature of the animals must not be tempered with as it amounts to gross interference into the natural design of the providence. He writes, “it is not the part of a true culture to tame tigers, any more than it is to make sheep ferocious; and tanning their skins for shoes is not the best use to which they can be put” (“Walking”, p. 199). Thus he sees other creatures of the earth as indispensable and valuable members of nature rather than subservient creatures to human beings.

Moreover, Thoreau's environmental justice accentuates the “regenerative power” of the wilderness and forests. (Marx, p. 377) For instance, his expedition in the forests near the Walden Pond signifies his pursuit for the restoration and possession of his purity that seems to have been adulterated during the social occupation. Sherman Paul writes,

Walden was Thoreau's quest for a reality he lost, and for this reason it was a quest for purity. Purity meant a return to the spring (and springtime) of life, to the golden age of his youth and active senses, when the mirror of his self was not clouded by self-consciousness. (p. 353)

Furthermore, Thoreau's understanding of nature personifies nature as a divine embodiment. Nature, for Thoreau is a living entity, a spiritual vehicle that leads heavenwards. According to him, “Nature has from the first expanded the minute blossoms of the forest only toward the heavens, above men's heads and unobserved by them” (“Waking”, p. 211). Thoreau finds a causal connection between the environmental landscape and the intellectual health of the human beings and attributes the loss of the pristine nature of man to his alienation from the nature. Pristine woodland provides the inhabitants the pristine occupations and here man is more congenial both to other men and other species.

For I believe that climate does thus react on man—as there is something in the mountain air that feeds the spirit and inspires. Will not man grow to greater perfection intellectually as well as physically under these influences? ... I trust that we shall be more imaginative, that our thoughts

will be clearer, fresher, and more ethereal, as our sky—our understanding more comprehensive and broader, like our plains—our intellect generally on a grander scale. (“Walking”, pp. 182-183)

This view of Thoreau invokes another seminal concept in environmental concerns that is animism. Actually, animism has several connotations and as a terminology it was devised by anthropologist E. B. Tylor. Tylor's conception of animism “summarizes his definition of religion as “belief in spiritual beings””. His usage of the term denotes a “theory of religion”. (Chidester, p. 78) However, in its other application the term is referred to primitive and indigenous religions that believe that human beings share this world with all other living and non-living entities and they possess spirit. This view has been asserted by many indigenous tribes who worship nature or at least project nature as a part of the Providence. In other words, its essence rests on the philosophy that “all that exists lives” and “all that lives is holy”. Animism in this sense of the term is antithetical to the idea of anthropocentrism. While primitive religions have been founded on animism, the institutionalized religions are considered to be anthropocentrism. That is why his view of animism is sometimes used by critics to compare the institutionalized religions with the primitive belief system of religion for understanding the alarming environmental disaster in the modern age (Encyclopedia, p. 81). Thoreau's environmental justice also reflects that natural objects possess spirit and their existence must be protected.

Remarkably, Thoreau's occupation in the forests and wilderness profoundly shaped his moral philosophy. He moved in the forests near Walden Pond on July 4, 1845 and lived an ascetic life for two years, two months, and two days. However, his position on the abolition of slavery, war, and the civil government was profoundly informed by this expedition. For example, he delivered his influential essay “Resistance to Civil Government” on January 26, 1848, a year after his expedition in the forests. Besides, he delivered another lecture against the re-enslavement of Anthony Burns on July 4, 1854, which was later published as “Slavery in Massachusetts” and became more voracious for the abolition of slavery.

Walden affirms that wilderness and forests stand for innocence and incorruptibility. Man and his worldly affairs such as religious and political affiliations, agricultural and commercial interests and ambitions have little space in the pristine woodland (“Walking”, p.170). Besides, it attributes the

retreat to the wilderness and forests to the restoration of wellness and happiness. For instance, walking for Thoreau is not just a physical exercise, it's a kind a spiritual expedition that gives the walker the opportunity to immerse in the nature. He writes, "For every walk is a sort of crusade, preached by some Peter the Hermit in us, to go forth and reconquer this Holy Land" ("Walking" p. 162). Furthermore, immersing in nature embodies a sort of salvation from the worldly affairs because it bestows freedom, independence, and leisure and it "comes only by the grace of God" ("Walking", p. 163). Thoreau's spiritual signification of walking echoes the importance of walking in Jainism, in which, walking is one of the chief prerequisites for attaining moksha.

Conversely, nature has some divine retributions too when it is tampered with. Natural calamities signify man's misadventures with the nature providence.

Every gazette brings accounts of the untutored freaks of the wind, - shipwrecks and hurricanes which the mariner and planter accept as special or general providences; but they touch our consciences, they remind us of our sins. Another deluge would disgrace mankind. ("Paradise" p. 452)

Thus, *Walden* provides juxtaposition of his lived experiences both in the society and in the forests and wilderness. Another influential essay "Walking" demonstrates the significance of nature for human beings' physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. It suggests that the presence of the birds and animals have significant bearing on the moral health of the society. A vanished or absent natural landscape has polluting and corrupting effects on the intellectual terrain and wisdom of the human beings ("Walking" p. 182). He goes on to say,

We are accustomed to say in New England that few and fewer pigeons visit us every year. Our forests furnish no mast for them. So, it would seem, few and fewer thoughts visit each growing man from year to year, for the grove in our minds is laid waste—sold to feed unnecessary fires of ambition or sent to mill—and there is scarcely a twig left for them to perch on. ("Walking", p. 209)

Furthermore, it also underscores human beings' lack of appreciation of nature and the natural landscape and reflects on the alarming shrinking of forests and degradation of the natural ecosystem. "Nature is a personality so vast and universal that we have never seen one of her features" ("Walking", p. 207). It

rebukes the infringement of wilderness for the human settlements and growing industrialization at the cost of the pristine woodland. For instance, Thoreau writes that human progress that comes at “the building of houses and the cutting down of the forest and of all large trees, simply deform the landscape, and make it more and more tame and cheap” (“Walking”, p. 169).

