

Thoreau's Eco-Holism Thoughts in *Walden*

Minglan Zhang^{1,2,*} Fa-de Wang¹

¹Faculty of Foreign Languages, Huaiyin Institute of Technology, 223001, Jiangsu, China

²Faculty of Foreign Languages, Huaiyin Institute of Technology, 223001, Jiangsu, China

*Corresponding author. Email: 894899157@qq.com

ABSTRACT

Walden records Thoreau's life experience besides Walden Pond and embodies Thoreau's ecological thoughts. This paper analyses the eco-holism of Thoreau in *Walden* and the significance of this thought in the relation between man and nature. Thoreau emphasizes that human beings, as an important part of nature, should live in harmony with nature and respect the inherent value and diversity of life; Also, he holds that it is nature's creativity that drives the whole development of ecological system forward and that human's creativity can't be separated from wilderness' creativity. Thoreau's eco-holism thoughts contribute to eliminating anthropocentrism, activate man to penetrate into the nature and settle the contradictions with nature.

Keywords: Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, Eco-holism

1. INTRODUCTION

Henry David Thoreau(1817-1862) is an American writer, philosopher, and a representative of transcendentalism. He was deeply influenced by Emerson and advocated that people should go back to their hearts and keep a close relation with the nature. Thoreau created more than twenty collections of prose and was regarded as the originator of natural essay. At that time, the economy developed quite fast and people's desire for better material pleasure grew gradually. People's growing needs can be satisfied in the commercial age and any faith or belief seemed so pale and meaningless. Under such circumstance, many scholars and thinkers began to wonder if such a society is what people are looking for. With such confusion, Thoreau moved to a wooden area near a lake and lived there all alone for two years and two months. During those two years, Thoreau earned his own living by building the house, planting for food and lived an original and simple life. He tried with his own efforts and experience to tell the world that people shouldn't be addicted to the material life, but to find some time to explore the spiritual world. Themed with this experience, *Walden* was published. As a classic transcendental work, *Walden* was considered one of the most popular non-fictional works in American history.

The book begins in spring and goes through summer, autumn and winter, and ends in another spring. Just like the circle of life, the end is a new start. The book is tranquil, with the magnificent description of the beauty of nature and profound thoughts of the writer. Thoreau wrote down the relation between man and nature, the frustration in society and the hope of people to improve their relation with nature.

Thoreau didn't escape from the modern society; he moved to the woods because he had doubts about real life. He wanted to show that we shouldn't pay too much attention to the material and lose our meaning and direction of life.

Along with his *Walden*, Thoreau proved that people did mix the true meaning of life. So, *Walden* can bring us back to the pure and simple world once we get further and further away from the nature.

By blending into nature, Thoreau has the deep consciousness of ecology. During his two years in the woods, he feels the nature in him and he is just a part of it. Thus, he expresses his idea in his works. and his thoughts about eco-holism lie in every lines of *Walden*.

Eco-holism means that ecological system and its property should be viewed as wholeness, its function cannot be fully understood solely in terms of its component parts. Ecological holism is not to deny the right of human existence, but to require humans to judge all things by the whole interests of ecosystem and keep themselves within the bounds of ecological law.[1] Ecological holism stresses that human's desire for materials, economic growth, reconstruction of nature should be within its capacity of nature's absorption, degradation and restoration for the sake of the whole benefits of ecology. After all, long-term interests and basic interests of human beings coincide with the whole benefits of ecology. Thoreau's eco-holism places stress on dynamic balance between mankind and nature, and arouses more concern to the relationships between mankind and nature. His ecological holism thoughts in *Walden* are mainly embodied in the following three aspects.

