

Lecture 14: Intro to Literature & the Environment, *Thoreau*

"I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms."

"Walden", 59

"Walden"

Walden is part autobiography, part non-fiction, and part novel:

Like many novels, Walden is highly autobiographical, but changes many real-life details. For example, Thoreau lived at Walden Pond for two years; Walden compresses the experience into one. Walden also resembles non-fiction writing as some of its chapters are little more than essays.

"Walden" was not well received in its time; that would change 100 years later: Thoreau had trouble publishing Walden; he put it through eight rewrites before 1854. Walden was rarely read in the 19th and early 20th centuries. However, 100 years after its publication, Walden became enormously popular with (and helped inspire) the 1960's "back-to-the-land movement."

Beginning in the 1960s, a surprising number of individuals have tried to actually live Thoreau's Walden lifestyle. Most recently this phenomena appeared in Jon Krakauer's 1996 book *Into the Wild* (and the Sean Penn film that it inspired), based on the life, and death, of Chris McCandless.

Walden brings together many of the themes that we have covered this term: With the possible exception of "The Description of Cooke Ham," Thoreau likely read every work to date on our syllabus. He is thoroughly aware of the Western tradition, its ideas, and its literary forms. Consequently, he is well positioned to understand, interpret, and push forward our literary past.

In addition to understanding the past, Thoreau anticipates the future:

As Walden contains a very modern perspective on the environment, in many respects Thoreau's perspective is ours as well. Even if unknowingly, we have inherited many of our attitudes from Thoreau and his era. These ideas may predate him (as with Jonson), but Thoreau modernizes them.

Thus, Thoreau transitioned past thinking into our environmental present:

Thoreau's thinking did not arise in a vacuum, but rather is the (perhaps inevitable) conclusion of centuries, if not millennia, of thinking.

"Walden" as Loco-descriptive

Walden is highly descriptive of a locale: Walden Pond:

Like other loco-descriptive works that we have read, Walden foregrounds the locale from its title forward: "The Description of Cookehame," "To Penshurst," Coopers Hill, "Upon Appleton House," & "Mont Blanc."

Walden, however, takes the project far further, especially in the descriptions of Walden Pond itself. We have not encountered this level of description before: "Walden is blue at one time and green at another, even from the same point of view. Lying between the earth and the heavens, it partakes of the color of both. Viewed from a hilltop it reflects the color of the sky; but near at hand it is of a yellowish tint next the shore where you can see the sand, then a light green, which gradually deepens to a uniform dark green in the body of the pond. In some lights, viewed even from a hilltop, it is of a vivid green next the shore" (page 115--this is just one of the many, many descriptions of Walden Pond in the text).

Walden explores elements of description previously ignored, such as sounds"

"The whistle of the locomotive penetrates my woods summer and winter, sounding like the scream of a hawk sailing over some farmer's yard, informing me that many restless city merchants are arriving" (77).

"Late in the evening I heard the distant rumbling of wagons over bridges--a sound heard farther than almost any other at night--the baying of dogs, and sometimes again the lowing of some disconsolate cow in a distant barn-yard" (82).

Thoreau repeatedly uses onomatopoeia to invoke the sound of sounds:

"When other birds are still, the screech owls take up the strain, like mourning women their ancient u-lu-lu. Their dismal scream is truly Ben Jonsonian" (81).

"Walden" as Critique of Consumerism

Walden contains a critique of consumerism in the spirit of Jonson and Denham:

"The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation," argued Thoreau (Walden, 4), because, as Denham had already realized 200 years before in Cooper's Hill, "Their vast desires, but make their wants the more" (l. 32).

In fact, the opening "Economy" chapter of Walden follows Denham directly:

I see the City in a thicker cloud
Of business, then of smoake; where men like Ants
Toyle to prevent imaginarie wants;
Yet all in vaine.

(Cooper's Hill, l. 28-31)

Thoreau takes Denham seriously; he derives a way of life from his observations.

Critiquing consumerism is not new with Walden, but it is carried to a new level: What is new with Walden is that radical lifestyle changes are now being called for in response to rampant consumerism. Thoreau is not only critical of excessive consumption on environmental grounds; he has a plan to do something about it--and encourages us (his readers) to do the same.

Unlike Jonson and Denham, Thoreau's approach sounds strikingly modern: For example, Thoreau attacks the fashion industry, which even in the 1840s was centered in Paris: "The head monkey at Paris puts on a traveller's cap, and all the monkeys in America do the same" (16).

Consequently, to Thoreau, clothing factories have less to do with seeing that "mankind may be well and honestly clad," than to ensuring "that the corporations may be enriched" (17).

Therefore, "beware of all enterprises that require new clothes" (14)!

