

# From Society to Solitude: An In-depth Analysis of Thoreau's Characters in *Walden*\*

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With the deterioration of the environment and the unbalanced relationship between man and nature, people are plagued by varieties of social problems and rising spiritual crises. This paper aims to analyze Thoreau's characters in *Walden* and attempts to provide the implications for our contemporary life. Combined with Thoreau's life experience and the background of *Walden*, the paper starts with the analysis of Thoreau's characters from three aspects concerning his pursuit of inner serenity, search for true essence of life and abiding passion for life, which constitute his unique and independent characters and provide the enlightenment for contemporary life. We concluded that unique thoughts, attitudes, and spirit embedded in Thoreau's characters are inextricably connected with our contemporary life. His personal experience and practice of solitary life at Walden Pond is a testimony to the necessity of closing to nature actively and confronting life passionately.

*Keywords:* Thoreau, *Walden*, solitude, characters, enlightenment for life

## Introduction

Thoreau is considered as “the first major interpreter of nature in American literary history and the first American environmentalist saint” (Myerson, 2000, p. 1). The long prose *Walden* is a classic work of Transcendentalism. In *Walden* Thoreau positioned himself as a careful observer of nature and considered nature as an aesthetic object and tried his best to discover its spiritual meaning, which are closely related to his unique characters and are exact reflections of his spirit. In *Walden*, his philosophical view of life is practical and poetic, personal and universal. With the tremendous transformation in society, people are intoxicated with material wealth by exploiting and conquering nature. As a consequence, people are plagued by varieties of social problems and rising spiritual crises. In *Walden*, the author describes the feeling that is unique to one's life—loneliness. The author does not describe it directly but uses some animals to demonstrate the feeling in his heart: The bullfrog barked in the darkness and the sound of the nightingale rose from the lake by the blowing winds. The swaying alder stimulated his emotions and made him barely breathe. However, as the mirror-like lake, the wave from the evening breeze is not a storm. Although loneliness makes the author “almost unable to

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breathe”, he believes this is not the most terrible thing in life and quietness cannot be absolute because “the repose is never complete” (Thoreau, 2004, p. 117).

Researchers have studied Thoreau and his works for more than a hundred years. In the last decades, with increasingly serious social problems such as the ecological environment, people began to re-examine the profound implications of Thoreau's works: *Walden* is not simply a description of the beauty of nature but also carries a deep reflection on the relationship between man and nature. Generally, most studies investigated the gradual development of Thoreau's spiritual world and showed his pursuit of self-realization in nature. In addition, Xu Chi (2006) first translated *Walden* and introduced Thoreau's ideas into China. Zhang Ailing once mentioned in her article *Thoreau's Life and Works* that Thoreau “lived a life similar to Robinson's drifting on deserted island when he was living at Walden Pond. This is a very famous event in the history of American literature” (Zhang Ailing, 1965, p. 2). Wei An thinks Thoreau's prose is simple, accurate, and intelligent. Inspired by Thoreau, he turns from creation of poetry to prose writing. He observes and narrates everything about nature and takes Thoreau as a model in life and behavior. However, the subjects covered by Chinese scholars were relatively single.

After the 1990s the research on Thoreau showed a thriving trend. The enthusiasm for the study of *Walden* has gradually increased and more versions of translation have appeared. Thoreau's perspective on nature and social life are studied mainly from his pursuit of life, morality, views on nature, etc. He fights against excessive luxury, advocates the simplification of material life, pursues spiritual fulfillment, and keeps a balance between humanity and nature (Bate, 2000, p. 3). These research contends that a simple life does not necessarily mean requiring all modern people to live a secluded life, but it just suggests that people keep their material wanted and consumer demands within the ecological bearing capacity, so that they can elevate their spiritual mentality and cultivate a taste for ecological aesthetics (Wang & Chen, 2009, p. 47).

