

Life Inspiration of *Walden*

LI Jian^{[a],*}; YAO Kunming^[b]

^[a]Associate professor. School of Foreign Languages, Northeast Petroleum Institute, Daqing, China.

^[b]Associate professor. School of Foreign Languages, Daqing Normal University, Daqing, China.

*Corresponding author.

Received 23 January 2014; accepted 9 April 2014

Published online 26 May 2014

Abstract

Walden is a very famous book written by Henry David Thoreau who is a representative of American Transcendentalism. In this book, Thoreau indicates life inspiration, it advocates simple outward, Thoreau strictly criticizes the American life style, in *Walden*, he advocates people to lessen their desire for the so-called “necessary of life”, some of which might turn out to be burden of life. Too much attachment to material world would deprive people of aesthetic sense, moral refinement, and physical freedom. It also advocates Awareness of environmental protection; Thoreau is a conservationist who practices “Small is beautiful.” He made minimum demands on the earth, and lived with great frugality. Then it advocates rich inward, Thoreau explains in *Walden* that one reason for his experiment of life in the woods was to see what a person actually needed and how much lifetime he really had to pay in exchange for those necessities. At last Thoreau concluded in *Walden*, it is the simple material life and rich spiritual life that people should pursue. This is also ecological responsibility of human beings.

Key words: Life inspiration; *Walden*; Henry David Thoreau

Li, J., & Yao, K. M. (2014). Life Inspiration of *Walden*. *Studies in Sociology of Science*, 5(2), 58-62. Available from: URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sss/article/view/4685>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/4685>

As we all know, Henry David Thoreau is the most influential philosopher as well as a writer in the 19th

century in America. He is one of the major characters of American Transcendentalism. When he is alive he only published two books, and *Walden* is one of them. This book details Thoreau's sojourn in a cabin near Walden Pond, near Concord, Massachusetts. In this book, Thoreau combines nature, human and transcendentalism ideas together, and get the life inspiration from it.

In *Walden* we can feel the charming thoughts of Henry David Thoreau and can also get the real inspiration of life, which is our life should be simpler, happier and more meaningful.

Walden influence ecology, literature and other aspects, especially the importance of leading the environmental awareness under ecological crisis with each passing day. The life inspiration influence on our personal thinking and daily life, meanwhile, it also tells the readers what attitude should people live with in real life.

1. WALDEN ADVOCATES SIMPLE OUTWARD

With the society developing, the technology and material life became much better. However, this development of civilization could be a dilemma to human beings. In his days, America witnessed a fast development of business and most people were enthusiastic to work so hard as to earn more money. Thoreau had a very clear observation about his society. He thought that Americans were fettered by materialism. Although they had broken away from the colony of Britain, they were still the slaves of themselves. It is materialism that caused people to take the priority of economic benefits and evaluate their life equally by this standard. In *Walden*, Thoreau strictly criticizes the American life style:

The nation itself, with all its so-called internal improvements, which, by the way are all external and superficial, is just such an unwieldy and overgrown establishment, cluttered with furniture and tripped up by

its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense, by want of calculation and a worthy aim, as the million households in the land; and the only cure for it, as for them, is in a rigid economy, a stern and more than Spartan simplicity of life and elevation of purpose. (Thoreau, 1995, pp.97-98)

Just as Joyce, the man of letters says that the materialism, being a true disciple of Renaissance, has destroyed people's spirit function, and made it impossible the further improvement. The modernist has conquered space, earth, disease, and ignorance, but all these great victory is just one drop of tear within spirit furnace. Thoreau criticizes more directly and popularly: "While civilization has been improving our houses, it has not equally improved the men who are to inhabit them" (Thoreau, 1995, p.36). "The country is not adapted to human culture, and we are still forced to cut our spiritual bread far thinner than our forefathers did their wheaten" (Thoreau, 1995, p.42). When people believe that they are taking the dominative role, actually they sometimes would find out that they are no more than "tools". "Men have become the tools of their tools." Thoreau says, "Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind" (Thoreau, 1995, p.49). The greater desire one holds for the material life, the less attention he will pay to his spiritual world. People are gradually forgetting living but trying to make a living. In pursuing so many improper and unnecessary material needs, people are in the risk of losing their inborn nature. They are turning themselves into machines and becoming the slaves of the lands, houses and clothes that they are thought to own. Misfortune of the young men is the farm, the house, the sheep and the cattle inherited from the ancestors, which is much easier to gain than to abandon. They ought to live freely on big open meadow, observing what labor is, and what a field is. Since human nature is fragile, we often set up one kind of condition, which is easy for us to come into, but have double difficulty going out. The garish world attracts our eyeballs so tightly that we all worry about the moment missing a lot of wonderful things. Most people have been running after various living styles desperately, but lost the real purpose of living. So Thoreau advocates people to lessen their desire for the so-called "necessary of life", some of which might turn out to be burden of life. Too much attachment to material world would deprive people of aesthetic sense, moral refinement, and physical freedom. At the beginning of *Walden*, Thoreau claims that people who own land have to toil day and night without any relaxation, actually being land slaves than landowners. This kind of life is shallow and superficial. He went to the woods just to look for ways of curing the social diseases. He chose the Independence Day as the day he formally entered the woods, perhaps just because he intended to create a true independence for his native people.

