

University of Windsor

Scholarship at UWindor

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Theses, Dissertations, and Major Papers

1981

An examination of the persona of the narrator in H.D. Thoreau's Walden.

Karen B. Griffiths
University of Windsor

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/etd>

Recommended Citation

Griffiths, Karen B., "An examination of the persona of the narrator in H.D. Thoreau's Walden." (1981).
Electronic Theses and Dissertations. 1038.
<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/etd/1038>

This online database contains the full-text of PhD dissertations and Masters' theses of University of Windsor students from 1954 forward. These documents are made available for personal study and research purposes only, in accordance with the Canadian Copyright Act and the Creative Commons license—CC BY-NC-ND (Attribution, Non-Commercial, No Derivative Works). Under this license, works must always be attributed to the copyright holder (original author), cannot be used for any commercial purposes, and may not be altered. Any other use would require the permission of the copyright holder. Students may inquire about withdrawing their dissertation and/or thesis from this database. For additional inquiries, please contact the repository administrator via email (scholarship@uwindsor.ca) or by telephone at 519-253-3000ext. 3208.



NOTICE

The quality of this microfiche is heavily dependent upon the quality of the original thesis submitted for microfilming. Every effort has been made to ensure the highest quality of reproduction possible.

If pages are missing, contact the university which granted the degree.

Some pages may have indistinct print especially if the original pages were typed with a poor typewriter ribbon or if the university sent us a poor photocopy.

Previously copyrighted materials (journal articles, published tests, etc.) are not filmed.

Reproduction in full or in part of this film is governed by the Canadian Copyright Act, R.S.C. 1970, c. C-30. Please read the authorization forms which accompany this thesis.

THIS DISSERTATION
HAS BEEN MICROFILMED
EXACTLY AS RECEIVED

AVIS

La qualité de cette microfiche dépend grandement de la qualité de la thèse soumise au microfilmage. Nous avons tout fait pour assurer une qualité supérieure de reproduction.

S'il manque des pages, veuillez communiquer avec l'université qui a conféré le grade.

La qualité d'impression de certaines pages peut laisser à désirer, surtout si les pages originales ont été dactylographiées à l'aide d'un ruban usé ou si l'université nous a fait parvenir une photocopie de mauvaise qualité.

Les documents qui font déjà l'objet d'un droit d'auteur (articles de revue, examens publiés, etc.) ne sont pas microfilmés.

La reproduction, même partielle, de ce microfilm est soumise à la Loi canadienne sur le droit d'auteur, SRC 1970, c. C-30. Veuillez prendre connaissance des formules d'autorisation qui accompagnent cette thèse.

LA THÈSE A ÉTÉ
MICROFILMÉE TELLE QUE
NOUS L'AVONS REÇUE

AN EXAMINATION OF THE PERSONA OF
THE NARRATOR IN H.D. THOREAU'S *WALDEN*

by



Karen B. Griffiths

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Department of English
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree
of Master of Arts at the
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

1981

© Karen Griffiths 1981

757904

ABSTRACT

The writing of Henry David Thoreau has increased in popularity through the years. *Walden* especially is generally recognized as a classic of American literature, and the narrator of *Walden* belongs to the growing tradition of American literary heroes. Thoreau's hero had the courage to live for himself in spite of much social pressure against his chosen way of life. And, in spite of the fact that the simplicity of the life that the narrator lived cannot be truly recreated today, he has provided a positive example to many readers; a model on which to base their lives. The impact of *Walden* may even be greater today than when it was first written because there are many more obstacles between us and a simple life than there were in the nineteenth century.

Although *Walden* has been submitted to a fairly thorough critical analysis, there are still some interesting aspects of it to be considered. The one that interests me the most, and the one which I will be attempting to address myself to in this thesis is the persona of the narrator of *Walden*. The narrator deserves to be closely examined as the hero of *Walden*. In this paper I will be examining the nature of the narrator, how he exemplifies the life of simplicity that Thoreau is advocating in the book. I will also be considering how the narrator fits into the mythological framework of the book, and his general philosophical attitude.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	p. i
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1: A SENSE OF UNCERTAINTY	7
CHAPTER 2: NATURE & MAN	26
CHAPTER 3 POET OF THE NEW PARADISE	44
CHAPTER 4 THE TECHNICAL SIDE	67
CONCLUSION	84
BIBLIOGRAPHY	90

INTRODUCTION

If Thoreau is today considered the most memorable character among the Transcendentalists, it is because his writings evoke most strongly the sense of a man behind the book.¹

Thoreau's writings, *Walden* in particular, do indeed leave us with the sense of a man behind the book. But who is this man, and how much does he really reveal about himself? It may be useful to note here that *Walden* was revised seven times before its publication in 1854, so whatever Thoreau reveals, or chooses not to reveal, about himself and his experiences at the pond has been very carefully structured. The man that we catch glimpses of in *Walden*, and even in the *Journal*, is certainly many-faceted, but he is also quite elusive. In this thesis I hope to examine this blend of a real and fictional voice to provide some further clues to a greater understanding of *Walden*, and perhaps of the man who wrote it.

In *Walden*, as in all of his writings, Thoreau employs the first-person narrator. He accounts for this feature of his writing, as it occurs in *Walden*, by saying, "I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well."² After reading both the *Journal* and *Walden*, however, one wonders at the amount of truth in the above words. For, far from revealing what Thoreau claims to be the narrowness of his experience, the above named works reveal, rather, a great breadth of experience and a considerable depth of thought. What Thoreau hides behind this experience and this knowledge is that very

¹L. Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1973), p. 296.

²H.D. Thoreau, *The Variorum Walden*, ed. W. Harding (New York: Washington Square Press, 1973), p. 1.

thing that he claims he will reveal to us - himself. It would seem, therefore, that Thoreau's use of the first-person narrator, and those of perhaps more traditional writers such as Rousseau and DeQuincey, arise out of different narrative conceptions. Whereas the latter authors are writing to reveal themselves in a manner that is clearly autobiographical, Thoreau seems to be revealing something less tangible about himself, in a much more indirect fashion. He is also hiding to some extent behind the narrative "I."

Although the *Journal* is of a somewhat more spontaneous nature than *Walden*, it does not provide us with the same type of personal information about its writer as would the journal of a Pepys or a Boswell. E. Seybold, in *Thoreau: The Quest and the Classics*, casts some helpful light on this subject by stating that biography "did not come under Thoreau's definition of truth."³ He therefore felt no obligation to tell the reader what he thought the reader did not need to know.

In the light of Thoreau's intriguing approach to the techniques of narration, I would like to undertake a concentrated investigation of his use of the first-person narrator in *Walden*. Because he makes claims towards autobiography in *Walden*, I will be using the more 'autobiographical' *Journal* extensively as well, since in the *Journal* may be found the key to some of the issues that are merely hinted at in *Walden*.

I would like to begin by examining the paradoxes that are to be found in Thoreau's narrational technique, for, as I have said above,

³E. Seybold, *Thoreau: The Quest and the Classics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951), p. 27.

Thoreau was often a very paradoxical writer. He is frequently to be found claiming, with equal vehemence, two or more entirely different philosophical positions in various places within *Walden*. These paradoxes contribute a great deal to the attraction and charm of *Walden* and the *Journal* as well, and therefore a study of the paradoxes should result in a greater understanding of these works.

The paradoxes in *Walden* also provide useful starting places for further investigations into Thoreau's techniques. For example, their very presence raises questions about his skill as a writer. Although we are quite aware of the dangers of projecting the intent of an author upon the work of literature that he has produced, I think that in light of the claims that Thoreau makes about writing in the opening pages of *Walden* and throughout the *Journal*, some minimal examination of intent can be justified in a study of his narrational techniques.

Many readers, myself included, have found Thoreau's writing to be very intoxicating reading. The exuberance and poetry of his prose can bear the reader away into flights of imaginative fancy, honest and clear appraisals of nature, or vehement bouts of passionate expression, without apparent effort on the part of the writer. What might be called an unquestioning acceptance of the convictions of the writer becomes a part of the reading experience when one reads Thoreau. This experience occurs most frequently in the reading of his impassioned political writings, but it also occurs in reading *Walden* and even occurs in the

reading of the more prosaic *Journal*.

The question of narrational distancing arises here. How did Thoreau create an account so contemporary as to make it seem immediate to every reader, and at the same time not become completely involved in it himself? We seem to have here a further proof of Thoreau's paradoxical style creating a sense of paradox in the reader. The answer to this question of distancing can perhaps best be reached through an examination of the rhetorical pose, or poses, that Thoreau assumes throughout *Walden*. The plot, or structure, that he has contrived to make his account effective must also be considered here. It may also be useful at this point in our investigations into the style and techniques of Thoreau's writing, to indicate the debt that he owed to the New England literary tradition of oratory.

Thoreau is most often seen as an optimistic thinker, and *Walden* is generally recognized as being one of his most positive books. I do not wish to disagree with the critical opinion of a large body of scholars. I simply wish to point out some aspects of Thoreau's writing that I think are sometimes not clearly examined. The positive side is quite obviously present, especially in *Walden*, where it is the most predominant element - being expressed in terms of spring and renewal. But if one reads through the *Journal*, and reads *Walden* closely, one notices the other less well publicized side to Thoreau's nature.

In *Walden*, Thoreau's pessimism is most noticeable in "Economy", in his

discussions of modern industrialized society, in the sections on the Irish immigrants and in his descriptions of the creatures of the night, and during the winter chapters.

In the *Journal* Thoreau's pessimistic streaks are more frequent and less concealed than they are in *Walden*. Due to the nature of the *Journal* these intrusions of pessimism seem to reflect Thoreau's reactions to daily events in his life, although because of his definition of autobiography and truth it is frequently next to impossible to determine reasons for most of these outbursts. In the *Journal* as well as in *Walden*, the expression of the joys of a life in nature is the more usual state of affairs. I would like to examine this dichotomy in Thoreau's personality as perhaps the ultimate paradox that we find in his writing.

Many readers of *Walden* seem to take what Thoreau says at face value, thereby denying that he has a sense of humour. I would like to argue that, amidst all of the paradoxes and other problems in understanding him, Thoreau was a writer with a very definite sense of humour. He could be both droll and ironic. As a general rule, he seems to reserve his droll sense of humour for natural occurrences and his biting sarcasm for the behaviour of mankind. I would simply like to observe, as part of my discussion of Thoreau's techniques, the many and various comic devices that he employs throughout *Walden*.

In chapter one I will begin my examination of the narrator by revealing some of the paradoxes that I have found in *Walden*. Of primary interest in this chapter is the basic paradox of Thoreau's

attitude towards narration in the book. I will also be looking briefly at some of the philosophical inconsistencies in the book, and at Thoreau's attitudes towards industry and society.

The second chapter will provide an in depth examination of the most ambiguous side of Thoreau's writing - his attitude towards man and nature.

In the third chapter I will be looking at the philosophical outlook of the narrator. The emphasis of the chapter will be on the very definite optimism of the book, but some attention will also be paid to the pessimistic side of *Walden's* narrator.

In the last chapter I will be attempting a more technical appraisal of *Walden* and its narrator. In this chapter I will look at some of the traditions that *Walden* grew out of and at some of the rhetorical narrative devices that Thoreau used in *Walden*.

CHAPTER 1: A SENSE OF UNCERTAINTY

We are led through the account of the Walden experience by an enigmatic figure of whom we are allowed to catch only infrequent glimpses. *Walden* opens almost immediately on a paradoxical note and Thoreau maintains this paradoxical position throughout the book. By the term 'paradox' I mean all of the incongruities, inconsistencies and uncertainties that are to be found in what Thoreau says in *Walden*. There are also paradoxes in the *Journal*. But the paradoxes in the *Journal* create less of a problem to the critic than those in *Walden*, because the *Journal* is the account of Thoreau's daily thoughts over a long period of time, during which there are bound to be some changes in opinion. Also, since the *Journal* was not intended for publication, Thoreau had no reason to maintain any one consistent opinion. *Walden*, on the other hand, is a tightly constructed whole, and if there are paradoxes in it, they should belong there as part of the narrational technique; most of them appear to, but some definitely do not.

It is these apparently incongruous paradoxes that I am chiefly interested in. It is through his frequent use of the paradox that Thoreau emerges to the reader as somewhat of an enigma. I would like to begin my discussion of Thoreau's persona of the narrator by revealing as many of these paradoxes as I can, and by discussing what they reveal about Thoreau the narrator.

Perhaps the largest ambiguity that we are faced with in studying any aspect of Thoreau is his relationship with Emerson; more specifically, the impact that Emerson's lecture "Nature" had on the philosophies

expressed in *Walden*. Many of Thoreau's contemporaries and some modern critics have made the assumption that in *Walden*, Thoreau is merely reiterating the ideas that Emerson had originally proposed in "Nature." There are, certainly, many similarities in the basic concepts of both pieces, and Thoreau does seem to have incorporated some of the philosophies of "Nature" into the text of *Walden*. For example, the belief that in Nature is to be found the key to a happy full life.

But it seems to me that when we come down to specifics, the differences are more apparent than the similarities. Emerson has a far more idealistic view of Nature than we see Thoreau portraying in *Walden*. And in Emerson's view God and Nature are one: "I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God."⁴ Thoreau, on the other hand, relishes Nature for herself: "I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself."⁵ Emerson portrays Nature in a much more passive light than we see her in *Walden*. Emerson portrays her as a servant to man, and to Thoreau Nature is a friend and a mentor, but in no way a servant to anyone.

"Nature" is a powerful exhortation on Emerson's part to the youth of America to see Nature in a different light and to exercise what powers they may have over her to create a new and better life and

⁴Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature", in *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson: An Organic Anthology*, ed. Stephen E. Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1957), p. 24.

⁵*Walden*, p. 97.

literature for America. Seen in this light it is hardly surprising that some of the ideas greatly impressed the youthful Thoreau who heard them. But, as was his wont, Thoreau took the ideas that he thought he could use and adapted them to his own purposes.