Thoreau's worldview on environment was heavily influenced by the transcendentalist movement. Transcendentalism as an intellectual and philosophical movement began in the first half of the nineteenth century and was influenced by the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Along with Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Amos Bronson Alcott, Theodore Parker, and Frederic Henry Hedge, Henry David Thoreau was one of the prominent figures in the movement. Inspired by German Romanticism and criticism of institutionalized religion it was an anti-establishment movement that sought to reform the contemporary American society. It also attempted to redefine man's relation to the universe and therefore, man's relation to nature (Transcendentalism). According to Emerson, the transcendentalists wanted to redefine society through “an original relation to the universe”(p. 3). Therefore, they questioned society's law and morality and were highly critical of slavery, racism, and the materialistic society. Heavily influenced by transcendentalism, Thoreau also experimented with transcendentalist maxims in his day to day life (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). It is important to remember that Thoreau's seminal text “Resistance to Civil Government” was written at this high time of transcendentalist movement. He also started several experimentations at this time. He found solitude and refuge in forests, embarked on expeditions and excursions in the natural landscape, and wrote and spoke against slavery. In 1839, Thoreau embarked on an excursion to Concord, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire with his brother John. The narrative account of this journey has been expressed in his book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849). Interestingly, they set on the voyage in a self-made boat. The boat, fifteen feet long was made in just one week (McPhee, p. ix). The trip went for two weeks that gave Thoreau opportunity to meditate on earthly issues. He contrasts his own occupation in nature with the functioning of the contemporary society. It reflects upon nature's bounty and magnificence and human beings' ignorance about it. He writes,

It is worth the while to make a voyage up this stream, if you go no farther than Sudbury, only to see how much country there is in the rear of us;

great hills, and a hundred brooks, and farm-houses, and barns, and haystacks, you never saw before, and men everywhere, Sudbury, that is Southborough men, and Wayland, and Nine-Acre-Corner men, and Bound Rock, where four towns bound on a rock in the river, Lincoln, Wayland, Sudbury, Concord. (*Week*, p. 9)

As a transcendentalist, Thoreau's philosophy is shaped by his appreciation and precedence of nature over the manufactured landscape. For instance, written as a review of J. A. Etzler's celebrated book, *The Paradise within the Reach of all Men, without Labor, by Powers of Nature and Machinery: An Address to all intelligent men, in two parts* (1842) Thoreau's treatise "Paradise (to be) Regained" critiques human beings' technological advancement at the cost of the nature and manipulating the natural ecosystem for their own desires. Etzler's technological utopian text proposes to create a paradise on earth by embarking on the technological exploitation of natural resources.

Etzler envisages a completely mechanized society where everything will be abundantly available to everyone with least of labor and endeavor. Most importantly, the natural ecosystem such as lakes, rivers, and mountains, would be transformed to suit the need of human beings. For he writes,

"I promise to show the means of creating within ten years, where everything desirable for human life may be had by every man in superabundance, without labor, and without pay", thus he proposes a world where "Mankind may thus live in and enjoy a new world, far superior to the present, and raise themselves far higher in the scale of being." ("Paradise", p. 451)

However, Thoreau sees his proposition morally and ethically unviable as it embarks on the abuse of nature and the natural. For he believes, that though Etzler's futuristic mechanized world seems promising, it comes at the expense of the natural order of the earth. Although, Thoreau is not averse to creating a prosperous society, his means of accomplishing this end is exactly the opposite to that of Etzler. Etzler argues that in order to create a paradise on the earth first the natural ecosystem and surroundings must be reformed and renovated to suit the human beings' comforts and desires. Thoreau, on the other hand, believes that a perfect and prosperous world could only be created when first human beings are reformed. For example, he writes,

One says he will reform himself, and then nature and circumstances will

be right. Let us not obstruct ourselves, for that is the greatest friction. It is of little importance though a cloud obstruct[s] the view of the astronomer compared with his own blindness. The other will reform nature and circumstances, and then man will be right. ("Paradise" pp. 451-452)

Thus, Thoreau claims that paradise on the earth can be created only when nature is restored to itself. However, abuse of the nature has only prevented it from realizing this aspiration. For instance, he writes,

At present the globe goes with a shattered constitution in its orbit. Has it not asthma, and ague, and fever, and dropsy, and flatulence, and pleurisy, and is it not afflicted with vermin? Has it not its healthful laws counteracted, and its energy which will yet redeem it? No doubt the simple powers of nature, properly directed by man, would make it healthy and paradise; as the laws of man's own constitution but wait to be obeyed, to restore him to health and happiness. Our panaceas cure but few ails, our general hospitals are private and exclusive. ("Paradise", p. 452)

To conclude, Thoreau's oeuvre celebrates the natural and ecological terrain. The theorization of his experience of the nature and the natural redefines the relationship between the human beings and the nature that intersects with the concerns of the environmental criticism. He problematises the conventional understanding of the nature and considers wilderness and forests as divine, appealing, and part of the providence. Besides, he voices his concerns over the shrinking natural landscape and human beings' alienation from the forests and wilderness, and the consequences of man's material and technological advancement at the cost of the natural and scape. Thus, his writing outlines the theoretical framework that constitutes the foundational moment for the environmental criticism.

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