2. WALDEN ADVOCATS AWARENESS OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

Thoreau is a conservationist who practices "Small is beautiful." He makes minimum demands on the earth, and lived with great frugality. Thoreau defines necessity as anything "so important to human life that few, if any, whether from savageness, or poverty, or philosophy, ever attempt to do without it" (Sayre, 1985, p.332). These he reduces at first to clothing, shelter, food, and fuel. His short list of necessities conspicuously omits the essential element of capitalism: money. "Money," he asserts, "is not required to buy one necessary of the soul" (Thoreau, 1995, p.89). The clothes, fuel and food for his first eight months cost him \$61.99 in addition to the beans and other vegetables he raised, selling a small surplus, and the berries and herbs he picked. He received during that time \$23.44 for the sale of produce and \$13.34 as a day laborer on a number of neighboring farms so that he ended having spent only \$25.21 3/4 more than he earned — that is essentially only the small capital with which he had started — and he now had paid for a comfortable home as well as two and a half years living expenses. Clothing, Thoreau complains, has become more fashion than necessity. Clothes are made to keep warm in coldness and later on to avoid nakedness in civilized society. People are more concerned "to have fashionable or at least clean clothes, than to have a sound conscience" (Thoreau, 1995, p.91). It is credible for Thoreau that they become the symbols of one's status and even the character of the wearer. A so-called civilized person prefers to walk lamely in the street rather than wearing a pair of mended trousers. People are judged by what they wear rather than who they are. We do not need new clothes for our journey, because "a man who has at length found something to do will not need to get a new suit to do it in" for "if there is not a new man, how can the new clothes be made to fit" (Thoreau, 1995, p.92)? New England tastes in housing also run to the merely fashionable and luxurious, he complains, while not more than half the families actually own their own houses. Whereas some build palaces without having the noble character to deserve them, others live in unheated shanties that, Thoreau points out, line the railroad tracks throughout New England. To prevent himself from being the tool of his tools, or the slave of his house, Thoreau makes every necessary of life as simple as possible. Thoreau's one-room cabin with its six modest pieces of furniture thus becomes the antithesis of the fancy homes described in house pattern books by such architects as Andrew Jackson Downing. Thoreau describes in detail how he built his cabin and how much each item cost him. He begins with a capital of \$22.14, and itemizes his expenditures, not counting the timber and stones and sand "which I claimed by squatter's right" (Thoreau, 1995, p.79). And he possesses so few of the furniture, just a bed, a table, three chairs and others, that some readers might

include him in the circle of ascetics. Regarding food, Thoreau describes his diet at *Walden* as consisting mostly of such simple staples as “rye and Indian meal without yeast, potatoes, rice, a very little salt pork, molasses, and salt, and my drink water” (Harding, 1982, p.86). Even when he dined with his family in town, his mother served excellent bread, vegetables, fruit, and occasionally pies or puddings, but not meat.

3. WALDEN ADVOCATES RICH INWARD

Thoreau explains in *Walden* that one reason for his experiment of life in the woods was to see what a person actually needed and how much lifetime he really had to pay in exchange for those necessities. So we can say that’s an experiment in economic independence. He sums up his ideas of economy in his advice to “Simplify, simplify” (Thoreau, 1995, p.82). This advice strikes to the heart of capitalist economics by asserting that it is not material objects but spiritual development that we should seek. Through his experiment at *Walden*, Thoreau attempts “to live a primitive and frontier life, though in the midst of an outward civilization, if only to learn what the gross necessities of life are and what methods have been taken to attain them” (Sayre, 1985, p.332). He claims that people need not to work six days and rest one day, but to reduce their needs and work efficiently so that their day’s work would be sufficient to allow six days of leisure for more important pursuits. For Thoreau, intellectual and spiritual labor was every bit as strenuous as physical labor. The true value of time is not in producing material goods or services such as railroad travel but in producing spiritual and psychological capital in the form of self-culture. Thoreau holds up several examples of neighbors — the young men who have no time for self-culture and can see no way out of the endless round of working, eating, and sleeping with no purpose other than physical survival or monetary profit. Thoreau assumes himself as a lucky man who knows the happiness of true labor, compared to the farmers who have no free time to take a look at the ripe fruits in their orchard but count how much money the fruits are worth. What Thoreau does by the lake is such little things. He builds the cabin as simple as it could be, tools borrowed, materials bought or got from the woods. As for the food he needs, he grows some beans, potatoes, corn, peas and turnips. Thoreau tries to prove from his “two years’ experience that it would cost incredible little trouble to obtain one’s necessary food, even in this latitude; that a man may use as simple a diet as the animals, and yet retain health and strength” (Thoreau, 1995, p.151).