Previous studies on Thoreau and *Walden* shared some consensus that Thoreau's practice proves that people should simplify their material life, elevate their spiritual mentality, and return to nature. However, the majority of the scope and vision focus on ecological ethics, naturalism, and freedom. The depth and breadth of research still need to be further expanded. Besides, there still exist some aspects in Thoreau's characters, and thus need to be further explored. Therefore, this study is intended to explain Thoreau's characters from different aspects, and further attempt to gain enlightenment for our contemporary life on how to better purify the minds and enjoy the pleasure of life, and how to effectively address the problems encountered in social life. Accordingly, based on the contents of *Walden*, this article elaborates Thoreau's distinctive view on solitude, nature, the essence of life, and self-realization, shedding light on the appropriate attitudes to nature, life and adversity as well as a healthy lifestyle.

### **In Pursuit of Inner Serenity**

The pursuit of inner serenity is actually a matter of how to keep a balance between oneself and the external world. In 1845 Thoreau came to Walden with absolute loneliness and built a house in the forest. He was both physically and spiritually eager to be immersed in a natural and pleasant atmosphere, which allowed him to truly get close to the earth. Intimate contact with nature assisted him in truly penetrating the natural texture and listening to the sounds from the deepest parts of nature (Cavell, 1972, p. 15). Thoreau's understanding of solitude

is of difference from ordinary people. People in modern world think that loneliness is a kind of suffering. On the contrary, in the eyes of Thoreau, loneliness is his partner, bringing him a sense of happiness and satisfaction: "I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude" (Thoreau, 2004, p. 123). So from the perspective of Thoreau, his seclusion is also a kind of entry into the world.

Just as Thoreau put it in *Walden*, whether a person is alone or cannot be calculated by the number of people. When you are alone in a busy job or something you are interested in you will not feel lonely even if you are alone in the eyes of others. Because you don't have time to feel lonely and you don't even think about it. When you are busy with something that you are willing to do, you will enjoy the sense of achievement. In addition, one cannot measure the degree of loneliness by counting how far away he is from his companion. You can be inseparable for 24 hours a day but "no exertion of the legs can bring two minds much nearer to one another" (Thoreau, 2004, p. 121). Being inseparable can only explain the distance of the body, but cannot measure the loneliness of the inner heart. When the distance between the two hearts and minds gradually narrows, even the ends of the earth are also close at hand.

During the period of two years of living in Walden, the only companion for Thoreau is nature. He once said "Real natural experiences can produce true wisdom" (Thoreau, 2004, p. 36). Thoreau makes a comparison between himself and nature. From the point of his view, he is not alone but has quite a few companions, that is natural items like a loon in the pond, the sun, God and Walden Pond itself. Especially in his eyes, those things are as lonely as him. He believes that man and nature are in an equal relationship. It is nature that shapes the unique characters of Thoreau. At Walden Pond there are flowers, grasses and insects as companions. There is no extra restraint and no disturbance from outside. There is only free flow of thoughts and freedom of reading. All spirits are relaxed and the human heart has been given unprecedented elevation. Nature plays a big role in purifying the human soul, enlightening the mind and revealing the essence of mentality (Bloom, 2008, p. 28). Thoreau pointed out that "as you simplify your life in nature, the laws of the universe will be simpler; solitude will not be solitude, poverty will not be poverty, nor weakness weakness" (Thoreau, 2004, p. 75). The human mind is inspired by the natural world and becomes rich and fulfilling. It can be said that the creation of Walden is also the result of natural enlightenment.

In short, Thoreau develops strong faith and determination. Although solitude cannot be rejoicing, it can lead you straight into your original heart to find a true self, a real world, which is the meaning of solitude. No matter where and when he was, he always follows his original heart. When he doubted if his lack of neighborhood was appropriate or when he was asked by others whether he felt lonely or not, he can invariably know what he want and give his perfect answers. Nature is the source of Thoreau's wisdom. He is inseparable with nature.