2.ADVOCATION FOR HARMONIOUS REALTIONSHIP BETWEEN MAN AND NATURE

Thoreau is an advocate of harmonious oneness between mankind and nature, he portrays a picture of coexisting with nature in a peaceful and pleasing way in *Walden*: "It was worth the while to see the sun shine on these things, and hear the free wind blow on them... pine cones, chestnut burs, and strawberry leaves are strewn about." [2]

Such living beings as the sun, wind, birds and blackberry vines and Thoreau merge into an organic whole. From the perspective of Thoreau, nature is a top university which provides human with an access to the palace of knowledge. While the majority of American people spare no efforts to leave nature for noisy cities, Thoreau comes close to nature and is ready to learn from nature. Nature places his impatience, vanity under restrictions and helps to educate him. Every day, he is not merely engaged in doing his incessant labor with his hands, but also spends most of his time enjoying the agreeable co-existence with nature. In his opinion, man and nature are integrated and have a close relation with each other. Nature is of generosity and kindness and provides people with conditions for survival such as sunshine, water, air, plant, health and happiness. Nature bestows good qualities on human beings. As a consequence, man should be grateful and treat nature in a good manner to achieve the harmony between mankind and nature. He takes delight in integrating into nature. As he puts it, "... rapt in a reverie, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude ... I grew in those seasons like corn in the night." [2] We can see from the description above that Thoreau is willing to immerse himself into the peaceful atmosphere. He insists that human should realize the fact that human is a part of it but not the master.

Thoreau's calling for harmonious wholeness between man and nature is also showed in his criticism of industry civilization. He criticizes Americans' ignorant lifestyle, which accounts for the destruction of balance of relationships between plants, animals, people, and calls on people to simplify life. Undoubtedly, industry civilization brings benefits to human race, promoting the construction of the harmonious community between men and society. However, it is at the great cost of deteriorating natural world, and interfering with the wholeness between man and nature. Human beings heartlessly destroy their home for survival with the hope of constructing a harmonious society, only to find that they don't get along well with nature any longer. As Thoreau mentions the Fitchburg Railroad in Walden, the clamant whistle of the locomotive passing along the railroad disturbs the tranquility of the woods. Although the Fitchburg Railroad represents the progress of the society in a sense, it does do damage to the harmony between human and nature.

3. RESPECT FOR LIFE AND ITS DIVERSITY

Industrial Revolution marked an entirely new age when human's bad living conditions got promoted, the severity of material shortage got lessened, and products were manufactured in large quantities. Thanks to a rapid increase of consumption ability, people flocked into big cities, hoping that they had access to a more comfortable life. Inevitably, nature is a good source for human to realize the ideal of material living. The quest for material can date back to seventeenth century. Linnaeus, a remarkable

Swedish biologist once pointed out that human which plays a role of the lords of creation should be superior to the other species and have the privilege to utilize other species in order to gain a better development. In addition, Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes upheld Rationalism and brought up Mechanism. Under the influence of Mechanism, people discarded theism and were strongly convinced that man could conquer nature. [3] As far as man's concerned, "life" mainly referred to human's life. Only human life was worth respect and protection while the lives of other species worked as a tool for serving human life and at human's disposal. The notion was in favor of anthropocentrists whose idea helped speed up the rapid advance of Industrial Revolution. Human didn't connect to nature any longer, instead the majority of them were isolated from nature. In their opinion, nature no longer stood for the god and on the contrary nature was an instrument for creating vast wealth. What man was in need was to go with their expanding desire, which had already gone beyond the essential necessities of human body. Under the drive of desire, human began to explore nature and tap into the natural resources without end, resulting in the fact that numbers of species became endangered.

At that time, Thoreau came to Walden pond and appealed to people to learn how to respect life. In his eyes, life not only refers to human but also covers plants, animals. Human, as the lords of creation, should have high respect for all creatures for the sake of ecological whole, not just exploit other living things for his own interests. Thoreau's ecological ideas can be found in the following description: "While I kept the latter close, and dodged and played at bo-peep it; and when at last I held still a piece of cheese between my thumb and finger, it came and nibbled it, sitting in my hand, and afterward cleaned its face and paws, like a fly, walked away." [2]

Mouse is deemed as a kind of animal which steals It always makes a mess and gets people in trouble so that for man mouse stands for a negative image. Whereas, mouse in the description of Thoreau is full of energy and sensitive to the surroundings. The mouse is a living thing equal to him. He is ready to share the shelter and the same bread with the mice. His affection for mice indicates that he treats other creature equally, not for benefits of mankind, but for the benefits of the whole ecological system.