The first major paradox, or problem, that we are faced with in coming to an understanding of *Walden* arises with Thoreau's position as narrator. What exactly is the role that he is taking, and how are we supposed to react to it? On the first page of the narrative, following the expression of the limitations of his experience, Thoreau makes this statement,

I, on my side, require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life, and not merely what he has heard of other men's lives ... for if he has lived sincerely, it must have been in a distant land to me.⁶

This demand for honesty makes Thoreau appear as a trustworthy narrator and we are led to believe that ^{what} will follow will be autobiographical in nature.

We find also, in the *Journal*, other remarks of the same tenor; statements that lead one to believe that Thoreau saw autobiography as an important literary form. Thoreau writes in a *Journal* entry for 1840, five years before he began his *Walden* experiment, "He is the true artist whose life is his material; every stroke of the chisel must enter his own flesh and blood and not grate dully on marble."⁷

⁶*Walden*, p. 1.

⁷*The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, eds. B. Torrey & F. Allen, 14 vols. bound as 2 (New York: Dover, 1962), vol. 1, p. 55.

The idea that each man is responsible for the creation of a better self, and also, with the presentation of this new self to the world, is a predominant one in *Walden*, where we see Thoreau constantly striving to improve himself and giving us the record of those improvements. *Journal* entries made after the publication of *Walden* reveal Thoreau's continued interest in the process of autobiography. In December of 1856 he writes that in order to interest his readers, a writer must write from within a satisfied life. The reader must be given "the essence or oil of himself [the writer], tried out of the fat of his experience and joy."⁸ And, in October 1957 Thoreau writes, "Is not the poet bound to write his own biography?"⁹

Further evidence of the important position that autobiography held for Thoreau is revealed by the reading that he did. He apparently received a good deal of pleasure from reading first hand accounts of the lives of the ancients by writers such as Cato and Varro. And he also enjoyed reading accounts of the early settlers and explorers in his own world, such as are to be found in *The Jesuit Relations*. With all of this evidence before us, it is not surprising to note that many regard *Walden* as Thoreau's autobiography.

Several pages into *Walden*, when he is sure that we have been convinced of the honesty of his approach to narration, Thoreau makes his first paradoxical reversal in position and apparently completely contradicts

⁸*Journals*, 2, 1101.

⁹Odell Shepard, ed., *The Heart of Thoreau's Journals* (New York: Dover, 1961), p. 185.

himself. This reversal in attitude towards his narrative becomes apparent when Thoreau tries to place his account on a different plane. In the opening pages of the first chapter Thoreau's focus is on fairly readily identifiable people and situations. But it soon becomes clear that we will be given more than a literal version of what happened while Thoreau lived at the pond. We are informed that we will also be given a record of some of the desires that the narrator felt during that time. Thoreau writes, by way of explanation of the obscurities that exist in *Walden*,

If I should attempt to tell how I have desired to spend my life in years past, it would probably surprise those of my readers who are somewhat acquainted with its actual history; it would certainly astonish those who know nothing about it. I will only hint at some of the enterprises which I have cherished.¹⁰

The key words in this passage are 'desired' and 'hint', and they would seem to provide Thoreau with some justification for denying us a complete and honest account of his sojourn at the pond. If *Walden* is going to be a record of desires rather than actualities, then perhaps one thing hinted at in the above passage is that *Walden* is going to be partially a fictional account of the narrator's life at the pond. Thoreau, therefore, has not completely contradicted himself as I originally suspected. He has, though, provided the reader with a clue as to how *Walden* should be read. We should pay just as much, if not more, attention to the hints we are given as to what we are told directly. The above passage puts us on our guard to read more carefully than we might other-

¹⁰*Walden*, p. 11.

wise, if we thought that we were being given a straightforward autobiography.

Turning again to the *Journal*, we find further evidence that Thoreau did not exactly approve of conventional biographical methods. In one of the entries for November 1851, during the period that *Walden* was undergoing revision, he writes that he would like to express more than just facts: "Facts should only be as the frame to my pictures; they should be the material to the mythology which I am writing..."¹¹ In other words, Thoreau is more interested in the universal truths revealed by the facts than in the facts themselves. In the year following the publication of *Walden*, Thoreau notes in his *Journal*, "In a true history or biography, of how little consequence those events of which so much is commonly made."¹² Thoreau thus finds fault with the biographer for making too much fuss over the simple, external events of his subject's life and ignoring the more significant inner or universal events. Yet we also find, on rare occasions in his *Journal*, that Thoreau has recorded details about his family and home life, and even incidents in the lives of his ancestors. We can assume that Thoreau will be concentrating on revealing only those elements of his life which he holds to be significant. We should, in fact, be expecting a mythological account of the Walden experiment.

We can now see why factual biography did not come under Thoreau's

¹¹*Journals*, 1, 229.

¹²*Ibid.*, 2, 946.

definition of truth - he considered the fact inconsequential next to the spiritual truth that he could make from the original fact. Although Thoreau makes clear his attitude towards biography, there is some confusion among critics as to how *Walden* ought to be classified. There seem to be three general critical schools trying to fit *Walden* into three different categories. First, there are those who describe the book as an autobiography, either factual or spiritual in nature. Secondly, we have the group who refer to *Walden* as what I shall call a 'creative autobiography.' And finally, there are a few critics who believe *Walden* is a complete work of fiction.

Van Wyck Brooks seems to take everything that Thoreau says in *Walden* very literally, and therefore regards the work as the autobiography of a dull plodding man of the soil.¹³ Henry Canby also believes that *Walden* is an autobiography. However, he finds that in the autobiography, Thoreau issues his challenge to what he saw as a largely unsatisfied world. Canby also sees *Walden* as a warning to Thoreau's contemporaries of their growing enslavement by the improvements of their society. Walter Harding believes that Thoreau had a straightforward autobiographical motive for writing *Walden*:

He wrote the book primarily to answer the questions of his neighbours who were curious about his life in the woods, ... and to those people everywhere who were dissatisfied with their lives but did not know how to improve them.¹⁴

¹³Van Wyck Brooks, *The Flowering of New England* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1952), p. 304.

¹⁴Walter Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), p. 333.

And Lawrence Buell categorizes *Walden* as an autobiography: "The most egoistic movement in American literary history produced no first rate autobiography, unless one counts *Walden* as such."¹⁵

The critics who regard *Walden* as 'creative autobiography', on the whole, give Thoreau more credit for imaginative writing than those who regard it as a simple autobiography. They believe that he has altered his facts somewhat to bring across a particular viewpoint, although they do not necessarily agree on what that viewpoint is. R.W.B. Lewis holds that in *Walden* we find a psychological drama that consists of the releasing of Thoreau's psychic double. Lewis also sees the narrator in *Walden* as representing the man who has escaped from the cave, visited the real world, and returned to the cave to tell the remaining captives the exact state of their imprisonment.¹⁶ Joseph Wood Krutch believes, as does William Ellery Channing, that Thoreau's primary literary achievement was the construction of a portrait of himself. However, Krutch admits Thoreau's elusiveness and says further, in a statement of which Thoreau would probably approve,

His act, or at least his dramatization of it, was a stroke of the creative imagination and so successful that Thoreau is the man who lived at Walden in somewhat the same way that Dante was the man who visited Hell.¹⁷

In other words, the man has created such an intriguing literary account

¹⁵Buell, p. 268.

¹⁶R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 21.

¹⁷J.W. Krutch, *Henry David Thoreau* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973), p. 114.

that it has now become very difficult to separate the man from the account of the experience, if indeed such a separation is necessary. The critics in these two groups focus their attention largely on the revelatory aspects of *Walden*.

Charles Anderson and Leon Edel believe, for different reasons, that *Walden* is totally a work of fiction. Charles Anderson holds that because the narrator is a protean figure and because we will never know for sure what happened at the pond, *Walden* is fictional. He justifies defining it as fiction by explaining that, "It is an imaginative projection of setting, character and action, although from known bases in fact."¹⁸ Leon Edel, on the other hand, describes *Walden* as a work of art pretending to be a documentary account. Edel places *Walden* in the same category as other imaginative literary voyages such as *Robinson Crusoe* "which yet possess, within the imagined, a great reality of their own."¹⁹

I tend to agree most completely with the second group of critics. *Walden* can be seen as autobiography, but only within certain limits, the same limits that we would apply to any other literary work known to be based more or less loosely on the life of the author. This is no place to fall victim to the extrinsic critical fallacy and impose too much of what we know of Thoreau of *Walden*. We should accept the word of Thoreau as narrator as we would the word of any other narrator. We know, for

¹⁸C. Anderson, *The Magic Circle of Walden* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968), p. 16.

¹⁹L. Edel, *Henry D. Thoreau* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1970), p. 31.

example, because Thoreau tells us, that the length of the actual experiment was shortened to a year in the book for symbolic purposes. We should therefore expect that many of his other actual experiences have been altered to give them significance. Experiences that Thoreau underwent while revising *Walden* can also be found in the account, in a suitably elevated manner. We should also bear in mind the clue of hints and desires that we are given near the beginning of the book. We should therefore expect to find in *Walden* an account of events that may or may not have actually occurred, but which Thoreau thought were significant to the image he wanted to present to the reader. The paradox of the position of the narrator can thus be resolved if we acknowledge that although Thoreau, the man who wrote *Walden*, actually underwent experiences similar to those that are recorded in the book, the 'I' in the book is actually a literary construction, designed to present a certain image.

There are several what might be called 'philosophical inconsistencies' to be found in *Walden*. In most of these instances Thoreau is to be found stepping back into society from the bounds of independence which he has declared for himself, or depending on others for things which we would not expect him to. At other times he is to be found supporting opposite, or at least differing, viewpoints in different places in the book which also causes the reader to feel perplexed.

One of the more obvious examples of Thoreau's self-contradiction occurs in the discussion of furniture in "Economy." While speaking of

luxury, the narrator says, "I would rather sit on a pumpkin and have it all to myself, than be crowded on a velvet cushion."²⁰ And, conversely, when he is describing the furniture that he had in his hut, and is talking of poverty, he writes, "None is so poor that he need sit on a pumpkin. That is shiftlessness."²¹ It may simply be that a pumpkin was the only example of a natural seat that Thoreau could think of in these two instances; however, the discerning reader is left somewhat puzzled by these apparently antithetical statements. One solution to this paradox may be that Thoreau is trying to show that neither a life of luxury nor one in the grip of poverty is to be desired. A pumpkin may be preferable to a velvet cushion, but a serviceable chair is to be preferred to both.

Examples of the more aggravating type of philosophical paradox that Thoreau indulges in are to be found in his remarks about clothing. Clothing is one of the necessities of life according to the philosophy outlined in "Economy." Although he is a very active participant in the construction of his shelter, the gathering of his firewood, and the preparation of his food - the other necessities of life - the narrator has absolutely nothing to do with the manufacture and care of his own clothing. The whole underlying concept of *Walden* is that if one were willing to forego luxury and live on what one could provide for one's self, life would be rather pleasant:

²⁰*Walden*, p. 26.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 48.

I am convinced both by faith and experience, that to maintain one's self on this earth is not a hardship but a pasttime... It is not necessary that a man should earn his living by the sweat of his brow, unless he sweats easier than I do.²²

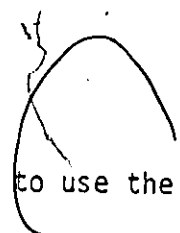
He first admits to having his clothes made by a tailoress. However, as he uses his difficulties with this tailoress as part of a Carlyle-like satire on the world of fashion, it may be allowed that this comment was simply placed in the narrative as a part of the satire, and to show that even our simple hero had skirmished with the fashionable world. A further admission concerning his clothes is that he had both his laundry and his mending done in town. In the account of the expenses he incurred while living at the pond, Thoreau writes, "So that all the pecuniary outgoes, excepting for washing and mending, which for the most part were done out of the house."²³ It is difficult to imagine why the narrator depended on others to do these particular menial tasks for him when he so enjoyed doing most things for himself. For example, he is more than willing to be seen manfully hoeing his beans all day long, fishing, working in his woodlot, or driving each nail into his lathing at a single blow when he was preparing for winter.

U There is one possible reason for the narrator's lack of interest in preparing his own clothing. In one of his statements of purpose he writes that although he wishes primarily to show what disadvantages are inherent in industrial society, he also wishes to show what advantages can result if this society is used properly.²⁴ What the narrator seems

²²Walden, pp. 51-52.

²³Ibid., p. 43.

²⁴Ibid., p. 22.



to mean here is that it is all right to use the advantages that society offers in order to free one's self to do what one enjoys. In this case, we must admit the possibility that although Thoreau believed that clothes were one of the necessities of life, he did not want to have the narrator seen directly involved in the clothing process, either because he did not enjoy such tasks, or because to be seen doing them was not part of the image he wished to portray.

Thoreau exhibits, both in *Walden* and in the *Journal*, a certain ambivalence in his relationship with industry, society, man and nature. As I would like to go into considerable detail concerning his attitude towards man and nature in a later chapter, we will concentrate here on the former two.

The rapid industrialization that the United States was experiencing during the nineteenth century, and the resulting social upheaval, roused Thoreau's ire. And yet, he was directly involved in this industrial growth as a pencil manufacturer, and reveals at times a strong fascination for the workings of factories.

Industry, and the business world as a whole, played King Admetus to Thoreau's Apollo. In spite of this master/servant relationship, Thoreau apparently believed that this modern life was the stuff of which mythology could be made, and which made the old myths real to his time:

Who is King Admetus? It is Business with his four Prime Ministers

Trade and Commerce and Manufactures and Agriculture. And this is what makes mythology true and interesting to us.²⁵

An example of Thoreau's mythologizing of the modern industrial world occurs in the chapter "Sounds." In this chapter, in a slightly ironic passage he describes the train that passed daily by Walden Pond as the modern Pegasus - a tireless iron 'fire-steed' - which dominated his world:

when I hear the iron horse make the hills echo with his snort like thunder, shaking the earth with his feet, and breathing fire and smoke from his nostrils, (what kind of winged horse or fiery dragon they will put into the new mythology I don't know) it seems as if the earth had got a race now worthy to inhabit it.²⁶

He draws parallels between the efficiency of the train on its tracks and the advantages of following one's genius. In this passage he also equates the train to one of the Greek Fates - submitting the idea that the train governed the world of his contemporaries much as the Fates had governed the lives of the ancient Greeks.