Thoreau's critique of excessive consumption focuses on our literal dwellings: In the spirit of the "modest" house celebrated in "To Penshurst," Thoreau actually suggests that a box "six feet long by three wide...[with]...a few auger holes in it, to admit the air," would be an adequate human shelter (18)

Although Thoreau's suggestion may seem radical, Marvell had already made it:

Why should of all things man unrul'd
Such unproportion'd dwellings build?
The beasts are by their dens exprest,
And birds contrive an equal nest;
The low roof'd tortoises do dwell
In cases fit of tortoise-shell;
No creature loves an empty space;
Their bodies measure out their place.
(Upon Appleton House 9-18)

Two questions remain from Thoreau's critique of excessive consumption:

Are his lifestyle prescriptions only valid in a rural or wilderness setting?

Must his prescriptions be taken to the extreme degree that he proposes?

"Walden" as Ecocentric

"To Penshurst" and "The Description of Cookeham" were anthropocentric: In Jonson's and Lanyer's poems, the environment is largely seen as centered on human inhabitants of the estate, which the plants and animals living there are imagined as willingly serving--and even happily dying for.

By contrast, in Walden the environment is not centered on the text's speaker:

As Thoreau imagines it, Walden Pond and the wooded area surrounding it are by no means just there for the benefit of their sole human inhabitant; rather, as all life there is equally served, it is ecocentric or “biocentric,” centered on the “ecological” place; all the life in that environment.

Hence, Thoreau’s speaker is part of the life there, but not a privileged part: The lifestyle that Thoreau advocates in Walden radically re-imagines the relationship that human beings have to the planet, as the environment, according to Thoreau, should no longer be centered on us.

The text of Walden is itself far more ecocentric than previous works: Not only is Thoreau advocating an ecocentric ethic in Walden, the text is highly ecocentric, as descriptions so lavishly portray the environment that the human characters in the text, the visitors to speaker’s home, seem far less important. Walden is centered on the environment, not human beings.

In Walden, the environment itself, in the form of the pond, is almost a character: The narrator of Walden comes close to speaking to the pond as if it were human and capable of understanding. “I see by its face that it is visited by the same reflection [of God]; and I can almost say, Walden, is it you?” (126). To our speaker, Walden Pond is not unlike a close friend.

Because it is so ecocentric, Walden is a milestone environmental text: Arguably, no other text prior to Walden was as ecocentric. Few other writers ever imagined a physical place almost like a character in the text.

In the visually arts, Thoreau’s era also moved away from anthropocentrism: In “Hunt of the Unicorn” (1500) humans beings dominated the scene.

In the 1650s, Claude Lorrain radically reduced the human presence.

In Thoreau’s era, human beings are tiny; in awe of the sublime scene, such as Dorè’s “Niagara” (1860), and Thomas Cole’s “The Fall of Kaaterskill” (1826).

But does a human presence & perspective still dominate the scene in some sense? Such as in Friedrich’s “Wanderer”?

Is Walden (the text) still dominated by a human presence and perspective? Note that the word “I” appears over two dozen times in the opening four paragraphs of Walden, three of which it begins. As in Friedrich’s painting, the human presence, in this case in the form of the narrator, still looms large in the work, in spite of efforts to foreground the environment. Friedrich’s painting is a strikingly effective effort to make this fact clear.

This raises an obvious question: Is Walden ecocentric or anthropocentric? While Walden is undeniably a milestone ecocentric text, it is also, at least in some sense, all about Thoreau. Indeed, it closely resembles his personal journals. Consequently, Walden is also, in a highly personal way, an anthropocentric text--a fact which destabilizes its expressed ecocentric perspective.

Ecocentrism and Anthropocentrism

Is anthropocentrism in fact unavoidable for human beings? Although early environmental critics were critical of anthropocentrism, as Walden makes clear, even a highly ecocentric perspective is shot through with human interests. Consequently, "pure" ecocentrism (altogether removing human beings from the scene) is not possible, even for Thoreau.

When too simplistic, ecocentrism can actually be dangerous: Speaking from a radical ecocentric perspective, in 1990 a co-founder of the environmental organization Earth First!, Dave Foreman, called human beings "a cancer on nature." Critics responded that such a position was worrisome, as it was also held in Nazi Germany by individuals who began exterminating people in part because they were seen as such a "cancer."

In the 21st century, ecocentrism is, for most of the planet, impossible: Now that human beings directly control over 85% of the planet's land mass, it is simply impossible to separate human interests from other life.