Thoreau's respect for life is also reflected in his love for grass. Thoreau writes, "but what right had I to oust johnswort and the rest, and break up their ancient herb garden?" [2] As a farmer, he didn't choose to pull weeds, facing the problem that weeds compete with beans in absorption of nutrition and probably affect the harvest of crops. In Thoreau's eye, weeds are a member of the ancient herb garden and have the same right with beans to absorb the sunlight and rain. Weeds' endeavor for survival is worth respect. The protection of the weeds is an act of the protection of ecological interests which contributes to maintaining the ecological wholeness.

What's more, Thoreau is much concerned about other natural life, in particular, inferior natural life. He sees animals as a friend like mice, phoebe, partridge and others at Walden pond. He tries to strike up a good friendship with

them. In Thoreau's view, men don't have the right to strip all natural life of their interests for their interests are closely related with ecological wholeness. If man shows care for them, their benefits can be secured, otherwise it goes to be opposite. Keeping correlated relationship with ecological wholeness lies in natural life's inherent value, not its instrumental value. [4]Thoreau firmly holds his opinion that man not only should treat natural life with reverence and equality but also should show great affection for them because of its inherent value.[5] Thoreau has a fondness for mice, grass and other natural life which has exceeded man's benefits, greatly going forward common benefits of ecology system. The intrinsic value of natural life makes Thoreau feel awed and humble. As Thoreau puts it, "I am always surprised by their rare beauty, as if they were fabulous fishes. They possess a quite dazzling and transcendent beauty which separates them by a wide interval from the cadaverous cod and haddock whose fame is trumpeted in our streets." [2] "They" refers to pickerels, a kind of fish lack of its market value. It makes no sense for human without instrumental values so little attention is paid by man to them until they were forgotten and became extinct. However, Thoreau uses the word "fabulous" to praise the rare beauty of pickerels. It is easy to see that Thoreau shows reverence for pickerels not because they are indeed of great value which is decided by market value, but because they are lives with inherent value in nature living for themselves.

Thoreau holds life in high esteem no matter how superior or inferior, valuable or valueless they are, because life is an existence for itself not for others. In comparison with Thoreau, industrial society expresses approval of life with its great instrumental value, which uncovers the fact that they look down upon life and don't show respect for life. Thoreau believes that respect for life is good for the diversity of creatures, which helps to keep the wholeness of ecology system.

4. APPRECIATION OF CREATIVITY OF NATURE

The act of Thoreau's standing up for creativity is to sustain the universal development of ecological system. In terms of Thoreau, nature is active, energetic and changing constantly. That is why nature can keep itself steady and favorable. Thoreau firmly holds that new life is produced under Nature's operation, on condition that Nature's operation is in a state of smoothness and fineness. And the sparkle of life will not become extinguished for the originality exists. So, human beings should pay a high tribute to nature's creativity instead of holding their own creativity in high regard. In the long run, it is nature's creativity that drives the whole development of ecological system forward.

Thoreau's commendation of nature's creativity is showed in the description of Walden pond. "It is a mirror which no stone can crack, whose quicksilver will never wear off, whose gilding nature continually repairs; no storms, no dust,

can dim its surface ever fresh- a mirror in which all impurity presented to it sinks." [2] It leaves readers an impression that nature, all-mighty and tolerant, keep its renewal and renovation by repairing marks from human beings. Walden pond always keeps itself beautiful, pure and stable thanks to the drive of nature's creativity. Furthermore, nature's creativity also holds everything in nature in vigor apart from Walden pond. Thoreau says, "All things must live in such a light." [2] "Light", here refers to nature's ability to create. To Thoreau, nature's creativity is the root of all things in nature so human kind has an obligation to protect it. In other words, its ability to create exerts a crucial impact on all things in nature among which mankind makes no exception. From the perspective of Thoreau, the breathtaking and beautiful look the pond takes on is crafted by nature but not by man. Thoreau asserts that nature has its own value reflected by itself but not as a means to embody man's values. Moreover, it is nature's creativity that maintains its eternity and perpetuation. [6]Thoreau describes the wilderness's creativity like this: "each morning the manager of this gallery substituted some picture, distinguished by more brilliant or harmonious coloring, for the old upon the walls." [2] In Thoreau's eyes, wilderness's creativity lies in the fact that it keeps improving itself by beautifying itself and living in harmony with all creatures. In addition, he has a special appreciation for what the pond looks like as it is. The pond is mysterious, pure and wild which witnesses wilderness's creativity. The gorgeous color from the pond which astounds him a great deal remains him in ecstasy. He details the changing water color such as blue, green, light green, dark green and etc. He not only conveys his admiration for the changes but also feel awed for it. What renders him in awe is the wilderness's creative power. Without its creativity, there are no wonderful color changes.