The primary reason that Thoreau disapproved of the factory system was that it degraded the labourer. By forcing a man to devote his life to earning a living, the system turned him into a machine, and Thoreau believe strongly that each man should have the leisure to develop his finer qualities. *Walden* is full of strong, perceptive statements against the world of industry and commerce. For example, he saw through the corporate organization and knew that "the principal

²⁵*Journals*, 1, 239.

²⁶*Walden*, p. 87.

object is, not that mankind may be well and honestly clad, but, unquestionably, that the corporation may be enriched."²⁷ And we see in the *Journal* that he continued to distrust the motives of those who controlled the corporation for the rest of his life. In a *Journal* entry for 1859, he shows both his independent thought and just how strong his dislike of the factory system was: "If labour mainly, or to any considerable degree, serves the purpose of a police, to keep men out of mischief, it indicates a rottenness at the foundation of our community."²⁸ Thoreau continued to believe throughout his life that men should work only at what they loved. And he believed that if an object were made lovingly by a man in his spare time, love made the finished product special. Handmade objects were more poetic and therefore superior to factory-made articles.

In spite of his admitted dislike for the world of business, Thoreau writes in "Sounds" that the bravery of the men involved in commerce makes him look favorably upon it. It is just the transport of goods by train that he is speaking of, but the virtues that he grants to it present a strange contrast to the picture of commerce we are shown in "Economy." Whereas in "Economy," Thoreau criticizes business for its artificial nature, in "Sounds" he praises it for its naturalness: It [commerce] is very natural in its methods withal, far more so than many fantastic enterprises and sentimental experiments, and hence its

²⁷Walden, p. 18.

²⁸Journals, 2, 1557.

singular success."²⁹ There are occasions in the *Journal* where, in spite of himself, Thoreau reveals a real fascination for industry. One of the best examples of this love for the intricacy of machinery is found in his three-page description of the visit he made to the gingham mills at Clinton on January 1, 1851. He recounts in great detail how the cloth is made and how perfect the finished product is, and he comments quite favourably on the perseverance, patience and fidelity of the workers.³⁰

Thoreau seems to have basically approved of industry, it was the adverse social conditions and the greed of those at the top of the hierarchy that made him dislike the system. The paradox in Thoreau's attitude towards the world of industry may be resolved if we consider that although he was living in a society that was fast becoming highly industrialized, he wanted to live by his own resources. He wanted primarily to illustrate the waste of human potential that industrial society could cause. Also, he wanted to show the readers of *Walden* that there could be more to life than financial success, and he was perhaps therefore forced to emphasize the negative aspects of the industrial world.

Thoreau seems never to have resolved the paradox of his attitude towards the society of his fellow man. Basically, his dislike of society stems from a belief that society emasculates mankind. We can

²⁹*Walden*, p. 89.

³⁰*Journals*, 1, 178.

see evidence of this belief in "Economy," where the narrator very deftly satirizes the dependence of his fellow Concordians on their possessions. Indeed, he represents possession as a form of imprisonment which men too readily accept, "I am wont to think that men are not so much the keepers of herds as herds are the keepers of men, the former are so much the freer."³¹ Society also met with Thoreau's disapproval because men meet each other too frequently and too casually. And as a very independent man, Thoreau disapproved even of the experimental Transcendental communities such as Brook Farm, because he believed that the only man who could accomplish anything was the man who worked alone.

On the other hand, however, Thoreau opens the chapter entitled "Visitors" by saying,

I think that I love society as much as most, and am ready enough to fasten myself like a bloodsucker for the time to any full-blooded man that comes my way. I am naturally no hermit, but might possibly sit out the sturdiest frequenter of the bar-room, if my business called me thither.³²

There are of course two considerable qualifying statements to be considered when reading the above quotation. First, the man to whom Thoreau would attach himself would have to be 'full-blooded,' and Thoreau did not see many of his contemporaries in that light. Also, he would attach himself to company for extended periods of time only if his business called him to do so, which suggests to me that the

³¹*Walden*, p. 41.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 105.

only time he found society attractive was when it was the society of full-blooded, honest men.

Thoreau's other reason for being interested in society is given in "The Village." In this chapter, the narrator claims that the village of Concord was as much a curiosity to him as a group of muskrats:

In one direction from my house there was a colony of muskrats in the river meadows; under the grove of elms and buttonwoods in the other horizon was a village of busy men, as curious to me as if they had been prairie dogs, each sitting at the mouth of its burrow, or running over to a neighbour's to gossip.³³

He appears to have visited man for the same reason that he studies the habits of animals, to learn more about them.

We can infer from the above somewhat tongue in cheek statement of Thoreau's that he was somewhat uncertain of his position in the world. This inference is supported by the fact that he does not maintain this gentle chiding tone for long. "The Village" soon becomes a description of what the narrator almost seems to have considered a vicious gamut that he was forced to run each time he visited Concord.

Any uncertainties that we may have concerning the relationships of the narrator with industry and society arise from the uncertainties that are inherent in the narrative itself.

All of the above paradoxes, and the many other paradoxes that can be found in *Walden* seem to reflect the basic problem of the image

³³*Walden*, p. 127.

of the narrator. Possible conclusions to be drawn from this discussion are that these seemingly unconscious paradoxes may have arisen from either Thoreau's lack of certainty about exactly what image he wished to portray, a difficulty in sustaining the image that he did wish to portray, or perhaps even a deliberate paradoxical refusal to be pinned down by his readers. One thing that seems very clear from the above discussion is that the question of Thoreau's attitude towards man and nature must be thoroughly investigated, and a closer look must be taken at his general philosophy of life.

The general sense of paradox in *Walden* begins on the first page when we try to separate the narrator from the man behind him, and continues even after we have finished reading the book. In the next chapter I will be examining what, to me, is the major paradox in *Walden* - Thoreau's complex relationships with man and nature.

CHAPTER 2: NATURE AND MAN

Some critics would have us see the Thoreau of *Walden* and the *Journal* as the high priest of nature writing, adoring nature without question in his youth and meticulously recording his observations of her in his older years. These critics would also have us believe in Thoreau's misanthropic attitude towards his fellow man. And, in spite of much criticism, to the opposite, this idea continues to persist.

But, if we read Thoreau closely an interesting picture emerges. It is true that in *Walden* the celebration of the joys of nature is more prevalent than praise of the ways of man, but Thoreau is not advocating the escape from society to nature in *Walden*. If one reads *Walden* with care it is quite obvious that Thoreau is more than a little ambiguous in his attitude towards both nature and man. His ambivalence towards these two opposite sets of values is even more clearly defined in the *Journal* where he has more time to develop both sides of his argument. In this chapter I wish to examine Thoreau's ambivalent attitude towards both nature and man as it is found in *Walden*.

There can be no doubt that Thoreau did indeed love nature very wholeheartedly; his writings are full of expressions of the joy that he found in nature. *Walden*, especially, is designed with the idea of revealing the positive aspects of a life in nature. One of the more obvious signs of the positive way that Thoreau looks at nature in *Walden* is found in the structure of the book. By condensing the

actual length of his experience into a year; by suggesting that the experiment both began and ended in the spring; and also, by suggesting that he was moving from the Walden experiment to another, equally important one, Thoreau has placed his emphasis on perhaps the most positive aspect of nature: the renewal which occurs every spring. This structure also represents what to Thoreau was the continuous cycle of life, which continued from spring to spring.

It is interesting to note further that although *Walden* is ostensibly the account of a year spent in the Walden woods, there is a lot more space dedicated to the spring and summer seasons than to the fall and winter ones. I do not mean to suggest here that Thoreau disliked the latter two seasons. He loved each day and lived every one to the full; however, each season bore different significance to him. The autumn was Thoreau's season of intellectual harvest, and the summer seems to have been an extension of either the preceding spring or the approaching autumn, depending on his general mood. Winter was important to him as a period of meditation and rest, but the revitalization of the earth that occurred every spring was the focal point of Thoreau's year. In the *Journal* we see him anticipating the coming of spring even during the winter months of January and February.

The narrator lives his life at the pond in very close sympathy with nature. On its most basic level this sympathy involves his attempt to live each day as it comes, and each season according to the dictates

of nature. Each chapter of *Walden* has a definite diurnal rhythm, moving from sunrise to sunrise, and the book as a whole follows a circadian pattern, advancing from spring to spring. The emphasis of the book is always on renewal.

Thoreau expresses his sympathy with nature in very personal, spiritual terms, as if he is trying to show that not only did he consider himself to be a part of nature, he also saw nature as a part of himself: "Sympathy with the fluttering alder and poplar leaves almost takes away my breath; yet like the lake my serenity is rippled but not ruffled."³⁴ It is his sympathy for the world around him that allows him to feel alive and that allows the narrator to live the way he does. His love for nature, as it is expressed in *Walden*, is truly his strength.

Nature is personified as a 'lusty old dame' in parts of *Walden*. Thoreau characterizes this side of Nature by saying that "she has a genius of unequalled fertility, and her memory runs back farther than mythology, and she can tell me the original of every fable, on what fact every one is founded..."³⁵ This description of Nature reflects Thoreau's earlier-mentioned interest in mythology, and reveals two apparently incompatible qualities in Nature that Thoreau loved - her antiquity, or agelessness, and her fertility. He frequently implies that this healthy zest for life possessed by Nature will allow her to outlive even mankind, whom he sometimes describes as Nature's favourite child.

³⁴*Walden*, p. 97.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 103.

Thoreau recognized in nature an equally important influence on society as a whole, realizing that without the presense of some wildness even our city lives would stagnate, "We need the tonic of wildness... We can never have enough of Nature. We must be refreshed by the sight of inexhaustible vigour..."³⁶ In his acknowledgement of the overall importance of nature Thoreau has been generally recognized as one of the forerunners of modern ecologists.

Although Thoreau's attitude towards nature may seem overly romantic in much of *Walden*, he reveals in "Spring", the second-to-last chapter, that there is a firm foundation of realism to his apparently romantic approach:

I love to see that Nature is so rife with life that myriads can be afforded to be sacrificed and suffered to prey on one another; that tender organizations can be so serenely squashed out of existence like pulp - tadpoles which herons gobble up, tortoises and toads run over in the road; and that sometimes it has rained flesh and blood.³⁷

This passage indicates not only Thoreau's realism concerning nature, but what seems to be a healthy attitude towards life as well. In many *Journal* entries where Thoreau is describing the muskrat hunting that he has observed along the banks of the Concord, we are given further proof of his awareness of the acts of violence that occur in the natural world. Parenthetically, it should be noted that Thoreau considered most hunters to be among the 'natural' beings of the world.

³⁶*Walden* , pp. 239-240.

³⁷*Ibid.* , p. 240.

He also reveals his realistic knowledge of nature through his endless collections of natural data and through his fascination for the reproductive patterns of the nature that surrounded him during the spring.

In the *Journal* Thoreau not only expresses a wonder at the fecundity of nature, he also dwells at greater length on the effects that the seasons and other natural occurrences had on him. For example, he frequently describes how his own usual, dreary existence was brightened by something that he saw or heard during his walks:

I hear the sound of Heywood's Brook falling into Fair Haven Pond, unexpressibly refreshing to my senses. It seems to flow through my very bones. I hear it with insatiable thirst. It allays some sandy heat in me. It affects my circulations; me-thinks my arteries have sympathy with it.³⁸

What this statement suggests is the great restorative powers that Thoreau found in nature. In his *Journal* Thoreau admires the lives of those who live in nature with even more ease than himself such as the Indians; farmers such as Minott and Rice; and hunters such as Melvin and Goodwin, whom the other Concordians considered to be useless layabouts. And he indulges in more description of nature simply for description's sake in the *Journal* than he does in *Walden*.

It is in the *Journal* also that Thoreau reveals the real extent of his love for nature. In *Walden*, the depth of this relationship, like many other details, is only hinted at. This love begins as a somewhat distant, perhaps chivalrous, love and becomes more passionate

³⁸*Journals*, 1, 219.

as he grows to know nature more intimately. In the years before the experiment, and during the experiment itself, his love of nature was simply Thoreau's source of strength; "My love is invulnerable. Meet me on that ground, and you will find me strong."³⁹ During his youthful period Thoreau was a very Anteus-like character - gaining strength from his frequent contact with the earth. Fifteen years after the above statement was made his love for nature had grown considerably; for in 1856 Thoreau says that he has fallen in love with a shrub oak.⁴⁰ A year later Thoreau's love for nature has reached its peak in passion:

How rarely a man's love for nature becomes a ruling principle with him, like a youth's affection for a maiden, but more enduring. All nature is my bride. That nature which to one is stark and ghastly solitude is a sweet, tender and genial society to me.⁴¹

It seems that the longer that Thoreau lived, the more passionately he loved nature, or at least the more passionately he declared his love.

Thoreau's unusually passionate love for nature has caused more than one critic to speculate that he was a little psychologically warped. Carl Bode, in his essay "The half-Hidden Thoreau," suggests that Thoreau never outgrew his mother-fixation. And because his

³⁹Shepard, p. 28.

⁴⁰*Journals* , 2, 1089.

⁴¹*Journals* , 2, 1136.

puritanical New England culture would not accept such a relationship, he tried to shift his psychic energies into his worship of 'Mother' Nature.⁴² But Bode also suggests that this fixation on nature provided a focus for Thoreau's sexual energies: "At its apex, Thoreau's sexual energy emerges as a desire for mystic union with nature."⁴³ Leon Edel also finds Thoreau's passion for nature to be psychologically suspect. He suggests that Thoreau clung obsessively to nature in an attempt to hold on to his sanity.⁴⁴

While I do not wish to suggest that psychological examinations of authors, and even of literary personae, cannot provide useful insights into their subjects, I do wish to point out that we should not regard such studies as the absolute truth. Thoreau wrote *Walden* for a definite purpose - he wished to show, through the example of his narrator, that life could be a pleasure if one went about it properly. Looked at in this light, we should expect to find Thoreau doing some posturing or trying to make nature appear rosier than is actually 'natural'. The dependence on nature that he has the narrator show is perhaps exaggerated to illustrate his belief that she was capable of offering and sustaining such support.

