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NEGOTIATING SELFHOOD AND CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY IN THOREAU'S *WALDEN*

By Emily Young, Arcadia University



Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* is many things: an account of a man's solitary retreat from society, a testament to the threat of modernity, a call for autonomy and mental awakening, and a sheer appreciation of life's simplicities. While some of the text is devoted to his daily life on Walden Pond, much of it is highly political and dialectical, advocating strongly for social change in nineteenth-century society rife with increasing industrialization, capitalism, and slavery. His withdrawal from this society was intended to show all the flaws of social organization and obsequious citizenship and the benefits of living simply, independently, and with a goal of improving oneself before one's society.

Thoreau's cultural longevity proves his mental and physical independence as clearly endearing to some, but he is often criticized for being hypocritical: calling for so much social change while he sat happily secluded from his struggling society. This essay will explore what civic responsibility Thoreau had to his society, and whether attending to his duty of self-preservation excuses his lack of social action. Even though he had many ideas regarding social reform, Thoreau's goals and gains from his experiment were firmly based in personal growth and reflection. I will argue that Thoreau's social withdrawal as seen in *Walden* was in fact his most poignant expression of civic duty, as it allowed him to become a more conscious, morally sound, and autonomous human being. This personal growth, in turn, fortified his society, and many societies thenceforward, to prosper as a whole.

SOCIAL CONTEXT

In order to fairly judge Thoreau's impact on his society, we must first examine that society and establish a clear picture of the social climate of nineteenth-century America. In the several decades leading up to the Civil War, Thoreau's New England, and America in general, underwent drastic changes in production, going from colonial agriculture to industrial capitalism. With the advent of canals, railroads, and macadam roads, local and regional markets dwindled in the face of the growing national economic capabilities. Subsistence farming fell away to the new mass production equipment in order to foster business and sales. The owners of commercial capital began to reap all the wealth of communities, launching many workers and families into the beginnings of poverty. Many New England farmers had no choice but to send their children to work in town factories to produce family income¹. This produced a mass migration to cities and a drastic transformation of lifestyles for many Americans. Between 1800 and 1860, the percentage of the national population working for wages increased from 10 to 40 percent².

These social changes prompted a very strong opposition from some, who were disgusted by the "parasitic" capitalists who fed off the labor of others³. The emerging capitalist society meant people stopped reaping the direct benefits of their labor. Instead, most of the benefits went straight to their employers, and workers were expected to be satisfied with meager and meaningless wages as compensation. Thus began the system of economic dependency Thoreau condemns throughout the whole of *Walden*. In addition to their dependency on external compensation, the labor itself was also controlled by the whims of the employers and the market for which they were producing, forcing the workers to perform duties lacking personal meaning or synchronicity with nature. As Benjamin Reiss says, work was "subject to the precise temporal monitoring of the employers rather than the

¹ Lance Newman, *Our Common Dwelling: Henry Thoreau, Transcendentalism, and the Class Politics of Nature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 25.

² *Ibid.*, 26.

³ *Idib.*, 28.

demands of the task at hand or the rhythms of the season”⁴. In other words, labor became unnatural and extraneous and this led to unmotivated and exhausted workers dependent upon capitalists to survive.

While Thoreau wrote about these injustices in *Walden*, others took more proactive steps to change their treatment and compensation on the job, and regain their sense of purpose. Many workers across the Northeast conducted strikes in which they fought for shorter hours, increased wages, and better working conditions. To foster a stronger community, workers also formed over 200 trade and craft unions, whose collective membership was around 300,000⁵. Even Thoreau was not entirely idle; he was a strong opponent of slavery and participated actively in the Underground Railroad by using his parents’ home in Concord as an overnight fugitive hiding place⁶. He also refused to pay his federal taxes one year, knowing they would go to the government and therefore support the slave industry; for this breach of civic duty he was sent to prison⁷.

Despite this, Thoreau was certainly not a leader of social uprising, at least in an active, physical sense. He chose to live alone and socially excluded for two years, two months and two days on his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson’s property in the woods outside of Concord, Massachusetts. His experiment at Walden Pond was introspective and personal, and though his book has reached many minds, the experience targeted mainly his own. With a clear picture of the society from which Thoreau seceded, it is now appropriate to shift our study towards the kind of existence he sought. Thoreau’s interest in the cabin at Walden Pond was founded in its ability to enlighten him; it was a space he thought would allow him to become a more whole and fulfilled human being. In other words, it was an ultimately personal project of inward exploration in which he entertained three major values: solitude, natural and simple living, and self-reliance.

