

American Literature: Notes on the Spirit of Thoreau

Emerson and Thoreau

In the “Declaration of Independence,” Thomas Jefferson presented a vision of a new nation in which everyone could live freely and have “the pursuit of happiness” as a possibility. In Thoreau’s life and writings, we see an attempt to carry out this ideal.



Very concerned about social injustice, Thoreau wanted to be free of government valued his individual privacy. He rejected the Puritan conscience and relied on the inner spirit; he also tried to become aware of how he was connected with everything in Nature. In this he put into practice the transcendentalism of Emerson. He enjoyed living close to Nature rather than living in a town or big city. As he says in Walden, in cities and towns people live “lives of quiet desperation.”



Because he enjoyed fresh air and lonely walks in the woods so much and because he saw so many people living unhappy lives in society, Thoreau chose to live as a full-time hermit at Walden Pond for two years. In his life he did without things that are important for others; in particular, he never married, had no wife and children. He was a civilized man who thoroughly enjoyed sharing his ideas and feelings with his close friends. One benefit for us one his bachelorhood is that he had long conversations in his journal instead of with a



wife about his deepest thoughts or feelings. And in Walden, he chose the written words to celebrate what he saw and experienced, to accept himself and to lead his readers to marvel at the wonders of Nature.

Thoreau and Asia

Thoreau’s discovery and study of India’s philosophical literature strengthened his tendency to detachment from society. Yet he never lost the desire to make human action significant. It is really too bad that he never discovered the ancient Chinese and Japanese poets and sages. Their devotion to the active life, with equal devotion to contemplation, would have greatly appealed to him. Without knowing it, Thoreau was

close to the spirit of Taoist and Zen masters. Like them, he felt that wisdom should liberate one from vague abstractions and return us to the immediate world around us. He was like the ancient Chinese on celebrating stone and stream, flower and bird, snow and spring. Like the early Taoist of China, he could recognize that the good life must also be concerned with the social. The important thing was to retain simplicity, to realize the good of this world here and now. Thoreau had the Taoist sense that is nothing better than to do the work at hand, to chop wood and draw water. So Thoreau could write: "I am convinced... that to maintain one's self on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime, if we will live simply and wisely. For Thoreau it was employment enough to watch the progress of the seasons," to live in the moment and to re-live the experience in writing it down. Compare his idea with what Po Chu-I (白居易) wrote in 812AD:

Surely if today I am not content with my lot

I need not expect ever to be content!

Both Po Chu-I (白居易) and Thoreau were operating from the same ideal: empty oneself of mental activity in order to gain consciousness and awareness of the world of Nature. One more quotation from Thoreau's Journal can suggest his relationship to the Chinese spirit. Thoreau wrote: "Wonderful, wonderful is our life and that of our companions! That there should be such a thing as a brute animal, not human! And that it should attain to a sort of society with our race! Think of cats, for instance... They do not go to school, nor read the Testament; yet how near they come to doing so! How much they are like us who do so!" Compare the meaning of Thoreau's insight to that of Chuang Tze (莊子), who wondered whether he was a man dreaming he was butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was a man.

Thoreau and Emerson



Emerson developed the philosophy and abstract expression of transcendentalism; Thoreau put transcendentalism into concrete practice in daily life. Like Emerson, Thoreau placed a high value and good conversation, on the sharing of our dreams and visions. Though Emerson and Thoreau were the best of friends for a good number of years, they did not always agree with each other. Sometimes Emerson did not reach the heights of wisdom which Thoreau expected of him, and sometimes Thoreau behaved in a way that disappointed Emerson. Both Emerson and Thoreau sensed that theory of evolution in Nature before Darwin put it into words, but in different ways. In his writings, Emerson was anticipating the scientific hypothesis of Darwin. Thoreau, was more at-home in the outdoors than Emerson and could write playfully and humorously about our affinity to



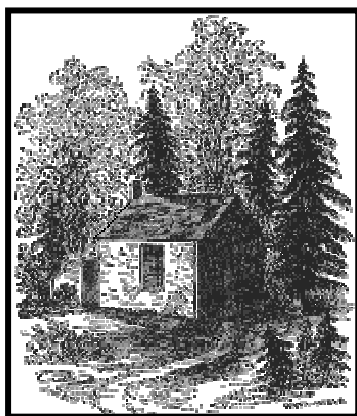
cats and other “brute animals,” was closer to the ancient Chinese notion of unity in Nature. In his writings, Thoreau was renewing the basic religious experience of awe and wonder before Nature.

The Influence of Thoreau



Thoreau has become a prophet more than anyone (except Emerson) suspected 130 years ago. The Russian Tolstoy, the Indian Gandhi, and the American black civil rights leader Martin Luther King were all strongly influenced in their position on non-violence by Thoreau’s “Essay on Civil Disobedience.” Even the hippies, the Peace Movement and other student movements of the 1960s in America gained much of their philosophy from Thoreau’s writings. Modern Americans who long to get Back-to-Nature, who leave jobs in the city to practice organic farming or go outdoors for weekend camping trips by the thousands are simply following in the footsteps of Thoreau. Those who understand how our industrial development is destroying the balance of Nature and ruining the natural ecology are also fooling in the tradition of Thoreau.

A Negative Response to Thoreau



Not everyone approve of Thoreau’s philosophy of life. In 1970, one critic has claimed that Thoreau appeals mostly to young people, especially those who are sensitive, idealistic, intelligent but inexperienced. This critic feels that Walden is a Never-Never land of escape, about as realistic as the world of Peter Pan. She (this critic is a woman admits that Thoreau loved Nature, but claims that he did not have a genuine love for man, who after all is one of Nature’s products. Moreover, in her opinion, Thoreau remained an adolescent all his life; his philosophy of life is over-simplified and inadequate to meet the complexities of civilized life.

Questions for Group Discussion

1. Emerson's basic philosophical ideas were formed before he gained any real knowledge of Asian literature. When he discovered Asian wisdom, he welcomed it. He especially found Hinduism's teaching of absolute unity very harmonious with his transcendental ideas. He responded less to Buddhism and Chinese thought than to Indian philosophy, but it seems he eventually also gained much from China (See Frederick Ives Carpenter's Emerson and Asia, if you want more information). Emerson never directly studied Taoism, but the combination of Taoism-Hinduism that leads to Zen meets closer to Emerson's spirit than Hinduism does. Why? Because Zen loses the transcendental to earth, and Emerson was at his best when he searched for the higher meaning in common earthly life. (See Van Meter Ames' Zen and American Thought.) There is one Chinese idea that Emerson especially liked and used in "Self-Reliance": A great man embodies the vital force of the universe. Now that you have studied Emerson, what similarities and differences do you see between Emerson's American transcendental philosophy and traditional Chinese ideas? The group should try to agree on several consensus statements.

2. Thoreau How many members of the group approve of Thoreau's philosophy of life? How many members agree with the judgment of the negative critic mentioned above? Each member should briefly state his or her reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with Thoreau's ideas.