Thoreau has a vivid description of vitality of a variety of animals and plants with the hope of calling for nature's creativity. What Thoreau intends to convey is to tell readers that it is nature's creativity, instead of humankind's one that make mankind's life colorful. If it hadn't been for nature's creativity, man would not keep the source of creativity. From all kinds of changes in nature, he holds wilderness's creativity in awe and veneration and is strongly convinced that humanity can't be separated from wilderness' creativity.

5. CONCLUSION

Thoreau' *Walden* interprets eco-holism from the multidimensional aspects. In his opinion, man should maintain a harmonious relation with nature. Thoreau deems himself as a member of the community and is active in integrating himself into the nature. Walden pond stands for a miniature model of nature where he can communicate intimately with his neighbors and build up an equal link with them. In his eye, everything in nature, kind and innocent, is an unavoidable part which jointly constitutes a balanced and steady whole. It is beneficial to

maintain the whole stability of nature by living in compatibility with nature.

Thoreau insists that natural life is an integral part of nature and has its inherent value. Man, as the paragon of animals, should show respect for them and think highly of their intrinsic values rather than their instrumental ones. However, human relentlessly makes full use of other creatures for their own benefits under the push of desire. Thoreau denounces human selfishness and ignorant lifestyle which is at the cost of damage to nature. He claims that nature's benefits are closely related with human's benefits. Only by respecting and loving natural life, the whole interests of nature will be protected.

Meanwhile, he appreciates the variations of nature. He loves the changes of water color, the alternation of seasons, diversities of species. He insists that all changes derive from wilderness's creativity. It not only safeguards the perfection of ecological system, but also promotes the development of ecological system. Human activities against nature laws will be renewed. Only by advocating and protecting wilderness's creativity, can human inspire their creativity and develop themselves better.

The traditional way of protecting environment is to do the best for human being, which means we still put our rights at the first place. People tend to believe we are the master of the world because animals or plants have no self-awareness and all we have done is to conquer or change the world. However, that is just the shallow view on ecology. The history has told us that we are inseparable from the nature, from other species and any damage we make to the nature will eventually get back at ourselves. *Walden* rings us a bell that human is only a normal part of the nature and also presents us a new view on living a simple life. In a word, Thoreau's eco-holism thought contributes to eliminating the idea that "human is the yardstick of everything", activate man to penetrate into the nature and instructs man to settle the contradictions with nature.

[6] Guan Chunhua. Thoreau and Nature: Reading Thoreau's *Walden* [J]. *Journal of Shenyang University*, 2005 (3): 62-63.

REFERENCES

[1] Cafaro, Philip. *Thoreau's Living Ethics: Walden and the Pursuit of Virtue* [M]. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2004.

[2] Thoreau, H. D. *Walden, or Life in the Woods* [M]. Tianjin: Tianjin Education Press, 2004.

[3] Bennett, Jane. *Thoreau's Nature: Ethics, Politics, and the Wild* [M]. London: Sage Publications Ltd., 1994.

[4] Naess, Aren. Ecology, Community and Lifestyle[J]. : *Outline of an Ecosophy*, 1989: 187.

[5] Guo Xiuhua. Interpretation of Thoreau's Ecological Holism -- Taking *Walden* as an example [J]. *Journal of Cangzhou Normal University*, 2015 (2): 20-23.