SOLITUDE

Thoreau’s experience is most poignantly one of isolation. True, he only lives a few miles out of the city and he does have occasional visitors, but Thoreau does not experience significant human companionship in any form. Bankston quotes Thoreau as saying in one of his journals, “If I had known how to name them [...] I should have signed off in detail from all the societies which I never signed on to; but I did not know where to find a complete list”⁸. In his solitary experience he aims to show others the benefits of taking time to fully discover themselves and their surroundings. According to him, this highly cognizant and reflective experience is far more valuable than living ignorantly in luxury, especially since such lifestyles are usually borne from excessive and spiritually damaging labor.

In his conclusion, Thoreau states, “Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth”⁹. By this, he means one’s personal truth, the truth of one’s individual senses and judgment. He feels that in modern, social existence humans do not know the truth of themselves or others but only what accidentally seeps through the cracks of our mechanical exteriors. Under the throes of industrialization and social pressures “we are mortal,”¹⁰ incapacitated from properly attending to our personal needs, feelings, and thoughts; “but in dealing with the truth we are

⁴ Benjamin Reiss, “Sleeping at Walden Pond: Thoreau, Abnormal Temporality, and the Modern Body,” *American Literature* 85, no. 1 (2013): 8.

⁵ Newman, *Our Common Dwelling*, 31.

⁶ Walter Harding, “Thoreau’s reputation” in *The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Joel Myerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 3.

⁷ Robert D. Richardson Jr., “Thoreau and Concord” in *The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Joel Myerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 15.

⁸ Carl L. Bankston III, “Thoreau’s Case for Political Disengagement” in *Modern Age* 52, no. 1 (2010): 8.

⁹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: Fall River Press, 2008), 311.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 94.

immortal”¹¹. Solitude for Thoreau is a major requirement for finding one’s inner truth buried deep beneath the rubble of their broken social identities.

In *Walden*’s conclusion, Thoreau talks about a hawk he witnesses in the sky: “It appeared to have no companion in the universe—sporting there alone—and to need none but the morning and the ether with which it played. It was not lonely, but made all the earth lonely beneath it”¹². His purpose in telling of this hawk is to praise its apparent approach to life; it finds fulfillment in its individual journey, and regards the business of others as irrelevant. Although it is alone, it is not lonely. It finds company in its self-reliance, and since it not only survives but thrives on its own, it makes the rest of the world seem weak in comparison.

In his *The Metaphysics of Morals*, philosopher Immanuel Kant discusses man’s duties to himself, categorizing them into two groups: “negative” and “positive”. He states, “The negative duties *forbid* man to act contrary to the end of his nature and so have to do merely with his moral *self-preservation*; the positive duties, which *command* him to make a certain object of choice his end, concern his *perfecting* of himself”¹³. Thoreau performs his negative duties when he helps fugitive slaves and refuses to pay his taxes, and his positive duties when he moves out to Walden Pond in hopes of self-betterment. Both of these duties clearly revolve around caring for the self, both nourishing and preserving what is already part of him, and cultivating his best possible self. Thoreau argues throughout *Walden* the only way to achieve this is by detaching oneself from the rest of society, which can be seen as the anti-self, and for Kant, antithetical to one’s duties.

One of the major allowances of a solitary lifestyle for Thoreau is the ability to think and exist deeply. In order to do this, one must undergo an awakening of sorts; rise from his hypnotic slumber in which he unconsciously enslaves his spirit and demeans his labor as a part of capitalist society. Thoreau says, “The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred million to a poetic or divine life. To be awake is to be alive”¹⁴. He feels that “we live thick and are in each other’s way, and stumble over one another, and I think that we thus lose some respect for one another”¹⁵. We “stumble” over each other because we are not really awake, but have been lulled into a waking sleep and tricked to believe such an empty and exploitive life is the only path to success.