The busy modern people often feel great pressures in chasing gains and fames. And living in the crowded cities, we are far away from nature. And even those who are lucky enough to have holidays will sometimes find

it difficult to enjoy the free time. We would usually give up nature when it was contradictory with “development”. One reason is that we believe that development is essential, and certain sacrifice is inevitable; another reason is that we keep in mind the pursuit of the higher quality of life, and we believe that it’s the basis of a better spiritual life. Mr. Xu Chi puts forward to the readers in the preface of his version that “Can you calm down? If you have not, I say, you’d better calm down first, and then open this book, otherwise you may not be able to continue because of the misunderstood that it is very concentrated and obscure, difficult to read, puzzling and can’t make out what it means.”. *Walden* is a lonely, peaceful, and sapient book, which has originality for readers to analyze the life, and criticize the customs. To read it is just like drinking, with the capability of tasting out its purity and alcohol degree. It takes Thoreau’s personal experience as model, teaching people how to live wisely and think lively. In the book, Thoreau appeals again and again: “Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity” (Thoreau, 1995, p.97). “Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life” (Thoreau, 1995, p.99)? Why don’t we make our life “as simple and well as Nature” (Thoreau, 1995, p.83)? He has abandoned almost all the pursuit for materials, and successfully achieved his goal of earning a living without being tired. In his diary, Thoreau explains clearly and definitely on simplicity: “There are two kinds of simplicity in the world. One is nearly like ignorance, and the other one is wise. Life style of the wise is simple outward and rich inward, while that of the savage is simple both inward and outward” (Thoreau, 1981, p.137).

4. WALDEN INDICATES THOREAU’S POINT OF VIEW OF LIFE

From Thoreau’s point of view, the so-called valuable and noble life goal is to enrich the spiritual life, in addition to be harmonious with nature. Too much involvement of social activities in people’s life brought about the spiritual waste land, for business destroyed the beauty and poetic significance of life. Man ought to have unique life style, enriching the spiritual life by lowering the need of material to the minimum. “With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meager life than the poor. The ancient philosophers, Chinese, Hindu, Persian, and Greek, were a class which none has been poorer in outward riches, none so rich inward” (Thoreau, 1995, p.15). Like other great men, Thoreau has seen society degenerating and people living numbly, so he just wants to make one rooster to arouse people to live simply, to read more books, to think more deeply, and to build a spirit building. Thoreau’s life at *Walden* is to cure people’s expanding desire on materials. In his opinion, the only way is to go into nature to minimize the desire, in order to maximize the spiritual need. The difference between

people and animals lies in that people have thought. If people are only busy running after material needs like animals without thinking, what diversity do people and animals have? How will human civilization develop? Running after material needs just gratifies people's vanity. The maximal enjoyment is spiritual satisfaction rather than the possession of outward wealth. Only great thoughts are eternal thought, while all materials will be destroyed by the time sickle. In the woods, Thoreau took the nature as his partner, raised himself by his own labor, and owned extremely rich spiritual life, although his material life was so simple. Nature not only provides the necessity of life for people, but also makes their spirit be edified and sublimated. In *Walden*, the nature is full of inspiration and closely linked with people's spirit, now and then providing with people some spiritual hint or enlightenment. Indeed, Thoreau's spiritual independence is closely connected with his highly esteem for individual conscience, which, in his opinion, is a moral principle higher than laws made by government and social institutions. As Thoreau mentions in the chapter "Higher Laws" of *Walden*, "I found myself, and still found, an instinct toward a higher... spiritual life", "I fear...that we may be well, yet not pure" (Thoreau, 1995, p.129). He wants to attain the purity, and "if I knew so wise a man as could teach me purity I would go to seek him forthwith" (Thoreau, 1995, p.142). During his stay in the woods, Thoreau lived in his own way. He grew beans, listened to the sound of birds, chatted with animals, communicated with ancient sages in the books, and washed himself in the pure water. From these activities he obtained greatest spiritual enjoyment, feeling the pleasure of life. Though he lived alone, he never felt lonely. To Thoreau, life is a journey of self-culture, in which one needs not only try to see the physical reality accurately, but also to see in the mystical sense, and to perceive the spiritual truth in and beyond nature.