Leon Edel, in his attacks on Thoreau's psyche, provides a possible reason for taking even the professions of love for nature

⁴²Carl Bode, "The Half-Hidden Thoreau", in *Thoreau in Our Season*, ed. John R. Hicks (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1962), p. 110.

⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁴⁴Edel, p. 43.

that Thoreau makes in the *Journal* less than literally. Edel says that Thoreau was a narcissist, going through life performing for himself.⁴⁵ Although Edel's statement may be a wilfully exaggerated misunderstanding of Thoreau's character, it points out the definite possibility that in his *Journal* Thoreau tried out different styles of writing and attitudes towards his subjects, as well as using it as a repository of his observations.

Thoreau's seeming worship of and dependence on nature are a natural part of the image he wishes to portray in *Walden* and consist of fairly obvious and frequent statements. The passages where Thoreau expresses displeasure and occasionally even disgust with nature, however, are far less blatant than the worshipful passages.

We must read *Walden* carefully indeed if we wish to note the narrator's occasional admissions that nature is not all that he presents her to be. He makes only one outright admission of this sort in the whole of the book:

I have never felt lonesome, or in the least oppressed by a sense of solitude, but once, and that was a few weeks after I came to the woods, when for an hour, I doubted if the near neighbourhood of man was not essential to a serene and healthy life. To be alone was something unpleasant. But I was at the same time conscious of a slight insanity in my mood, and seemed to foresee my recovery.⁴⁶

Within that admission that nature's companionship could be less than perfect the narrator has provided himself with at least two excuses

⁴⁵Edel, p. 6.

⁴⁶*Walden*, p. 99.

for doubting her. The most obvious is that he felt himself to be a little insane at the time; clearly his sanity was less important to him than the image of his relationship with nature. His second excuse is that this incident occurred when he had been living in the woods for only a few weeks and had not completely adjusted to his new life.

In "Higher Laws", the philosophical centre of *Walden*, the narrator seems to be at least making an attempt to discuss the uncertainties in his attitude towards nature. The chapter begins with the narrator rejoicing over his close contact with nature, "I like sometimes to take rank hold on life and spend my day more as the animals do."⁴⁷ Hunting and fishing are recommended by him as providing the best introduction to the life of the woods. However, this celebration of the natural life soon becomes almost an attack on the same life, "Is it not a reproach that man is a carnivorous animal? True, he can and does live, in a great measure, by preying on other animals; but this is a miserable way ..."⁴⁸

We find that, although the narrator loves nature, the nature that he aspires towards is not the nature that we find in the rest of *Walden*. It is not the 'lusty old dame' of mythological fame, nor is it the nature towards which he yearns sexually; it is an ethereal nature. It is another nature altogether, through which the narrator

⁴⁷*Walden* , p. 160.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 164.

believes that he can transcend the rudeness of the nature around him, and what he sees to be the coarseness of his own nature.

In fact, the narrator's difficulties with his attitude towards nature, as they are expressed in "Higher Laws," are the result of what might be called his Transcendental dilemma. As a man, he clearly believes in the nature that he encounters every day in his walks through the Concord woods. But as a Transcendentalist, he is reviled by this 'coarse' nature. Transcendentalists believed that there was an innate core of spiritual knowledge within each man. However, as each man grew older, he lost touch with this divinely inspired grace and thus grew away from God. Every Transcendentalist believed that it was his duty to overcome the hardness that comes with experience and return to his original, lost, innocence. It is this belief that causes the narrator, mouthpiece for Thoreau the lover of nature, to say, "Nature is hard to be overcome, but she must be overcome."⁴⁹ The nature that must be overcome is that reptilian, unchaste aspect of each man. As a Transcendentalist, the narrator believes there are parallels between the gross insect larval state and man's present state. It is as a man that he believes in hunting and fishing.

In the *Journal* as in *Walden*, negative statements concerning nature are much less frequent than positive ones, providing proof that, in spite of his Transcendentalism, Thoreau's ultimate view

⁴⁹*Walden*, p. 168.

of nature was positive. In the *Journal*, the negative statements are more obviously negative than statements of the same kind in *Walden*.

There are two examples of Thoreau's negative responses to nature that I would like to point out here. One refers to his Transcendental dislike of 'coarse' nature and one to his human desire for wildness.

In October 1855, Thoreau makes a reference to his dislike of nature's coarseness:

I never liked to have many rich fruits ripening at the same season.... Nature by her bounteousness thus disgusts us with a sense of repletion - and uncleanness even ... She offers us too many good things at once.⁵⁰

However, three months later, in January 1856, the human Thoreau provides himself with an answer to the above complaint: "In Nature nothing is wasted."⁵¹ The human Thoreau does have one complaint about nature in the neighbourhood of Concord, and that is that it is not wild enough to satisfy him:

We soon get through with Nature. She excites an expectation which she cannot satisfy. The merest child which has rambled into a copsewood dreams of a wilderness so wild and strange and inexhaustible as Nature can never show him.⁵²

This complaint though, is largely a complaint about the destructive effect of man on nature.

It is through its relationship to man that we must ultimately judge Thoreau's attitude towards nature. Although *Walden* was written

⁵⁰*Journals*, 1, 920.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 2, 958.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 1, 739.

with a love for nature, its primary purpose was to aid his fellow men who Thoreau thought needed instruction on the art of living:

Perhaps these pages are more particularly addressed to poor students. As for the rest of my readers, they will accept such portions as apply to them. I trust that none will stretch the seams in putting on the coat, for it may do good service to him whom it fits.⁵³

There are other indications in *Walden* that Thoreau's aim in writing it was social in nature. The narrator claims in "Economy" that for many years, among other things, he had been the self-appointed caretaker of forest paths and woodlots. Although many used the paths that he kept clear, none appreciated his work enough to pay him for it, or to get him a civil appointment.⁵⁴ The fable of the Indian who made, but could not sell, his baskets, applies to the narrator's being available and not being made use of by those he wishes to serve. Both situations imply a lack of communications between the seller and the potential buyer.

It was his sense of rejection that made Thoreau seem a little distant in his relations with the rest of the human race. However, I would never agree with Holbrook Jackson that, in his *Walden* experiment, Thoreau was in flight from civilization.⁵⁵ We must after all consider the facts about his excursion to the woods, and remember that it was just a short-term experiment. During the short time he was at *Walden*.

⁵³*Walden*, pp. 1-2.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁵⁵Holbrook Jackson, *Dreamers of Dreams: The Rise and Fall of 19th Century Idealism* (London: Faber & Faber, 1971), pp. 220-221.

he was close enough to Concord to visit it frequently and to receive visitors. Sherman Paul, a very sensitive reader of *Walden*, explains that Thoreau's sense of rejection manifested itself in a more subtle manner than simple flight from society: "This selflessness and the misinterpretation of it provided one of the most haunting strains in his thought."⁵⁶ Perhaps his contemporaries' misunderstanding also contributed to the ambiguity he felt about how he should regard man.

In the final segment of "Economy" the narrator reveals that although he would like to help the poor especially, he is not going to take the easy way out and simply give them money. He believes that the reason that most men contribute money to charity is that there is something wrong with their own lives:

I believe that what so saddens the reformer is not his sympathy with his fellows in distress, but, though he be the holiest son of God, is his private ail.⁵⁷

In many ways *Walden* is Thoreau's attempt to right the social wrongs of the world. He holds that what the poor really need is an example of a better way of life to follow. We see the narrator trying to provide this in "Baker Farm", and we also see that for all his good intentions, the example he provides does not improve the lives of John Field and his family at all. Their response to the narrator's

⁵⁶Sherman Paul, *The Shores of America: Thoreau's Inward Exploration* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 76.

⁵⁷*Walden*, p. 57.

remarks on his lifestyle is a wish that they could afford to live so well. This episode provides one example of the haunting strain that we occasionally find in *Walden*.

There are times in *Walden* when through the narrator Thoreau seems almost to completely despair of ever influencing mankind. The bitter satire that occupies much of the first chapter is a good indication of the depth of the despair that the narrator saw in the lives of those around him. In the first chapter he reveals that, in contrast to the peace that he has found, the lives of his fellows were anything but peaceful - in their imagined as well as their real lives:

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desparation. What is called resignation is confirmed desparation.... Stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind.⁵⁸

The truth that we can see in these words provides proof enough that Thoreau had examined fairly closely the life-styles of his contemporaries and reached a conclusion that is still applicable to our modern world. He also suggests, in "Sounds", that the majority of men resist change so strongly that not only is there little chance that they will ever improve their lives, there is equally as little chance that the present state of man's existence will ever deteriorate.⁵⁹

The statements that Thoreau makes of this nature suggest that

⁵⁸*Walden* , p. 5.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, p. 90.

perhaps he saw his self-imposed task as being somewhat futile. Even statements that he makes in "Visitors" where for the most part he is engaged in fairly positive descriptions of mankind, the narrator's comments seem slanted against the mass of men. For example, he writes, "With respect to wit, I learned that there was not much difference between the half and the whole."⁶⁰ Although this particular statement may be taken as a simple example of Thoreau's satiric wit, it has an air of sincerity in the context in which it is placed. Then, with what we have come to expect as almost typical Thoreauvian ambiguity, he makes a statement that declares the strength of his overall belief in mankind, "As for men, they will hardly fail one anywhere."⁶¹ Statements of this nature provide some proof to Paul's idea that Thoreau was indeed very concerned about mankind, and felt that he belonged to the human race.

Thoreau's *Journal* reveals a less settled attitude towards mankind than we might have expected from the writer of *Walden*. It is only through a reading of the *Journal* that we can realize how close the correspondence was between his attitudes towards man and nature, throughout Thoreau's life. Although the ambivalence in his general attitude towards man is still present in the *Journal*, the individual statements are far less ambivalent than those found in *Walden*. For

⁶⁰*Walden* , p. 113.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, p. 108.

example, he claims in 1854 that, "I am not interested in mere phenomena, though it were the explosion of a planet, only as it may have lain in the experience of a human being."⁶² He also claims that "In society all the inspiration of my lonely hours seems to flow back on me, and then first have expression."⁶³ This man, called a misanthrope by many of his contemporaries, Emerson among them, also has this to say about his relationship to man: "A lover of Nature is pre-eminently a lover of man. If I have no friend, what is Nature to me? She ceases to be morally significant."⁶⁴ This admission is interestingly suggestive that Thoreau loved nature the most when his friendships with man were strong, and equally that, when he felt himself to be at odds with man he felt somewhat uncomfortable in the woods. Of course, due to Thoreau's unconventional habits of journal-keeping, it is not always possible to pinpoint enough documented examples to provide adequate proof to support a theory of correspondence on this subject.

In the *Journal* the negative statements that Thoreau makes about mankind are concerned with his difficulties in approaching them: "I almost shrink from the arduousness of meeting man erectly day by day."⁶⁵ The triviality of men also causes him some distress:

The gregariousness of men is their most contemptible and

⁶²*Journals* , 1, 718.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 1, 50.

⁶⁴Shepard, p. 92.

⁶⁵*Journals* , 1, 62.

discouraging aspect. See how they follow each other like sheep, not knowing why. Day and Martin's blacking was preferred by the last generation, and also by this. They have not so good a reason for preferring this or that religion as in this case even.⁶⁶

But his primary complaint about man in the *Journal* arises directly out of their misunderstanding of him. He finds that if he is treated with suspicion his behaviour reflects this attitude, yet he still refuses to explain himself to his detractors, "My prickles or smoothness are as much a quality of your hand as of myself. I cannot tell you what I am, more than a ray of the summer's sun. What I am I am and say not."⁶⁷

His final word is that nature is far less constrained than man and that is why his general preference is for the former rather than the latter. Again, however, the final word provides an overall sense of optimism concerning the relationship between Thoreau and mankind: "Nature and man; some prefer the one, other the other; that is all *de gustibus*. It makes no odds at what well you drink, provides it be a well-head."⁶⁸

Even considering the many very bitter things that Thoreau said about man during his life, I think that the desire to serve mankind was his most dominant desire, and a love of mankind his most predominant emotion. I would like to cite one more proof that Thoreau's basic desire was to be useful:

⁶⁶*Journals* , 2, 1270.

⁶⁷Shepard, p. 23.

⁶⁸*Journals* , 1, 187.

Use me, then, for I am useful in my way, and as one of many petitioners, from toadstool and henbane up to dahlia and violet, supplicating to be put to my use, if by any means ye may find me serviceable...⁶⁹

He wanted to be used, but only on his own terms.

It is clear from the above examination of Thoreau's varying attitudes towards man and nature that any one affirmative statement concerning them would not be absolutely correct. It can be safely said that there does seem to be a correspondence between how he was treated by man, and how he regarded man, and how receptive he was to the beauties of nature and how much he loved her. For the narrator of *Walden*, love of nature, and a desire to show his fellow man a path to a better life predominate.

In order to understand better how and why the narrator desired to illustrate an improved way of life, it should be useful to examine his philosophies of life.

⁶⁹Paul, p. 77.