### **In Search of True Essence of Life**

What distinguishes human beings from animals lies in that human understand what is the meaning of life. The whole period of one's life is a process of continuous search for the true essence of life. In pursuit of a spiritual experience, Thoreau gained the most genuine and exact experience of life. He savors the intimate relationship between human beings and gradually develops his own thoughts and has his own judgments, becoming free from the oppression of others (Zhang, 2007, p. 90). In terms of Thoreau's thoughts during the period of his living in Walden, it is noticeable that he differs from others. When someone thinks he is lonesome, he feels just the

opposite. Even, he makes up his mind to give up so many comforts of life so as to avoid too many distractions, which is unacceptable and unbelievable for most people. And he suggests that people should live with a certain distance, because “society is commonly too cheap. We meet at very short intervals, not having had time to acquire any new value for each other” (Thoreau, 2004, p. 123). Otherwise human beings are easily affected by surroundings and swayed by others’ opinions, while it is extremely difficult to adhere to one’s own beliefs all along.

From the narrations of *Walden*, it can be found Thoreau hopes that people can truly understand what they really want instead of following what others want. The significance of life lies in acquiring a spiritual freedom instead of being a slave to life (Yang, 2014, p. 15). One of the most valuable characters of him is that he has independent thoughts and never follows others blindly. Whenever faced with something that can be dealt with according to his willing, he always has rational ideas and follows his heart without being influenced by the opinions of others. Men frequently say to Thoreau that “you would feel lonesome and want to be nearer to folks”, for which he once “doubted if the near neighborhood of man was not essential to a serene and healthy life”. But he was “at the same time conscious of a slight insanity and seemed to foresee his recovery and sensible of such sweet and beneficial society in nature” (Thoreau, 2004, p. 119). So whether to copy other people’s thoughts without any judgments or to take their essence and discard the dregs is fundamentally different. Undoubtedly, as Thoreau asserted, with thinking we may be beside ourselves in a sane sense (Thoreau, 2004, p. 122). With independent thinking, he is in a better position to make clear distinctions between the right and wrong and treat things in an objective manner.

Furthermore, it is assumed that the aim of Thoreau’s living at Walden involves not only enjoying the pleasure of solitude but also focusing on self-realization. Through the experience of solitude and constant reading and considering, he hopes to discover the true essence of life and elevate his spiritual state of mind. The nature of Thoreau’s concentration on self-realization is actually to gain a promotion of spirit. Spiritual life in *Spiritual Civilization* is defined as “the spiritual activities of people for survival and development, which included the ideal, sentiment, interests, beliefs, social study, love, and a variety of cultural entertainment, etc.” (Wang, 2013, p. 42). On the shores of Walden, Thoreau’s greatest interest is not to observe the hustle and bustle of daily life but to examine the inner world of the individual. He once said “I could bring my mind to give up so many comforts of life” (Thoreau, 2004, p. 121). He always reflects on whether he has a noble spirit. Then what is the answer to this question? He tells the world with his personal experience: in order to improve the current spiritual situation of human life we must promote simple life. “This kind of simple life view is trying to find a way to return to nature, hoping to regain the harmonious relationship between human and nature” (Ren, 2013, p. 17). It can bring maximum spiritual freedom to mankind and it is also a prerequisite for people to live in harmony with nature. From Thoreau’s perspective, the closeness of the human body is not equal to the intimacy of the heart. Thus the priority should be put more on the communication between the human and the human mind. This kind of communication can function without language and it does not depend on the physical proximity. As long as everyone has their own independent spiritual world they can reach the others’ spirits.

Therefore, Thoreau put more emphasis on the mental development. The process of spiritual development reflects his view on the relationship of material and spirit. “Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, were not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind” (Thoreau,

2004, p. 18). In this way, Thoreau achieves his expansion in spiritual aspect. "High quality spiritual life contains a healthy mental life, rich cultural life; and the relentless pursuit of truth, goodness and beauty. It is an important symbol of pursuing the quality of life, which contributes to the improvement of the moral and personality" (Pan, 2008, p. 68). Therefore in the choice between material and spirit, Thoreau must have his own independent spiritual world.