Thoreau's whole lifetime is so simple and pure, just like his favorite Walden Pond. Maybe it is just because he is so calm inner side that he can think on the world from a unique point of view, thus making him the great thinker. Thoreau calls for simple life in that he hopes people leave off the appendage to life and mind the simple and true life with the help of nature. During his two years and two months life in the nature, Thoreau practiced his social ideal. *Walden* is a perfect forest mirror, from which one can examine himself honestly. So Thoreau decides to write down his life, providing another kind of life — the quiet and carefree life — for people. Early in 1962, the American philosopher and literary critic Mumford gave high valuation on Thoreau's simple life, but at that time people nearly forgot Thoreau. Mumford pointed out that Thoreau may be the only person who stops and writes down his rich experiences. Other people were rushing all around while he kept calm; other people were desperately

earning money while he lived so simply. Simplification did not lead him to the simple-minded fanaticism, but to the higher civilization. Thoreau would probably become a person to prophesy, and the new era would give his thought and character high valuation. Fifty years later, Mumford's prophecy becomes true. People highly praise his originality, and especially respect Thoreau's view on simple life. The development of society, the growth of economy, and the need of materials should be restricted to the range of ecosystem. It is the simple material life and rich spiritual life that people should pursue. This is our ecological responsibility of human beings.

CONCLUSION

Thoreau regarded his sojourn at Walden Pond as a noble experiment with a threefold purpose. First, he was escaping the dehumanizing effects of the Industrial Revolution by returning to a simpler, agrarian lifestyle. (However, he never intended the experiment to be permanent, explicitly advised that he did not expect all his readers to follow his example, and never wrote against technology or industry as such.) Second, he was simplifying his life and reducing his expenditures, increasing the amount of leisure time in which he could work on his writings (most of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* was written at Walden Pond). Much of the book is devoted to stirring up awareness of how one's life is lived, materially and otherwise, and how one might choose to live it more deliberately — possibly differently. Third, he was putting into practice the Transcendentalist belief that one can best transcend normality and can experience the ideal, or the Divine, through nature.

Walden emphasizes the importance of self-reliance, solitude, contemplation, and closeness to nature in transcending the "desperate" existence that, he argues, is the lot of most humans. The book is not a traditional autobiography, but combines autobiography with a social critique of contemporary Western culture's consumerist and materialist attitudes and its distance from and destruction of nature. The book is not only simply a criticism of society, but also an attempt to engage creatively with the better aspects of contemporary culture.

Influenced by Thoreau, some writers share his ideas, and through their writings do much contribution to wakening up people's environmental awareness. As the great ecologist of Romantic period, Thoreau not only thinks that other creatures have the same rights to exist as human beings, but also emphasizes that people should adore nature, which can save nature and even people themselves. As the green bible, the rich ecological thoughts written in *Walden* were a great spiritual wealth to the society. Thoreau's influence on contemporary environmentalism is great, not only because he is a careful observer, but also because he found and expressed the

ecological ideas about the harmony between every part of nature. Looking at the environmental protection clubs or societies all over the world, we can see Thoreau's great influence on development of ecology awareness and environment protection, which has a significant relationship with human's life.

For hundreds of years, most people have been running after various living styles desperately, but lost the real purpose of living. The over-pursuit for materials and ignorance of spiritual pursuit make the young flighty and rash, lack of the firming and belief of the older generation. This kind of life is shallow and superficial. From Thoreau's point of view, the so-called valuable and noble life goal is to enrich the spiritual life, in addition to be harmonious with nature. Simplification did not lead him to the simple-minded fanaticism, but to the higher civilization. So we are demanded to attach equal importance to both material and spiritual civilization. Thoreau calls for simple life in that he hopes people leave off the appendage to life and mind the simple and true life

with the help of nature. It is the simple material life and rich spiritual life that people should pursue. This is our human beings' ecological responsibility.

From both macroscopical perspective and microcosmical perspective, Thoreau and his Walden inspired people to live a simple, happy and meaningful life, which could benefit human beings generation after generation.

REFERENCES

- Cavell, S. (1972). *The senses of Walden*. New York: The Viking Press.
- Thoreau, H. D. (1995). *Walden*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Mark Van Doren (1916). *Henry David Thoreau: A critical study*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Robert F. Sayre (1985). *Henry David Thoreau: A week on the concord and Merrimack River; Walden; or, life in the woods; the Maine woods; Cape Cod*. New York: Library of America.