CHAPTER 3: POET OF THE NEW PARADISE

After examining some of the specific paradoxes and ambiguities of *Walden*, it should now be possible to come to a greater understanding of Thoreau's philosophy of life as it is realized in the narrator. The narrator of *Walden* presents himself and his life at the pond in an almost Elysian light. Through his description of the hut and its environs, the narrator completely removes them from the typical New England setting:

The upright white hewn studs and freshly planed door and window casings gave it a clean and airy look, especially in the morning, when its timbers were saturated with dew, so that I fancied that by noon some sweet gum would exude from them. To my imagination it retained throughout the day more or less this auroral character, reminding me of a certain house on a mountain which I had visited the year before. This was an airy and unplastered cabin, fit to entertain a travelling god and where a goddess might trail her garments. The winds which passed over my dwelling were such as sweep over the ridges of mountains, bearing the broken strains, or celestial parts only, of terrestrial music.⁷⁰

This careful comparison of his own hut with the one on the mountain makes it seem metaphorically that they are one and the same place. Thoreau has created in the reader the same impression of openness and freedom about Walden Pond that he apparently had gained from the cabin on the mountain. Thoreau's constant use of Greek and other mythologies also emphasizes his desire to create an impression

⁷⁰*Walden*, p. 63.

of a new golden age. We are also given to suspect that actual visitors to Walden left it with a feeling of freedom and beauty that they may never have experienced before.

Our perceptions of the narrator's philosophy of life are influenced in much the same way as he sways our view of his retreat at Walden - by very careful writing, and by precise juxtaposition of the locale of Walden with other places revered by Thoreau. In this chapter I would like to examine the general philosophy of life of the narrator of *Walden*. On the surface, both the philosophy and life of the narrator appear to be examples of absolute Transcendental tranquility. However, there are also undertones of personal despair in some isolated passages of the book, where feelings of regret and melancholy are allowed to show. I would like to examine this dichotomy in the narrator with the intent of revealing what it can tell us about both the narrator and the writer. As usual, the *Journal* will be used to provide further insights into some things that may only be hinted at in *Walden*.

The statements that the narrator makes concerning his purpose in undertaking his experiment, and for writing his account of it, are generally very optimistic and full-bodied in tone. It is easy to see the narrator as a man with a healthy respect for life as well as a sincere love for nature. The dedication to *Walden*, which is repeated in "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For," is a particularly

optimistic statement: "I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbours up."⁷¹

The chanticleer, a lusty domestic bird, was for Thoreau, throughout his life, a very strong symbol of the zest for life. In the first version of *Walden*, written in 1846-47, ⁷² he romanticizes the bird in a rather lengthy poem, which I will quote in its entirety:

Poor bird! destined to lead thy life
Far in the adventurous west,
And here to be debased tonight
From thy accustomed nest;
Must thou fall back upon old instinct now,-
Well nigh extinct under man's fickle care?
Did heaven bestow its quenchless inner light
So long ago, for thy small want tonight?
Why standst upon thy toes to crow so late?
The moon is deaf to thy low feathered fate;
Or dost thou think so to possess the night,
And people the drear dark with thy brave sprite?
And now with anxious eye thou lookst about,
While the relentless shade draws on its veil,
For some sure shelter from approaching dews,
And the insidious steps of nightly foes.
I fear imprisonment has dulled thy wit,
Or ingrained servitude extinguished it.
But no, - dim memory of the days of yore,
By Brahmapootra & the Jumna's shore,
Where thy proud race flew swiftly o'er the heath,
And sought its food the jungle's shade beneath, -
Has taught thy wings to seek yon friendly trees,
As erst by Indus' banks & far Ganges.⁷³

⁷¹*Walden*, p. 62.

⁷²J. Lyndon Shanley, *The Making of Walden* (Chicago:University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 104.

⁷³*Ibid.*, pp. 160-161.

Although the pages which contain the particular incident on which this poem is based are missing, the poem itself provides reason enough for Thoreau's feelings of affection for it. He apparently felt a sense of kinship for this neither entirely wild, nor entirely tame bird as though he saw parallels between it and himself. There is also a rather lengthy passage extolling the vitality of a young rooster in a *Journal* entry for 1858.⁷⁴ Although on first consideration it may seem unusual for a man who bragged that there were no signs of domesticity in his life at the pond to adopt an at least partially domesticated bird as a personal emblem, a reading of the early poem and the later *Journal* entry explain how this could not only be possible, but somehow fitting. Thoreau not only did not believe that the chanticleer was not an entirely tame bird, but he also believed that as a native of the East, the chanticleer partook of the virtues of the far eastern philosophies which Thoreau followed.

The chanticleer would also have been recognized by Thoreau's readers from its presense in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and from other folklore sources. His educated readers would also recognize

⁷⁴*Journals* , 2, 1326.

the connection between Chaucer's chaunticleer and fox and Henry Bolingbroke and Mowbray, the Earl Marshal,⁷⁵ which furthers the idea that the ordinary can be made heroic by juxtaposition with that which is heroic.

The chanticleer of the dedication has another symbolic significance in its context in *Walden*. It provides the symbol of Thoreau's desire to rouse his neighbours from their slumbering enslavement in modern society.⁷⁶ He wants to awaken those who read the book and those who listened to the lectures to the potential of life, because to be awake is to be alive. Although he may deny it, the narrator of *Walden* is one who is truly alive, and he wants to share this sense of well-being with who ever he can.

It is indicative of the critical controversy that surrounds Thoreau, that at least one critic, Stanley Cavell, sees the dedication not as a sign of hope, but as a key to the desperation expressed in *Walden*. Cavell makes the conjecture that Thoreau has indeed written

⁷⁵F.N. Robinson, ed. *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1957), p. 751.

According to Mr Hotson's theory, *Isaurel* is represented as a col-fox instead of the usual red fox of the Renard cycle, because he stands for Nicholas Colfax, a follower of Mowbray, who was associated with him in the murder of Gloucester at Calais in September, 1397. But the fox's colours correspond to those of Mowbray's truncheon as Earl Marshal. Hence he represents Mowbray himself as well as Colfax, and the quarrel with the cock stands for the duel of Mowbray and Bolingbroke. Chaunticleer's colours correspond to Henry's arms. The fox is ruined by talking, as Mowbray was ruined by his slander of the king.

⁷⁶S.G. Kellman, "A Conspiracy Theory of Literature: Thoreau and You", *The Georgia Review*, Winter 1978, p. 814.

an ode to dejection - an ode through which he tries to warn of the dangers of modern society. Cavell also implies that Thoreau would have been wiser if he had allowed his contemporaries to continue their lives of misery, and lived his own peaceful life without trying to change the lives of others:

The commitment to Chanticleer entitles *Walden* to Chaucer's Nun's Priest's discovery that a tale is epic in which a crower has to learn to keep his mouth shut.⁷⁷

In other words, although the narrator's intentions may have been to awaken his neighbours, the lesson that he learned from the failure of realizing this goal through his Walden experience was to mind his own business. Cavell sees Thoreau's self-imposed task as an entirely futile one.

Cavell has, I think, taken the apparently serious tone of the satiric nature of "Economy" rather too much to heart. He even mistakes the humorous passages in the chapter for admissions of desperation on the narrator's part:

The bragging and wild laughter will have to take place over despair, and perhaps will express only that shrill sound. Then it may at least wake his neighbours up to their actual condition.⁷⁸

Cavell is so intent on seeing the pessimistic aspects of *Walden* that he fails to see the truth of the overwhelming optimistic nature

⁷⁷Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of *Ealden** (New York: Viking, 1972), p. 38.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

of the book. Consider, for example, the following segment from the "Conclusion":

A living dog is better than a dead lion. Shall a man go hang himself because he belongs to the race of pygmies, and not be the biggest pygmy that he can?⁷⁸

This is the major part of Thoreau's message that Cavell misses - that we should all accept ourselves for what we are.

As has been previously mentioned, the predominance of the presence of spring and the symbols of renewal contribute considerably to the overall impression of optimism in *Walden*. Although the Walden experiment did not officially begin until early July, actual construction of the hut began near the end of March, at the very beginning of spring. The narrator describes not only the awakening of nature during this time, but also his own coming to life. And, in spite of the troubles that we are shown existing in Concord, the beginning of the book describes the inception of a new earthly paradise: "They were pleasant spring days, in which the winter of man's discontent was thawing as well as the earth, and the life that had lain torpid, began to stretch itself."⁷⁹ By suggesting that as he built his retreat, life was beginning all around him, the narrator adds to our impression of Walden as an earthly paradise. He is also expressing here his hope that the despair he saw in the lives of those around him could be

⁷⁸*Walden*, p. 246.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, p. 29.

removed and life could again become enjoyable for all.

In this respect, Thoreau is advocating an American myth that was in vogue during much of the nineteenth century - the myth of America as the new Garden of Eden: "The master symbol of the garden embraced a cluster of metaphors expressing fecundity, growth, increase and blissful labour in the earth..."⁸⁰ We see a more specific example of this in *Walden* in the narrator's bean field, where he is trying to make the earth produce something other than what it was used to produce. This myth of the garden of America provides further emphasis on the heroic potential of the average man. In the myth the hero was the independent yeoman, such as the narrator is. And, independence and self worth, the supposed virtues of these independent farmers, are exactly the virtues that Thoreau is advocating in *Walden*.

Even the lumber that he used to build his hut underwent a ritual rebirth before it was used. When we first see it, it is part of the James Collins' shanty, a "dank, clammy and aguish"⁸¹ building. The morning after he reaches an agreement with the unlucky Irishman, the narrator dismantles the hut and lays the boards in the sun to bleach and lose their old shape and connection with the old building. And the next time we hear of the wood it is part of the airy cabin that is the home of the poet of the new paradise.

Like any organic body, the hut took a long time to become

⁸⁰Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York: Vintage Books, 1950), p. 138.

⁸¹*Walden*, p. 31.

completely grown, or entirely finished. The skeletal structure was sufficient to provide the narrator with shelter throughout the summer and through the early fall. During the autumn, like an animal getting ready to hibernate, the narrator prepared his hut for winter. He very slowly and methodically built himself a fireplace during the month of October. And when the freezing weather came, he plastered the walls of his hut, thus removing much of its airy, Elysian appearance. Although the cabin looked less 'natural' after it had been plastered, both it and the narrator are seen to retain a close instinctual relationship with nature: "At length the winter set in in good earnest, just as I had finished plastering, and the wind began to howl around the house as if it had not had permission to do so until then."⁸² Nature is here represented as a neighbour, co-existing with the inhabitants of the new paradise.

The narrator obtained a small stove during the second winter he spent at the pond and thereby lost not only the companionship of the fire, but a little more contact with nature as well. Because he began his experiment by building his cabin, the close ties that he develops with nature in the account are begun on a domestic note. It is indicative of the positive nature of the narrator's relationship with both avenues of life that this relationship is maintained throughout the *Walden* account.

⁸²*Walden* , p. 88.

The slow construction of the hut is not only a part of the rebirth mythology of *Walden*, it is closely related to the myth of life as it was viewed by Thoreau. He saw life as an organic process of constant growth and he therefore frequently draws parallels between vegetative growth and the life of man. One such parallel occurs in one of his more predominant natural metaphors- the description of man in terms of a flowering plant from which he demands the best and most wholesome parts: "I want the flower and fruit of a man; that some fragrance be wafted over from him to me, and some ripeness flavour our intercourse."⁸³ He develops this metaphor further by stating that man, like a plant, is rooted in the earth so that he may gain nourishment from that contact, and flower into the heavens above him.⁸⁴ A *Journal* entry for November 1860 further clarifies Thoreau's thoughts on the potential for human growth:

I am struck by the fact that the more slowly trees grow at first, the sounder they are at the core, and I think that the same is true of human beings. We do not wish to see children precocious, making great strides in their early years like sprouts, producing a soft and perishable timber, but better if they expand slowly at first, as if contending with difficulties, and so are solidified and perfected.⁸⁵

As an organic view of life is necessarily a positive one, the profusion of organic and natural metaphors in *Walden* places considerable emphasis on the overall optimism of that book. The elements of primitivism

⁸³*Walden*, p. 56.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁸⁵*Journals*, 2, 1718.

that are to be found in *Walden* are further aspects of the narrator's emphatic symbolizing of the need for an organic life.⁸⁶

The rebirth ritual mentioned briefly above is also a pre-dominant aspect of the built in optimism of *Walden*. R.W.B. Lewis sees the whole of *Walden* as a "metaphoric expansion of Bartram's busk - the busk of the human spirit, when clothes and pots and pans are discarded as symbols of ambition and interests."⁸⁷ The busk to which Lewis is referring is briefly described in "Economy." It was an annual ceremony of purification celebrated by the Mucclasse Indians, during which all old possessions were disgarded and a general amnesty was declared. After a three day fast 'life' was begun again when the priest lit a new fire which was then spread throughout the community.⁸⁸ The narrator also describes other primitive purification rites in this brief segment.

This passage illustrates one source where Thoreau may have received some of his ideas on the need for periodic rebirth from, and also shows why he is so hard on the materialism of his contemporaries. The busk is also an apt symbol for the new paradise that the narrator is advocating.

The segment on the busk, while emphasizing the rebirth theme of *Walden*, also reveals the narrator's basic philosophy of simplification. That those primitive people freed themselves periodically from their

⁸⁶Paul, p. 230.

⁸⁷Lewis, p. 15.

⁸⁸*Walden*, p. 50.

possessions, showed that they were not as overly concerned with material belongings as were the members of Thoreau's modern audience. Much of "Economy" is taken up in showing the Sisyphean labours that the narrator saw his neighbours undergoing in their attempt to keep up with their possessions. The example of the busk is intended to show that material wealth is not necessary for a happy life. A more specific statement of the need for simplicity occurs in the second chapter: "Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand,... Simplify, simplify."⁸⁹ Thoreau's emphasis on simplicity and rebirth show his belief that life cannot be enjoyed if it is cluttered up with unnecessary accoutrements. The simplicity of the narrator's life at Walden Pond provides an instructive and practical example of how pleasant a simple life could be.

In *Walden*, the eastern philosophies that the narrator professes, and the rites that he follows, are also major aspects of the positive appeal of the book. The examples of eastern beliefs that we receive in *Walden* are all present to emphasize the beauty and peace that can be found in life if one knows where to look. The early morning baths that the narrator takes in the pond, as part of his worship of Aurora, provide him with the daily opportunity of renewing his innocence.

Another eastern belief that the narrator follows, no doubt to the chagrin of his more materially concerned neighbours, is the forsaking of works.

⁸⁹*Walden*, p. 68.