Even though he does take in some visitors, Thoreau is adamant that his preferred lifestyle is that of isolation from other people. Newman criticizes this aspect of the Transcendentalist’s mindset, because he sees it as avoiding the root of his discontent: “Perfection of the kind Thoreau sought is only possible under tightly controlled conditions, that moral absolutism is based on an erasure of the social context within which alone such choices become meaningful”¹⁶. From this perspective *Walden* is most definitely a misguided and poorly executed experiment, because it is impossible for Thoreau to correct social insufficiencies if he is totally separated from his society.

However, Thoreau did not believe he was inherently responsible for correcting the social problems of his time. In his famous political essay entitled “Resistance to Civil Government,” he writes, “It is not a man’s duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong”¹⁷. He believes one’s only

¹¹ Thoreau, *Walden*.

¹² *Ibid.*, 298.

¹³ Immanuel Kant, *The Doctrine of Virtue: Part II of The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary J. Gregor. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964), 82.

¹⁴ Thoreau, *Walden*, 84-5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹⁶ Newman, *Our Common Dwelling*, 135.

¹⁷ Henry David Thoreau, “Resistance to Civil Government” in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature: Shorter Eighth Edition*, ed. Nina Baym (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), 847.

duty in response to such wrongs is to “wash his hands of it”¹⁸ and pursue a separate individual course. As he puts it, “The only obligation which I have a right to assume, is to do at any time what I think is right”¹⁹. Therefore, being a public figure does not bind him to a philanthropic lifestyle; but being a good human being requires that he follow his own moral truths above all else.

NATURE AND SIMPLICITY

In his “Solitude” in *Walden*, Thoreau momentarily laments his state of seclusion in the woods, stating, “To be alone was something unpleasant”²⁰. However, he concludes that he is not really alone because nature is his constant company: “Yet I experienced sometimes that the most sweet and tender, the most innocent and encouraging society may be found in any natural object”²¹. Thoreau was a fiercely observant man. As Richardson says, “He taught himself how to see things, how to give to every leaf and twig a separate intention of the eye”²². This was part of his delight in living simply away from the rest of society; without the many distractions of industrialism and modernity, he had the energy and peace of mind to wholly perceive and appreciate his surroundings, often taking four hours walks each day. Thoreau realizes he does not have to do something to be content; in fact, he believes man’s preoccupation with acting, and not reflecting, is his downfall. At Walden Pond, he is content to sit and watch the seasons pass.

Thoreau’s relationship with nature is supported by Immanuel Kant, who theorized the autonomy of nature inspired the same in people²³. According to his ideas, when people are immersed in uncharted and untamable environments, they discover the joy of freedom and importance of self-governance. Guyer says, “From the start of his mature thought [...] Kant insisted that the free choice to do what morality requires of us is not unrelated to the natural world, but imposes objectives on us that can only be realized in the natural world”²⁴. The laws of nature, he asserts, align with the laws of the self, because both act independently of any other force. Nature inspires such autonomy of spirit, while the unnatural spaces on Earth-epitomized by social culture and government- aim to disable it.

In addition to fortifying our strength as individuals, Thoreau also argues that nature makes us realize our relative weakness in the grand scheme of life. In *Walden*’s conclusion, he writes, “At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed, and unfathomed by us because unfathomable[...] We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander”²⁵. In other words, witnessing nature’s grandeur awakens us to our human vulnerability and limited scope of perception and experience. It imbues us with a sense of humility and smallness that is essential for our cultivation into moral beings.

During his time at the cabin, he spends much time farming in order to feed himself. He realizes he must rely on the workings of the seasons to sustain his survival, since he no longer wishes to associate with mass means of production and distribution. Discussing this, he writes, “The gentle rain which waters my beans and keeps me in the house today is not drear and melancholy, but good for me too. Though it prevents my hoeing them, it is of far

¹⁸ Thoreau, “Resistance to Civil Government,” 844.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Thoreau, *Walden*, 124.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Richardson, “Thoreau and Concord,” 17.

²³ Paul Guyer, *Kant*, ed. Brian Leiter (New York: Routledge, 2006), 6.

²⁴ Ibid., 7.

²⁵ Thoreau, *Walden*, 299.

more worth than my hoeing”²⁶. This could be interpreted to mean moisture is more valuable to the crops than his maintenance, but a second meaning could be his experience of the rain is more beneficial than his working. This is the sort of simple lifestyle Thoreau sought in his retreat, because he believed the spiritual benefits of being able to do things like sit and listen to the rain far surpass the rewards gained from excessive laboring.