### **Being Full of Abiding Passion for Life**

Thoreau believes that everything has a bright facet as long as people have a continued enthusiasm for life. It seems that he enjoys life at Walden and is always free from cares. As a matter of fact, it is inevitable that no one's life is smooth and perfect. Thoreau is an optimistic person. He believes that getting close to nature is the best way to cure darkness. Despite the fact that it was raining all day and he couldn't go out, he sat quietly listening to the sound of the rain behind the door. Unstoppable rain makes the potatoes in the ground rot, but that's okay because rotten potatoes are also good for the grass in the highlands. Thoreau thinks that he is favored by the gods more than others and is "especially guided and guarded" (Thoreau, 2004, p. 119). His sense of happiness is derived from his optimistic attitude.

At the same time, there is another point in Thoreau which is worth to be noticed. That is his distinct way of thinking. In front of adversity and suffering, he chooses to confront bravely rather than complains and falls into despair. Just as he said, "nothing can rightly compel a simple and brave man to a vulgar sadness" (Thoreau, 2004, p. 119). He is good at altering his way of thinking and transforming situations. In his mind, there must be bright facet behind any misfortunes. It's no wonder that he feels "I was distinctly made aware of the presence of something kindred to me, even in scenes which we are accustomed to call wild and dreary" (Thoreau, 2004, p. 120). It's because the quality of life does not completely come from the abundance or impoverishment of material life. It depends more on our attitude and state of mind. When the heart is in gloom, the whole world will be bleak; if the heart is in bloom, then life will be full of light. For Thoreau, optimism is a sign of mental health, maturity and strength (Harding, 1982, p. 46). It is a buffer against people's frustration in life and helps people better cope with the various crises and challenges in life. In contrast, pessimistic thinking will only weaken the spiritual power, reduce enthusiasm and kill creativity. Difficulties and obstacles do exist but if you are optimistic then they are simply episodes on our long road to victory.

Additionally, it seems that Thoreau spent most time at Walden on his spiritual development without much attention to practical affairs. In effect, in the process of his pursuit of mental improvement, he does not ignore to seek something that's closely related to his actual living. He depicts himself that "I think that I love society as much as most. I am naturally no hermit, but might possibly sit out the sturdiest frequenter of the bar-room, if my business called me thither" (Thoreau, 2004, p. 127). So he just strikes a good balance between the ideal and the reality. Actually, going back to nature can be equated to the returning to life. It is to explore the solutions to problems in reality from nature. In such a wonderful and beautiful natural environment he established the most intimate connection with nature, which has provided him with a wealth of writing materials. To some extent, he has become a part of nature, but he is not purely immersed in nature with ignorance of earthly affairs.

Therefore, aside from his pursuit of a noble spirit, Thoreau also pays attention to reality with practical purpose and absorbs nutrition from reality. "Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves

and vegetable mould myself?" (Thoreau, 2004, p. 125). These words indicate his reflection on the relationship between himself and reality. He contends that "the pill which will keep us well, serene, contented is our great-grandmother Nature's universal, vegetable, botanic medicines" (Thoreau, 2004, p. 125). All of these are manifestations of his down-to-earth spirit.

### Conclusion

This study concentrates on Thoreau's unique qualities by analyzing his thoughts on nature and attitudes toward life. We make a detailed analysis of Thoreau's characters in terms of his pursuit of inner serenity, quest for essence of life and enduring passion for life. Then we draw profound implications for contemporary life. Thoreau's unique thoughts and attitudes are clear manifestations of his characters. He emphasizes the significant role nature plays in the life of human beings as well as the healing effects that nature may bring to man. So he makes an attempt to keep company with nature and has a pleasant time living with solitude. He has firm beliefs that the true essence of life can be found in one's pursuit of independent thoughts. With an abiding passion for life, whenever faced with adversity, he never falls into depression and always sees the positive sides of everything. What's more precious in his quality is that he puts all of his beliefs into practice, which holds him in good stead in his remarkable achievements as well as his personal sense of accomplishments.

As a whole, we are in a better position to draw a conclusion about the significance of *Walden* and Thoreau. By living wisely and independently, he provides us with insights about what is a truly successful and meaningful life. With the rise of varieties of social tough issues, people in contemporary society are overwhelmed by spiritual crises. They are in an urgent need to rescue themselves from those sufferings. Fortunately, under the guidance of Thoreau, the most effective way is to live in harmony with nature, cultivate independent thoughts, and embrace life with passion.

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