Life was sometimes so enjoyable during his retreat at the pond that the narrator did not have time to do anything but enjoy life:

There were times when I could not afford to sacrifice the bloom of the present moment to any work, whether of the head or hands.... I grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been.⁹⁰

What the second statement in the above quotation suggests is that while he was sitting, to all appearances idle, the calming, beautifying influence of nature was entering his soul and improving him.

The final paragraph of "Higher Laws" is a more easily understood example of the idea of "corn growing in the night." Briefly stated, this paragraph describes John Farmer, a general personification of modern man, relaxing after a hard day's work. After daydreaming for a while, he becomes conscious that the sound of a distant flute has removed his attention from the cares of the mundane world. Unlike the narrator, John Farmer is unaccustomed to this general feeling of well-being. So, "All that he could think of was to practice some new austerity, to let his mind descend into his body and redeem it, and treat himself with ever increasing respect."⁹¹ And this is the ultimate lesson of *Walden* - self respect.

There are many other ways by which Thoreau underscores his positive philosophy. The sense of humour that the narrator exhibits

⁹⁰*Walden*, p. 83.

⁹¹*Ibid.*, p. 169.

is one of these. The most easily recognized humorous passages are those that are concerned with the antics of his 'brute' neighbours. For example, the description of the approaches made by the squirrels to the food he left for them in the winter is one of the most charming and amusing passages in the book.⁹² It was obviously written after many hours of watching the squirrels and observing their movements. The description of the degenerate frogs who night after night drank each other under the pond with their watery liquor, is another such segment.⁹³

Thoreau exercises his humorous ability on the antics of the human animal as well. The conversation that we witness between the Hermit and the Poet is another example of Thoreau's mild and gentle humour. For the most part, however, the humour concerning man is more or less sarcastic. One of the best examples of his sarcastic humour is found in the "Bean-Field" chapter. When discussing the Concord military training exercises, the narrator says that the presence of the local militia made him feel so secure that he "could spit a Mexican with good relish, - for why should we always stand for trifles? and looked around for a woodchuck or a skunk to exercise my chivalry on."⁹⁴ This is quite clearly an ironic and hyperbolic statement and should not be taken too seriously. Mild or sarcastic, the humour points to

⁹²*Walden* , pp. 206-208.

⁹³*Ibid.* , p. 94.

⁹⁴*Ibid.* , p. 121.

Thoreau's general positive outlook. Without optimism there could be no humour.

Even the potentially destructive removal of the ice from the pond's surface does not sully the waters of Walden or create any sense of pessimism in the narrator. In fact, Thoreau uses the ice harvest to further bind his Walden experiment to the eastern philosophies he was so fond of:

Thus it appears that the sweltering inhabitants of Charleston and New Orleans, of Madras and Bombay and Calcutta, drink at my well. In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmological philosophy of the Bhagavat Geeta,... I lay down the book and go to my well for water, and lo! there I meet the servant of the Bramin, priest of Brahma and Vishnu and Indra,... our buckets as it were grate together in the same well. The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges.⁹⁵

Like the enterprises that Thoreau cherished, his pessimistic side is, for the most part, only hinted at. This is because he was following "another rule for writing: that the hero hide his struggles."⁹⁶ Sometimes, however, in spite of Thoreau's skill as a writer, the struggles of the hero (narrator) intrude into the paradise, and become apparent to the reader. The narrator's disenchantment with the world reveals itself in two different forms. The major form of his disenchantment seems to consist of a sense of loss. The second most noticeable form is a feeling of personal desperation that one gains from some segments of *Walden*. We also occasionally get a sense of the

⁹⁵*Walden*, p. 225.

⁹⁶Paul, p. 296.

narrator's impending withdrawal from society.

The statement in *Walden* that reveals most clearly the narrator's general sense of loss occurs very early in the book, in a famous and much quoted passage:

I long ago lost a hound, a bay horse, and a turtle-dove, and am still on their trail. Many are the traveller I have spoken concerning them, describing their tracks and what calls they answered to. I have met one or two who had heard the hound and the tramp of the horse, and even seen the dove disappear behind a cloud, and they seemed as anxious to recover them as if they had lost them themselves.⁹⁷

Many suggestions have been made about what the precise meaning of these symbols may be. Critics from Thoreau's day to our own have suggested many theories but none has final, definitive, acceptance. The difficulty in accounting for this particular symbol arises largely out of Thoreau's elusiveness concerning the passage. When 'Uncle Ed' Watson of Plymouth, Massachusetts asked him about that symbol, Thoreau is reported to have said, "Well Sir, I suppose we all have our losses."⁹⁸ And it seems that no one has been able to really pin down a more definitive statement than that about the symbol.

Interpretations of this passage also abound among modern critics. Stanley Cavell suggests that the hound, bay horse and turtle dove are symbolic of everything of value that Thoreau had ever lost. Based on this supposition Cavell states that *Walden* is the record of Thoreau's

⁹⁷*Walden*, p. 11.

⁹⁸W. Harding, ed. *The Variorum Walden* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1973), p. 259, n. 44(1).

losses:

[I]t [the symbol] is not a set of desired things he has lost, but a connection with things, the track of desire itself. Everything he can list he is putting in his book; it is a record of his losses.⁹⁹

Sherman Paul suggests that what Thoreau had lost was reality and his sense of communion with nature.¹⁰⁰

It may be that what is significant about this passage is not that it provides clues to what either Thoreau or the narrator may or may not have lost - they are both far too elusive figures to give anything away unless it was necessary. The passage should be seen rather as a definite indication that the narrator was not as satisfied with his life as he would have us believe. The symbol of the hound, bay horse and turtle dove reveals that *Walden* is not only Thoreau's attempt to help his readers in their search for a better way of life; it is also the record of his own search for the same thing.

There is sufficient evidence to suggest that, even in *Walden* one of the things that Thoreau felt himself to be losing was what used to be an inborn sensibility towards nature. The loss of contact with nature and the loss of innocence seem to be closely related for Thoreau. In fact, the symbol of the hound, horse and dove may represent Thoreau's sense of loss of those two ideals of his life. If that were the case, it would also provide a partial explanation as to why others

⁹⁹Cavell, p. 50.

¹⁰⁰Paul, p. 256.

were searching for them with as much diligence as he was.

In a *Journal* entry for August 19 1851, we find Thoreau complaining that his knowledge of nature is becoming too narrow, too scientific; that instead of seeing nature whole he is seeing her in parts.¹⁰¹ Yet less than two months later he states that he finds himself more constantly merged with nature than ever before. Thoreau's changing perceptions of his relationship with nature in his later years reflect a growing uncertainty of the exact state of the relationship.

Thoreau's feeling of the loss of contact with nature is a part of his desire to return to his youth, when his relationship with her was completely instinctual. We find Thoreau's expressions of this loss primarily in the *Journal* during the 1850s:

Too late now for the morning influence and inspiration. The birds do not sing so earnestly and joyously; there is a blurring ripple on the surface of the lake. How few valuable observations can we make in youth! What if there were united the susceptibility of youth with the discrimination of age? Once I was part and parcel of Nature: now I am observant of her.¹⁰²

Thoreau is bemoaning not only his lost youth, but the lack of perception and wisdom he had while he was young, which deprived him of taking full advantage of his complete integration into nature. *Walden*, written and published during this period, was an attempt on Thoreau's part to remain true to his youth: by reliving the events of his youth through the persona of the narrator he hoped that he could stave off the feeling

¹⁰¹*Journals*, 1, 246.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*, 1, 369.

that they were gone forever.¹⁰³

Thoreau's pessimistic outlook on life is also revealed by the continuing, but usually well concealed, presence of an undertone of regret and desperation in *Walden* and the *Journal*. As we have already noted, the bulk of the desperation depicted by the narrator is that of those around him - from the Indian who "stands on the unelastic plank of famine"¹⁰⁴ to the equally degraded rich. In "Economy" the narrator speaks out directly on the desperation that he saw around him, using mythological punishments and hardships to exaggerate and thus draw attention to, the plight of modern man as he saw it.

In the rest of *Walden* Thoreau employs animals as further symbols of desperation. The laughter of the loon and the demoniacal barking of the foxes on winter nights are two of these natural symbols of desperation. It is the owls, however, with their graveyard associations, who really represent the dark melancholy side of human nature - that of the narrator as well as the rest of mankind:

They [owls] are the spirits, the low spirits and melancholy forebodings of fallen souls that once in human shape night-walked the earth and did the deeds of darkness, now expiating their sins with their wailing hymns or threnodies in the scenery of their transgressions... I rejoice that there are owls. Let them do the idiotic and maniacal hooting for men... They represent the stark twilight and unsatisfied thoughts which all have.¹⁰⁵

I believe that Thoreau himself felt this despair that he had heard the

¹⁰³Paul, p. 294.

¹⁰⁴*Walden*, p. 23.

owls express. It has been said that as a Transcendentalist, Thoreau had no awareness of evil or darkness, however, if he could not conceive of darkness and despair, he could not write of them - and the above passage illustrates that he could indeed write about them. It may even be that his experience with despair was a further result of his Transcendental dilemma. It could not have been easy for a man as realistic as Thoreau was to maintain a belief that it was possible to return to the innocence of youth when all he saw around him illustrated the impossibility of it. That is not to say, however, that he could not write so as to convince the reader that this return was indeed possible.

The possibility seems to exist that, in spite of his profound love for mankind, the narrator may withdraw permanently from society. The reason for his tendency to remove himself from society is that he did not believe that society had entirely accepted him, or that it had fully recognized his gifts. The fable of the Indian who believed that once he had woven his baskets, the responsibility rested on the shoulders of the buyers, is a representation of Thoreau's experiences. The narrator tells us that he had spent years

faithfully minding my own business, till it became more and more evident that my townsmen would not after all admit me into the list of town officers, nor make my place a sinecure with a moderate allowance.¹⁰⁶

He concludes his allegory of the Indian by stating that although he too had woven a kind of basket, "instead of studying how to make it worth

¹⁰⁶Walden, p. 12.

men's while to buy my baskets, I studied rather how to avoid the necessity of selling them."¹⁰⁷ Although, as we have previously observed, Thoreau was hurt because he felt that he had been rejected by those around him, he was not willing to take any of the blame for the situation. He faulted society for his lack of social eminence.¹⁰⁸ And it may well be that the satire of "Economy" is Thoreau's way of relieving his tensions against society.

In several *Journal* entries for 1854, the year *Walden* was published, he comments that he is cheapening himself by attempting to become a successful lecturer. It is another incidence of his thumbing his nose at society for not realizing the importance of what he had to say. And in the "Conclusion" he chastizes society for dragging everything that is potentially great down to the mundane level of the multitude.

These examples of Thoreau's occasional irritation with society's lack of appreciation of him may hardly seem to be hard evidence of what I called a tendency to remove himself from society. However, these expressions of irritation, together with the bitter satire on the herd instincts of men and the *Journal* entries on other distasteful habits of mankind, combine to point out that on many occasions Thoreau felt a strong disgust for his fellow men, and felt a desire to withdraw from them into nature. But as we know, he did not do it - he left

¹⁰⁷*Walden*, p. 13.

¹⁰⁸Paul, p. 322.

his Walden retreat after two years and returned to a full life in Concord. And it may be that the book can be seen as an attempt on Thoreau's part to make positive contact with his fellow humans.

Walden was written largely in the years after the experiment at the pond. The book is a product of the last decade of Thoreau's life - years of increasingly frequent crises in his life.¹⁰⁹ A reading of the *Journal* for this period reveals just how deep Thoreau's feelings of despair ran in those years.

Walden is perhaps the most optimistic book that Thoreau wrote, but the optimism is described in retrospect. The affirmation is ever-present in *Walden* because

Educated by failure, determined now by conscious endeavour to find the way back to his golden age, his affirmation in *Walden* was that of one who had known the darkness but would not submit, who took faith instead in the last refuge of optimism, the faith in faith itself.¹¹⁰

Thoreau's affirmation in *Walden* appears all the more positive having been attained through a struggle with desperation. It seems as though the optimism has been made stronger, purer by being tested. Thoreau forged himself, in spite of great odds, into the poet of his new paradise. Considering the struggles that he underwent within himself to make *Walden* a positive book, it is hardly surprising that pessimistic notes should creep in. But, with the exception of critics like Cavell, it is the positive aspects of *Walden* that most readers recall.

¹⁰⁹Paul, p. 256.

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 256.

The creation of this optimism was in no way haphazard, and the presence of the persona of the narrator, although an important aspect of the optimism, is not the only reason for it. The form itself is an optimistic one. Thoreau used his wide knowledge of many literary traditions to create this form, and so an examination of those traditions should be helpful to our understanding of *Walden*.

CHAPTER 4: THE TECHNICAL SIDE

If it is indeed the case that the immense optimism of *Walden* arose out of a period of increasing pessimism in Thoreau's life, then we can entertain no doubts as to the extent of his technical skill. In this, the final chapter of my study of *Walden*, I will be briefly examining some of the more technical aspects of the writing of the book. I would like to note some of the literary traditions from which Thoreau emerged, and how they influenced him. I will also be looking at narrational distancing in the book, and at the guises which Thoreau, as narrator, assumes throughout the book. Perhaps through this further study of the narrational techniques that we find in *Walden* we will be able finally, to resolve the paradox that exists in the relationship between Thoreau and the narrator. It should also be beneficial to our understanding of *Walden* to show how it evolved from the early version of the 1840s, lectures, and *Journal* entries. For this portion of the chapter I will be depending largely on J. Lyndon Shanley's *The Making of Walden*. Through this examination of Thoreau's technical ability I hope to show not only how *Walden* became what it is, but also how Thoreau gained such a masterful control over both his subject matter and his audience.