Thoreau wished to “live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life”²⁷ because so many things are neither essential nor valuable, and detract our sensibilities from determining the truly meaningful aspects of life. In Thoreau’s time of the Industrial Revolution, mass production of goods was seen to be of utmost importance, so human lives were sacrificed and defiled to meet its demands, such as with slavery. He called these modern developments “hindrances to the elevation of mankind”²⁸. Thoreau was concerned about the deterioration of society, and recognized that the process begins with the slow corrosion of individual vitality. Through his writings, he urges people to realize they have a choice in how they live; they do not have to be mentally under-stimulated and physically over-worked, deprived of recreation for but one day a week. This is the system modern civilization has come to accept as “normal,” so people forget they have a choice to decline such means of living if they wish.

SELF-RELIANCE

Newman says, “*Walden* is not a book that is mainly about the woods. It is about earning a living there”²⁹. Thoreau asks, what do we labor for? It is not out of necessity, but a “blind obedience to a blundering oracle”³⁰ that is society. Man “has no time to be anything but a machine”³¹. We no longer care for self-maintenance or treat ourselves gently— only about making a product, laboring to produce commodities. Thoreau recognized that the reason people do not rest and take care of themselves is because of their need to support themselves financially—you work, you get paid, you survive. However, he thinks people have a skewed idea of what they need to survive. He proposes lowering our standards of living in order to be able to lower our standards of labor. He promotes working for oneself so people can lead lives of independence; only this will lead to peace, he argues, because if we depend on one another we try to take advantage of one another. People no longer think for themselves, but submit their bodies and minds to the reins of the system, to the puppeteers of society who are powered solely by their ignorance.

In his chapter “The Ponds” in *Walden*, he speaks to the incomparable joy which can only come of self-producing goods:

The fruits do not yield their true flavor to the purchaser of them, nor to him who raises them for the market. There is but one way to obtain it, yet few take it that way[...] It is a vulgar error to suppose that you have tasted huckleberries who never plucked them[...] The ambrosial and essential part of the fruit is lost with the bloom which is rubbed off in the market cart, and they become mere provender.³²

This passage shows how Thoreau feels vulgarized and corrupted even thinking of the impure processes of production, and scorns those who believe their mass-produced, chemically-enhanced food are truly their own. Something is lost from that fruit that is picked in vain, not for survival or subsistence, but for profit and greed.

²⁶ Thoreau, *Walden*, 124.

²⁷ Ibid., 85.

²⁸ Ibid., 12.

²⁹ Newman, *Our Common Dwelling*, 137.

³⁰ Thoreau, *Walden*, 4.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 165.

Bankston remarks of Thoreau, “In his mind, the walls between himself and his fellow townsmen simply made him freer than others, since he was acting in accord with his own moral directions”³³. As a self-reliant man at Walden Pond, he was free to do whatever he wanted without worrying about the repercussions. In his mentality, he could do nothing wrong if his actions matched his morals. Similarly, of his night spent at the Concord Jail, he says:

I saw that, if there was a wall of stone between me and my townsmen, there was a still more difficult one to climb or break through, before they could get to be as free as I was. I did not for a moment feel confined, and the walls seemed a great waste of stone and mortar. I felt as if I alone of all my townsmen had paid my tax.³⁴

The tax to which he refers is the one he paid to himself by standing up for his morals. This, in turn, is recycled back into society through his enriched personhood as an individual, which enables him to have a more positive influence on the world around him.

In another passage of “Resistance to Civil Government,” Thoreau says man mistakenly “ventures to live only by the aid of the mutual insurance company, which has promised to bury him decently”³⁵. By this he means that people enter into binding contracts with the government and with capitalist employers in order to protect themselves. The promise of burial is not only meant physically, but Thoreau implies the laborer’s mind and spirit become metaphorically buried deeper each day he chooses to sell his work to other people. Thoreau says what we actually need to be protected from are those same insurance companies, which pretend to be our benefactors but really attempt to steal away our freedom. As long as we remain self-reliant beings, no one has any control over us, and therein lies our true protection.