Thoreau as Monist

Like Milton, Thoreau propounds the environmental implications of monism: "Why has man rooted himself thus firmly in the earth, but that he may rise in the same proportion into the heavens above?" -- for the nobler plants are valued for the fruit they bear at last in the air and light, far from the ground, and are not treated like the humbler esculents" ("Walden", 9).

These lines echo Milton's striking deconstruction of dualism in *Paradise Lost*: "So from the root / Springs lighter the green stalk, from thence the leaves / More aerie, last the bright consummate floure" (5.479-81).

Like Milton, Thoreau not only imagined human beings as an enmeshed amalgam of flesh and spirit, he saw this "spiritual flesh" as deeply rooted in the earth, like a plant. This deconstruction has profound implications as both thinkers would erase the divide between the physical & metaphysical.

Axis Mundi
Metaphysical
Physical

Walden is strikingly direct about the body and its functions, such as eating: Thoreau is thinking through an age-old question: what exactly constitutes the “good life.” His answer, involving everything from eating to worship, is what you might expect of such a thoroughgoing monist.

The narrator in Walden largely advocates vegetarianism:

“Like many of my contemporaries, I had rarely for many years used animal food . . . not so much because of any ill effects which I had traced to them, as because they were not agreeable to my imagination. The repugnance to animal food is not the effect of experience, but is an instinct” (139).

The narrator in Walden is a proponent of “eating locally”:

In 21st century America, the average fruit or vegetable travels 1500 miles before reaching our tables. The message in Walden is one of radical self reliance, borrowed from Ralph Waldo Emerson, which includes the growth and preparation of one’s own food, as well as the rejection of imported foodstuffs (see the “Higher Laws” chapter).

Thoreau as genius loci

Traditionally, genius loci figures protected the environment--from humans:

In The Myth of Gilgamesh, for example, Humbaba at least tried to protect the Cedar Forest from Gilgamesh’s dream of unbridled human exploitation.

In the early modern period, human beings are increasingly seen as genius loci:

Jonson argued that Robert Sidney protected the Penshurst estate; the speaker of “Cookeham” worried what would happen to the estate without its female protectors; Milton imagined Eve as the genius loci of Eden.

The narrator of Walden is clearly a genius loci; the protector of Walden Pond:

Although there are early modern precedents, Thoreau greatly expands the notion that a human being could be a genius loci, actually implying that his readers should themselves become protectors of places. As perhaps the first modern environmentalist, Thoreau is suggesting that environmentalists are the new genius loci. This inverts and challenges the traditional view.

"Walden" as Pastoral

Walden is thoroughly in the pastoral tradition:

Thoreau read both Theocritus and Virgil, and, like Katherine Philips and the Romantic poets, he unabashedly imagined the countryside as a pastoral locus amoenus. Like Wordsworth, Thoreau literally moved to the country.

Although acutely aware of urban problems, Thoreau turns away from them: Like many Romantic poets, and unlike Edward Burtynsky, Thoreau turns away from contemporary environmental problems in search of a simpler life in the country. The danger here is that this move risks turning, even running, away from these problems. Millions of individuals have followed Thoreau into countryside; ironically in the process hastening its destruction.

Thus, overly romanticizing the countryside carries a twofold danger: First, we risk ignoring--and doing something about--the environmental difficulties that come with human culture. Second, in running away from these issues, we may bring these problems to the areas we romanticize.

“Walden” Conclusion

Questions that remain from Thoreau’s environmental critique of modernity:

1. Are his lifestyle prescriptions only valid in a rural or wilderness setting? Could one live a “Walden” lifestyle in the inner city, for example? From the point of view of consumption of the planet’s resources, how would Thoreau’s Walden way of life be different in a city? A suburb?
2. Must his prescriptions be taken to the extreme degree that he proposes? Does Thoreau have anything to offer to individuals who are unwilling, perhaps unable, to make such a radical break with consumer society?
3. Is Thoreau’s highly Spartan lifestyle even possible for most people? Since he was unwilling--or unable--to sustain it for more than two years (assuming that he did at all, given his reliance on the town of Concord), could other individuals, much less families, duplicate it for a lifetime? Even if they could, should they do so on environmental grounds?
4. What do we make of the fact that SUV advertisements promise to literally take us to the sort of places about which Thoreau and the Romantic poets waxed poetically? Is there a danger here?
5. If adopted, would Thoreau’s prescriptions actually harm the environment? What would happen if millions of individuals did what he did? What would the effect be on the rural environments so inhabited? Is there a danger in this “pastoral” impulse?
6. With respect to Thoreau’s “pastoral impulse,” how does it compare to what we have been calling the anti-pastoral of artist Edward Burtynsky? Does one approach have environmental advantages over the other? Does Burtynsky’s approach avoid the above dangers that we have seen with overly romanticizing the countryside?