Thoreau seems to have conceived of *Walden* originally as a lecture or lectures on his experiences at the pond. On February 10, 1847, he

gave a lecture in the Concord lyceum, entitled "A History of Myself."¹¹¹ It was presumably the very positive public reaction that the lecture received that encourage him to continue working on the project. Much of the rest of the book also first came before the public eye in the form of lecture. On November 22, 1848, Thoreau lectured in Salem, Massachusetts on "Student Life in New England, Its Economy."¹¹² Shortly afterwards, on January 3, 1849 he lectured in Concord on "White Beans and Walden Pond."¹¹³ These and other lectures apparently served as a testing ground for the material before it was finally committed to paper. To emphasize the importance that the lecture form bore for Thoreau, I should mention that all of his major essays were first aired as lectures.

Thus, it would seem that it was to the tradition of oratory that Thoreau owed one of his major literary debts. In America, the tradition of oratory developed out of the practices followed in the Puritan pulpit. With time the sermon of the Puritans became more and more literary, and finally developed into the glowing essay form under the influence of the Unitarianism that flourished in Boston around the turn of the nineteenth century.¹¹⁴ And then this form was taken over by the Transcendentalists who continued to develop both the oratorical and essay traditions.

The organization of a Puritan sermon was simple. It began with a

¹¹¹Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau*, p. 187.

¹¹²*Ibid.*, p. 236.

¹¹³*Ibid.*, p. 238.

¹¹⁴Brooks, p. 13.

scriptural text, doctrines were derived from the text, reasons were given for the doctrines and, finally, uses of the doctrine were suggested.¹¹⁵ We can see vestiges of this organization in *Walden*. Thoreau begins with the premise that "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation."¹¹⁶ The first chapter, "Economy," is largely taken up with the illustration of how and why this society is harmful to its adherents. From his premise, and still in the first chapter, Thoreau derives his doctrine and suggest his alternative to the problem, which can basically be described by two words - simplicity and independence. The remainder of the book can be seen as Thoreau's support or justification for his doctrine. Finally, in the "Conclusion" he suggests the ultimate lengths to which he believes his doctrine can be carried: "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away."¹¹⁷

Although the traditions that Thoreau followed were primarily those of American oratory he was also, like the other Transcendentalists and other nineteenth-century American writers, influenced by the Restoration literary forms of the highbrow review and the periodical essay, such as were written in the *Spectator* and *Tatler*.¹¹⁸ The most

¹¹⁵W. Blair, T. Hornberger & R. Stewart, *American Literature: A Brief History* (Chicago: Scott, Foresman & Co., 1964), p. 25.

¹¹⁶*Walden*, p. 5.

¹¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 246.

¹¹⁸Buell, p. 94.

easily identifiable example of the Transcendentalists following in the literary footsteps of the Restoration is *The Dial* which began in 1840¹¹⁹ and lasted until 1844. Thoreau was a frequent contributor to this Transcendental vehicle. He also contributed to other journals of the day, and portions of *Walden* first appeared in print in a journal. Some time after the original version of *Walden* had been written, portions of it were published in *Sartain's Magazine* in July 1852. These sections were called "A Poet Buys a Farm" and "The Iron Horse."¹²⁰

The travel account, or romantic excursion is another literary form that greatly influenced Thoreau's writing. With the exception of his very political essay such as "Civil Disobedience" and the two essays on John Brown, all of Thoreau's major works take the form of a journey. He often used the straightforward journey account in combination with his own version of the Puritanical account of a spiritual journey.

If we compare *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and *Walden*, two of his major works that are connected through Thoreau's life at the pond, we can see how he improved on his use of this combination of these two journey motifs as he became more familiar with them.

In *A Week* the combination appears to be quite clumsy. The actual physical voyage undertaken by Thoreau and his brother is frequently interrupted rather abruptly by accounts of Thoreau's spiritual state

¹¹⁹F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 83.

¹²⁰Shanley, p. 31.

and other miscellaneous subjects. This lack of unity between the two journey motifs creates a sort of 'scatter-gun' effect as far as both of them are concerned - we do not get a full and truly detailed account of either. And, as a result, the reader is left feeling slightly dissatisfied on both accounts.

In *Walden*, however, physical and spiritual journey have been successfully blended into the same basic framework. The two are completely interconnected and they each gain support from the other. On the physical level we have the move to the pond; construction of the hut; cultivation of the garden; daily perambulations around the Concord woods; and the eventual return to town. The spiritual journey involves the same movements, but they are seen in a somewhat different light. The spiritual journey begins with the withdrawal from the social imprisonment of Concord to a life of freedom, peace and creativity at the pond. While he is at the pond the narrator cultivates his spirit and his intellect in much the same manner as he does his bean field on the physical level. In "Higher Laws," the central chapter of the spiritual journey, he grapples with his spiritual difficulties, and in "Spring" and the "Conclusion" he experiences a discovery of personal spiritual peace and is able to return to society, an apparently wiser man than when he had left it.

It may be that Thoreau's success with the journey motifs is more apparent in *Walden* than in *A Week* because he gave himself a much.

larger time span to work with. The space of a year is much less limiting than that of a week: changes occur more gradually, appear less forced, and so the integration of physical and spiritual growth and development is more likely to be successful.

Thoreau is also largely indebted to romanticism, the essence of which is the ability to wonder and reflect.¹²¹ Like the poets of the romantic era, Thoreau preferred to relate accounts of his own locale to those of areas he was not familiar with, and he placed a high emphasis on the details of what he was describing.¹²² To the romantics and to Thoreau alike, the reality of nature was "to be found in a process, or activity, in which the universal and the particular fulfill each other."¹²³ Examples of Thoreau's romanticism abound in *Walden*. Perhaps the best example of it is the oneness that he felt in his relationship with nature and the open-hearted wonder with which he often describes her.

In spite of the extent of his belief in the romantic tradition, Thoreau was also very much of a realist in his views of nature. Although we see most of his natural realism in the *Journal* entries, we are given considerable proof of this aspect of his writing in *Walden*. I will point out several instances of the realism of this aspect of his writing. We find the first of these in "Brute Neighbours," where Thoreau describes in minute detail a battle that he had observed between

¹²¹R.E. Spiller, *The Cycle of American Literature: An Essay in Historical Criticism* (New York: The Free Press, 1955), p. 22.

¹²²W.J. Bate, ed., *Criticism: The Major Texts* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich Inc., 1970), p. 271.

¹²³*Ibid.*, p. 359.

red and black ants. Although it is a poetically described incident, in which Thoreau uses classical metaphors to bring a moral point across, the passage was obviously written about an incident he had observed. The original description of this battle is to be found in the *Journal*, in the entry for January 21, 1852.¹²⁴ This is a somewhat more factual account than the one we find in *Walden*. A further example of Thoreau's realism is found in the survey of the bottom of Walden pond that the narrator undertook while the pond was frozen over in the winter. The survey is described in "The Pond in Winter." Although the purpose of the survey was to satisfy the narrator's curiosity as to the bottom topography of the pond, and although his surveyor's approach to the task is very professional, this passage also illustrates a moral point. The moral of the survey is that as there are laws of nature, so must there be laws of humanity: "What I have observed of the pond is no less true in ethics. It is the law of average."¹²⁵ Although the survey itself is an example of Thoreau's deep-seated realism, the purpose to which he tries to put it is an example of his equally strong Transcendental tendencies. And finally, Thoreau's serious concentration on the details of natural occurrences is revealed in "Spring", where he lists the dates of the breaking up of the ice on Walden for the years of 1846-1854.¹²⁶

¹²⁴*Journals*, 1, 326-327.

¹²⁵*Walden*, p. 220.

¹²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 229.

These different traditions followed by Thoreau and their influence on him are useful in more than their historical context. They also provide us with several different frames of reference through which we can view not only *Walden*, but many of Thoreau's other works as well. If we can see *Walden* as arising out of such diverse traditions as the sermon, romanticism and realism, to name just three of its literary precursors, we can arrive at many more insights into the book than if we simply regard it as escapist nature writing or as a Transcendental manifesto.

The guises assumed by Thoreau as the narrator of *Walden* are many and varied. He is indeed a very protean figure stepping in and out of his multiple roles with as much confusing alacrity as those fashion-conscious quick-change artists he ridicules in "Economy" changed their dress. The roles that the narrator assumes seem to me to fall into several easily recognizable categories, which can be further broken down into the individual roles. These major categories have Thoreau projecting himself as a social critic; an independent yeoman; and, for lack of a better word, a philosopher. Within these very general categories there are approximately ten different roles, not counting the most basic one of narrator, that Thoreau assumes for varying reasons and lengths of time in *Walden*.

As a social critic, one of Thoreau's earliest and most obvious roles is that of the caustic cynic who has not got a single positive thing to say about life in modern society. This guise is primarily

visible in "Economy", where the narrator proceeds to tear apart every aspect of the life followed by his contemporaries - from land ownership to architecture to the idle ways they passed their time.

Although to judge him by his somewhat peculiar life-style Thoreau would hardly seem qualified to be an economic critic, this is one of the roles which he plays in much of *Walden*. In fact, he describes his purpose for the experiment in economic terms:

I have thought that Walden Pond would be a good place for business, not solely on account of the railroad and the ice trade; it offers advantages which it may not be good policy to divulge; it is a good post and a good foundation.¹²⁷

By establishing his life at the pond in successful economic terms Thoreau puts himself in a position to give economic advice to his readers. And in the first chapter aptly entitled "Economy" this is what he proceeds to do. In spite of his statement that "Economy is a subject which admits of being treated with levity, but it cannot be so disposed of."¹²⁸ Thoreau's economic criticism contains both a serious and a teasing note. He is perfectly serious when he is decrying the plight of the poverty-stricken Indians and Irish immigrants. However, in the highly detailed financial statistics that we find in "Economy" and "The Bean-Field" we see the narrator poking fun at the seriousness with which New Englanders were prone to view business. Critics who see *Walden* as autobiography, such as Henry Canby, are inclined to

¹²⁷*Walden* , p. 14.

¹²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 20.

view these statistics as further proof of the veracity of Thoreau's account of his life at the pond. We do not see too much of Thoreau in the role of political critic in *Walden* - he reserves that role primarily for other essays.

It is when we come to Thoreau's guises as independent yeoman that we see him really 'letting himself go' in a creative sense. For example, in the chapter entitled "House-Warming," where he is describing the preparations he undertook before plastering his cabin, the narrator assumes the role of the thoroughly efficient handyman: "In lathing I was pleased to be able to send home each nail with a single blow of the hammer, and it was my ambition to transfer the plaster from the board to the wall neatly and rapidly."¹²⁹ This particular very casual example of the narrator's assuming the role of expertise in carpentry is very much a guise rather than a statement of truth. Walter Harding tells us that

Despite his boasted dexterity, he was apparently a bad shot with a hammer; when the site of the Walden cabin was excavated a hundred years later, the cellar hole was found filled with hundreds of bent nails.¹³⁰

He is also playing the role of efficient handyman when he describes the ease with which he built his cabin and fireplace.

Although he successfully avoided the temptation to buy the Hollowell farm - in "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For" - the narrator plays the role of farmer in much of *Walden*, especially in the "Bean-Field"

¹²⁹*Walden*, p. 186.

¹³⁰Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau*, p. 182.

chapter. In his role of farmer he manages to fit himself into the general economic picture of the area by describing the comments made about his field by passing farmers: "Fellow-travellers as they rattled by compared it [Thoreau's bean field] aloud with the field which they had passed, so that I came to know how I stood in the agricultural world. This was one field not in Mr. Coleman's report."¹³¹ (The Mr. Coleman referred to in the above statement was a clergyman who published a series of surveys of the agriculture in Massachusetts from 1838 to 1841.)¹³² It is through his role of farmer that Thoreau reveals one of the major themes of the book - that of intermediacy. Although he is playing at being a farmer in his experimental cultivation of beans, Thoreau recognizes that his attempt represents what might be called the halfway point between the wilderness and the extensively cultivated farmland around him:

Mine was, as it were, the connecting link between wild and cultivated fields; as some states are civilized, and others half-civilized, and others savage or barbarous, so my field was, though not in a bad sense, a half-cultivated field.¹³³

These guises in the independent yeoman category seem to me to be necessary because of Thoreau's following the American myth of the great importance of this type of man. When we consider these roles that he plays it is almost as if Thoreau wrote *Walden* for the express purpose of illustrating the truth that he found to be inherent in this myth. He also appears to be trying to strengthen the hold of this myth on

¹³¹*Walden*, p. 119.

¹³²Harding, ed. *The Variorum Walden*, p. 292, n.12.

¹³³*Walden*, p. 119.

the minds of his contemporaries who were drifting away from the myth of the garden of the west because of the growing industrialization the country was experiencing.

The roles that Thoreau assumes as philosopher are those of purveyor of Oriental philosophy, and of Transcendentalist. We have seen, in a previous chapter, some of the uses that he had for the Oriental philosophy and ritual. They seemed to represent to him all that was beautiful and sensible. Transcendentalism, on the other hand, was the philosophy that Thoreau grew up into,¹³⁴ and as such it is the most natural role for him to be playing. As a Transcendentalist, in *Walden*, Thoreau was attempting "to re-orient the possibilities of life, to give the individual new powers and a new stage for action"¹³⁵

Charles Anderson in *The Magic Circle of Walden* suggests that there is yet another role that Thoreau is assuming in *Walden*. This role is that of the comic eiron - with Thoreau as the eiron pitted against the alazons of the world.¹³⁶ Northrop Frye defines the eiron as "the man who depreciates himself"¹³⁷ and an alazon as an impostor, or "someone who pretends or tries to be something more than he is."¹³⁸ Anderson speculates that many of the alazon figures that the narrator vanquishes are merely 'straw

¹³⁴Paul, p. 1.

¹³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹³⁶Anderson, p. 47.

¹³⁷Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 40.

¹³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 39.

men' who have been set up just to be knocked down.¹³⁹ If we accept this premise, the "The coincidence of his semivictory at the end with the coming of spring fulfills another of Frye's prerequisites for the comic mythos."¹⁴⁰ However, I cannot accept this view of *Walden* as a comedy because in a comedy there must be a definite and visible victory achieved by the eiron over the alazons who are blocking his desires. In *Walden* neither Thoreau nor the narrator is being seriously blocked by anyone - even his leaving from Concord is an entirely voluntary act. Also, in *Walden* we do not have a traditional comic ending, which involves the formation of a new society around the eiron and his new wife. Thoreau, as narrator, has come to a greater self-realization by the end of *Walden* and he has mapped his course in case any may wish to follow his example, but there is no real hint of any victory over society in the book. In fact, there are very few hints of any really serious conflict in *Walden*.