His Critics

As previously alluded to many times, Thoreau’s experiment in the woods has attracted much criticism. Addressing Thoreau’s stance on slavery, Bankston notes that while he was openly opposed to it, and turned away from his society because of it, such actions did not end the war. Slavery ended because of years of warfare and political action, not Thoreau’s “individual conscientious objection”³⁶. Bankston goes on to criticize his lack of a “blueprint” for fixing his unsatisfactory society, other than withdrawing his support for it. Creating a modern day analogy, he compares Thoreau’s solution to our withdrawal into the “solipsism of our suburban homes,”³⁷ where our white picket fences ostracize the outside world so we can live in happy ignorance of its ugly toils. Under the theory of solipsism, embodied for Thoreau by a secluded woods and cabin, the self is all that can be known to exist. His final critique is of Thoreau’s dependence on conscience to guide all decisions. He asks where conscience itself finds guidance and how that can be trusted to serve a stable social order.

Paul Guyer discusses the ideas of Immanuel Kant, who thought moral law to be different for each person, because it is created by each person as an individual³⁸. Therefore, how can we criticize a man’s character when we are not governed by the same moral law? He also offers critical ideas against Thoreau’s social withdrawal. He says:

³³ Bankston, “Thoreau’s Case for Political Disengagement,” 8.

³⁴ Thoreau, “Resistance to Civil Government,” 852.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 847.

³⁶ Bankston, “Thoreau’s Case for Political Disengagement,” 9.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁸ Guyer, Kant, 3.

It is a duty both to ourselves and to others not to isolate ourselves but to bring our moral perfection into social intercourse; while we should make ourselves a fixed center of our principles, we should regard the circle thus drawn around us as one that also forms a part of the all-inclusive circle of those who, in their attitude, are citizens of the world.³⁹

He would regard Thoreau's experiment as harmfully exclusive, and defiant of one's identity and responsibility as a world citizen.

Even his long-time friend and fellow Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson criticized Thoreau's inaction when delivering a eulogy at his funeral. He obviously discussed many favorable things about his friend, such as his uniquely deep connection to nature and the nobility of his spirit. Yet, even in a speech meant to honor him, Emerson could not resist commenting on Thoreau's bizarrely dichotomous passion for social change and disinterest in its facilitation. He called for the abolition of slavery and taxes, but remained unrepresented in politics and was quite verbal about his distaste for reformists. Emerson is quoted":

Had his genius been only contemplative, he had been fitted to his life, but with his energy and practical ability he seemed born for great enterprise and for command; and I so much regret the loss of his rare powers of action, that I cannot help counting it a fault in him that he had no ambition. Wanting this, instead of engineering for all America, he was the captain of a huckleberry party. Pounding beans is good to the end of pounding empires one of these days; but if, at the end of years, it is still only beans!⁴⁰

Here he addresses Thoreau's preoccupation with seemingly trifling matters of existence, such as gathering fruit and farming beans. Emerson does not seem to understand, like much of Thoreau's audience, why a man of such intellectual prowess and political influence would waste his time out in fields and forests. He felt Thoreau had within him "rare powers of action," and it was shameful that his genius was merely used for contemplation.

Some other critics take issue with Thoreau's time in the woods not because of the experiment itself, but the fact that he sold his experience in the form of *Walden*. For instance, Schneider notes the irony of a man bemoaning capitalism when writing a book in the hopes of making a profit and sustaining a literary career⁴¹. Neufeldt calls this Thoreau's "personal agenda," which he believes is inevitable in any autobiographical project⁴². He discusses Thoreau's "private enterprise of self-culture,"⁴³ by which he partly means his dedication to his literary craft even during his allegedly reflective and anti-business experiment. In Neufeldt's words, he "drive[s] his vocational ideals into a corner in order to determine whether his art of life could be secured by terms tolerable to his society yet compatible with his aspirations as a writer"⁴⁴. Thoreau wanted the best of both worlds, and even though he denied his concern for social approval or financial stability, Neufeldt argues he really wanted both, which is why *Walden* was written.

Elaborating on his point, Neufeldt states, "He speaks with the aplomb and calculated idiom of a shrewd entrepreneur who has evaluated his market, his circumstances, and his career interests. He will not jeopardize his best interests;

³⁹ Kant, *The Doctrine of Virtue*, 145.

⁴⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Thoreau – Part 1 and 2," *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1862, 14.