Although we are very much drawn to the narrator of *Walden* and the account of his sojourn at the pond, we are always kept at a distance from him. This distance that is maintained between the narrator and reader by Thoreau is a major argument that I would use to prove that *Walden* is not an autobiography. Autobiography, in my experience, usually involves an attempt on the part of the writer to create a sense of intimacy between himself and the reader through the relation

¹³⁹Anderson, p. 52

¹⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 54.

of highly personal details. And in *Walden* we are given only a very limited amount of this type of information. We are told, for example, of the profound effect that Thoreau's first view of the pond had upon him:

When I was four years old, as I well remember, I was brought from Boston to this my native town through these very woods and this field, to the pond. It is one of the oldest scenes stamped on my memory.¹⁴¹

He also tells us of the pleasures that he experienced at the pond while he was a youth growing up in Concord.¹⁴² But aside from the somewhat apocryphal story of how he almost bought the Hollowell farm, that is almost the complete extent of the intimate details to be found in the book.

This is not to say that *Walden* is not a very intimate account, but the intimacy is on a different plane than we are used to. The narrator seems to be a version of Everyman, and his account can almost be described as a paradigmatic journey of Everyman through a difficult period in his life.

The major way that Thoreau manages to maintain the distance between the narrator and the reader is through the frequent changes of narrational guises. It is hard to pin down a protean figure who changes form whenever you begin to get near him. And perhaps it is this protean nature of the narrator that gives rise to some of the paradoxes

¹⁴¹*Walden*, p. 117.

¹⁴²*Ibid.*, pp. 133, 145-146.

we find existing between the narrator and Thoreau. In trying to discover a correspondence between the two, we get caught up in the many literary guises and lose contact with the man behind them, which is probably what Thoreau intended to happen.

Walden which was originally subtitled *Life in the Woods*, underwent many revisions and much polishing between the time that the original version was completed in 1846-1847 and the published version of 1854. One important conclusion that Shanley draws from his examination of these versions is that *Walden* is a recreation of the experiences that Thoreau had at the pond, and not a mere re-telling of them.¹⁴³

Some of the material in *Walden* was drawn from *Journal* entries as far back as 1840, five years before ^{he} even began his experiment at the pond.¹⁴⁴

This material from the *Journal* was reorganized and used in lectures about his life at the pond. When he came to use the lectures in the book many of the changes that he made were simply those that were made necessary by writing for a more distant audience. For example, he toned down some of the exaggerated statements of his lectures that required face to face delivery.¹⁴⁵ Throughout all of these changes and additions Thoreau was striving to make *Walden* a more unified, tightly constructed whole. The essence of the published version is present in the original, but having read both versions, I must agree with J. Lyndon Shanley that the finished version is much fuller and richer

¹⁴³Shanley, p. 5.

¹⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 35.

in tone than was the original.¹⁴⁶

Walden was not made a classic simply because Thoreau tenaciously reworked his material until he had what he wanted. He also had a not inconsiderable skill with the English language, and many critics have been very generous in their praise of Thoreau's talent as a writer. The editors of *The Seven Arts* had this to say about the language in *Walden*:

There are pages in *Walden* which, by contrast, show up our American fiction, despite its occasional glamour, its frequent finesse, for the poor unpalatable straw it mostly is.¹⁴⁷

And, in the same book, Stanley Edgar Hyman has this to say about Thoreau's ability as a writer: "Thoreau wrote, at his best, the only really first rate prose ever written in America, with the possible exception of Abraham Lincoln."¹⁴⁸ Walter Harding, in his introduction to the *Variorum Walden*, lists an impressive number of the different types of figurative speech used by Thoreau in *Walden* - a list that includes almost thirty different technical devices from alliteration to synecdoche.¹⁴⁹

In conclusion, by the rapid variation of his roles, Thoreau keeps his readers 'on their toes' and is able to keep them going in the direction that he wants them to go. He creates an intriguing, sometimes

¹⁴⁶Shanley, p. 25.

¹⁴⁷The Editors of the *Seven Arts*, "Henry David Thoreau (1817-1917)", in *Thoreau: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. S. Paul (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 11.

¹⁴⁸S.E. Hyman, "Henry Thoreau in Our Time", in *Thoreau: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. S. Paul (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 25.

¹⁴⁹Harding, ed., *The Variorum Walden*, pp. xvii-xix.

humorous account that keeps the reader's interest from the time he reads the first word until well after he has finished the book. There is an aura of mystery surrounding the narrator, created purposely by Thoreau, that also contributes to the holding of our interest. Through his constant, but barely perceptible, alterations of personae Thoreau is also able to present various attitudes towards his subject matter, a further method that enables him to control his readers.

CONCLUSION

It has not always been easy for me to focus my attention³ where it properly belonged - on the elusive figure of the narrator. For the even more elusive man behind the narrator is, to me, a most charismatic and fascinating presence, and as such my attention was continually being drawn towards him. The fascination of the narrator has been created by this man who exerts control over the narrator and through him, the reader, and his role of creator makes him an impelling character. However, in this study, we have tried to leave the author as much in the shadows as possible and concentrate on his persona, the narrator.

In order to resolve the problem of the categorization of *Walden* we must accept Shanley's evidence that it is a reconstruction of the Walden experience and not simply a retelling of what occurred while Thoreau lived at the pond. *Walden* is, in fact, a record of both desires and potentialities rather than actualities. It is an account of how life should be lived and on that basis we can recognize the narrator as an ideal man. He is, therefore, much more than a reconstruction. As we have seen, the "I" is in large part entirely a literary creation. He is a carefully constructed image around whom the events of the experiment unfold. By removing himself once from his audience through the separate entity of the narrator, Thoreau is enabled to say many things that he probably could not have gotten away with had he said them directly. I am referring specifically to the very pointed criticisms directed at his contemporary society in "Economy". Even his plan for life in this new paradise was probably better received coming from another voice than his own.

If we can accept the narrator as a genuine literary persona it should make some of the paradoxical statements of "Economy" appear less paradoxical in nature. For example, I quoted this statement as representing a paradox in my first chapter:

If I should attempt to tell how I have desired to spend my life in years past, it would probably surprise those of my readers who are somewhat acquainted with its actual history; it would certainly astonish those who know nothing about it. I will only hint at some of the enterprises which I have cherished.¹⁵⁰

This is something more than the narrator telling us that these events occurred long in his past. The first part of this statement seems to come directly from Thoreau and says to me that what will follow will be a very imaginative, artistic account. It tells us that *Walden* is a partially fictionalized version of real events and not the complete or entirely factual account of what occurred during the two years, two months and two days that Thoreau actually spent at the pond.

The account that the narrator gives us is, in fact, a very complete one, but it is almost mythological in its completeness. The unity and movement of the events in *Walden* are far more complete and rounded than they could have been if it was simply a day by day account of Thoreau's experiment in living. And, in fact, the final published version is far more impressive than the original one of 1846-47.

The myth of the possibility of the creation of a new paradise here in North America is one of the major mythological concerns in *Walden*. With the possible exception of the Poet who we are shown visiting the narrator at his cabin, the only visible inhabitant of this new paradise

¹⁵⁰*Walden*, p. 11.

is the narrator himself. However, the reader is also a member of the new paradise, somewhat vicariously, through the narrator. The reader shares not only the experiences at the pond, he also shares the narrator's sense of superiority over the society around him. Thoreau has indeed become the poet of the new paradise, he is its creator and we as the readers are its inhabitants along with the narrator.

In the narrator we also see the epitomization of what Henry Nash Smith calls the myth of the garden of the west. Although in *Walden* the narrator speaks disparagingly of those who mindlessly move westward searching for new frontiers to open when they have their own personal frontiers always with them, he is himself a perfect example of the independent yeoman of this popular myth. Like the frontiersman, the narrator lives in the face of strong odds, dependent almost solely upon his own resources. The frontier that the narrator of *Walden* faces, however, is a somewhat different one than that faced by Western pioneers. Rather than pitting himself against a hostile exterior environment, he is meeting the challenge of discovering himself and his own destiny. And he urges us, as fellow inhabitants of this paradise, to do the same thing:

be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought. Every man is the lord of a realm beside which the earthly empire of the Czar is but a petty state, a hummock left by the ice.¹⁵¹

The narrator is telling us that each man can be, in his own way, an independent yeoman and thus a hero in his own right, by facing the life that he finds.

Another of the major mythological concerns dealt with by the

¹⁵¹*Walden*, p. 243.

narrator of *Walden* is the myth of rebirth and renewal as is illustrated by the example of Bartram's busk. The renewal and rebirth of *Walden* is even more far reaching than the predominance of the presence of the season of spring would suggest. The narrator undergoes a definite rebirth during the course of the book - *Walden* is really the account of the moulting season of a man. We can see the narrator growing and casting off his old attitudes throughout the book. He changes from the bitter social satirist of "Economy" to the calmer, more wise man of the "Conclusion" who willingly returns to the same society he had earlier abandoned.

Some ambiguities remain concerning the attitude of the narrator towards nature and man in *Walden*. He seems to set out to revere nature and dislike mankind, but he is not entirely successful at either. He does revere nature, but as a gateway to the discovery of the self. In "Higher Laws" where he says that nature must be overcome he means that although in order to understand ones self, one must start with nature, one must transcend her to achieve complete self-realization or independence. His relationships with nature are therefore determined by the message Thoreau wishes to convey.

As for man, the narrator shows a desire to serve, but only on his own terms. Although he has few immediate successes within the book, he has positively influenced the lives of many who have read the book. For *Walden* is a book such as the narrator describes in "Reading ":

How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book. The book exists for us perchance which will explain our miracles and reveal new ones. The at present unutterable things we may find somewhere uttered.¹⁵²

As we have seen *Walden* follows an extremely organic pattern, moving from spring to spring. The narrator maintains a very natural relationship with this movement. His actions throughout the year are always in accordance with the seasonal mood. He begins his experiment when all around him nature is being reborn; he and his beans continue to grow and develop throughout the summer. In the somewhat more pensive season of autumn he, like nature prepares for winter. During the winter months his thoughts dwell on the hardships endured by the animals who do not hibernate and on past inhabitants of the neighbourhood of the pond. And, when spring arrives and nature is awakening he moves on to another, undisclosed, experiment in living.


By living according to the dictates of the changes of the seasons the narrator is illustrating a very positive attitude towards life. Although he recognizes the presence of death and destruction, he knows that spring and morning will always arrive and life will begin anew. The growth of the grass in the spring is an apt symbol for the view of the human experience as it is expressed in *Walden*: "So our human life but dies down to its root, and still puts forth its green blade to eternity."¹⁵³ Hope is one of the major messages expressed through the metaphor of spring by the narrator of *Walden*.

Through the persona of the narrator Thoreau has created not

¹⁵²*Walden*, p. 80.

¹⁵³*Ibid.*, p. 235.

only the ideal Transcendentalist, but a beautiful illustration of the human potential as he saw it. The narrator and Thoreau may not be the same person, but through the former both Thoreau and the reader are allowed to experience a life lived in absolute accordance with nature. The messages of self-respect, independence and hope that the narrator expresses are as powerful today as they were when they were first written.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES:

Thoreau, Henry David. *The Variorum Walden*. W. Harding, ed. New York: Washington Square Press, 1973.

Torrey, Bradford & Francis H. Allen, eds. *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*. New York: Dover, 1962.

SECONDARY SOURCES:

Anderson, Charles R. *The Magic Circle of Walden*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968.

Bate, Walter Jackson, ed. *Criticism: The Major Texts*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc., 1970.

Blair, Walter, Theodore Hornberger & Randall Stewart. *American Literature: A Brief History*. Chicago: Scott, Foresman & Co., 1964.

Brooks, Van Wyck. *The Flowering of New England*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1952.

Buell, Lawrence. *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973.

Cavell, Stanley. *The Senses of Walden*. New York: Viking, 1972.

Edel, Leon. *Henry D. Thoreau*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1972.

Harding, Walter. *The Days of Henry Thoreau*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965.

Harding, Walter, ed. *The Variorum Walden and the Variorum Civil Disobedience*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1973.

Hicks, John, ed. *Thoreau in Our Season*. Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1962.

Jackson, Holbrook. *Dreamers of Dreams: The Rise and Fall of Nineteenth Century Idealism*. London: Faber & Faber, 1971.

Kellman, Steven G. "A Conspiracy Theory of Literature: Thoreau and You", *The Georgia Review*, Winter, 1978, pp. 808-819.

Krutch, Joseph Wood. *Henry David Thoreau*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973.

Lewis, R.W.B. *The American Adam: Innocence and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955.

Matthiessen, F.O. *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1941.

Paul, Sherman. *The Shores of America: Thoreau's Inward Exploration*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1972.

Paul, Sherman, ed. *Thoreau: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962,

Seybold, Ethel. *Thoreau: The Quest and the Classics*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951.

Shanley, J. Lyndon. *The Making of Walden: With the Text of the First Version*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957.

Shepard, Odell, ed. *The Heart of Thoreau's Journals*. New York: Dover, 1961.

Smith, Henry Nash. *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*. New York: Vintage Books, 1950.

Spiller, Robert E. *The Cycle of American Literature: An Essay in Historical Criticism*. New York: The Free Press, 1955.

VITA AUCTORIS

Karen Griffiths was born on June 03, 1955 in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. She graduated with an Honours B.A. in English Literature from Trent University on November 03, 1979. During her Master of Arts candidacy at the University of Windsor she worked as a Teaching Assistant in the Department of English 1979-80. Since 1980 she has worked for the Forest Pest Management Institute, Department of the Environment of the Canadian Forestry Service. She is a member of the Steinbeck Society of America and also a member of the Thoreau Society.