⁴¹ Richard J. Schneider, "Walden" in *The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Joel Myerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 104.

⁴² Leonard N. Neufeldt, "Thoreau's Enterprise of Self-Culture in a Culture of Enterprise," *American Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (1987): 231.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 231..

he will merely reject popular interpretations of enterprise and reward”⁴⁵. He recognizes that while Thoreau feigns disinterest in market economics, he is actually very business-savvy and exercises capitalist behavior inasmuch as he works mainly toward his own success. As he notes, however, Thoreau does not agree with traditional definitions of success, which is what sets him apart from other businessmen of his time.

Abbott contributes further criticism in this vein, arguing that Thoreau’s experiment is a plea for redemption in the eyes of the middle class. In *Walden* he says he can do nothing for the poor, and does not promote a charitable lifestyle. Rather, he specifically writes to the middle class and attempts to convince them “bourgeois life can be cleansed”⁴⁶. Abbott says, “Thoreau hopes to redeem himself in the eyes of Concord by retrieving the principles of bourgeois life itself”⁴⁷. He argues his physical alienation is actually an attempt to reconnect himself mentally to his society; he aims to affirm the virtues of their lifestyle while also suggesting subtle improvements. Therefore, his criticism of Thoreau is that he was too intentional about his experiment and its inspired text, and catered obsequiously to his middle class audience when his whole text derided such external dependence.

THOREAU’S DEFENSE

In “Resistance to Civil Government,” Thoreau states, “I came into this world, not chiefly to make this a good place to live in, but to live in it, be it good or bad... This may seem harsh and stubborn and unconciliatory; but it is to treat with the utmost kindness and consideration the only spirit that can appreciate or deserves it”⁴⁸. This is the basis of Thoreau’s defense in response to the many criticisms made against his experiment at Walden Pond. Thoreau does not assume responsibility for improving the state of his society, and he believes he should not have to: “I am not responsible for the successful working of the machinery of society. I am not the son of the engineer”⁴⁹. He is merely one discontented citizen whose stay in the woods is an attempt to treat himself with the respect and tender attention he feels every man owes to himself.

Much of Kant’s philosophy agrees with Thoreau’s notion of attending first and foremost to the self. He says, “man considered in terms of his *personality*, i.e. as a being endowed with *inner freedom*, is susceptible of obligation and, indeed, of obligation to himself (to humanity in his own person)”⁵⁰. Each individual constitutes a part of humanity, and Kant argues if every man works primarily on improving himself, the collective whole will come out stronger, because its individual parts will be stronger. Abbott agrees, stating in his essay that despite the oft-perceived narcissism of Thoreau’s project, it poses important socio-political questions about what kind of individuals we should be⁵¹.

The idea that every individual has a right to live for themselves and tend to their own growth and happiness is relatively basic. The argument is taken further, however, by Bankston, who despite his critiques of Thoreau’s credibility and sincerity, agrees with his priority of personal development over social responsibility:

Individuals are prior to any particular form of civil society and have the right to exist for themselves. This right to live for oneself and for one’s own purposes is not a repudiation of responsibility toward others, but the foundation of this responsibility. To the extent that people live for the sake of their governments or

⁴⁵ Neufeldt, “Thoreau’s Enterprise of Self-Culture,” 243.

⁴⁶ Philip Abbott, “Henry David Thoreau, the State of Nature, and the Redemption of Liberalism,” *The Journal of Politics* 47, no. 1 (1985): 194.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Thoreau, “Resistance to Civil Government,” 849.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 853.

⁵⁰ Kant, *The Doctrine of Virtue*, 80-1.

⁵¹ Abbott, “Henry David Thoreau,” 184.

communities, they give up the power to think independently and to make moral decisions [...] The individual's detachment from the web of commitment is precisely what makes conscientious reasoning possible.⁵²

With this passage, Bankston transcends the argument of one's basic right to care for oneself above others. He suggests that only when people detach from their external commitments can they develop their individual strength, like a baby weaning off its mother's breast milk. At this point only can the individual be said to contribute to the greater good; for if he remains suckling at the teat of society, living only off of its strength and vitality, how can it ever contribute new innovations and developments? As Bankston later says, "Paradoxically, only those who resist the state serve it with their consciences, and only those who hold themselves apart from civic cooperation can improve the political order"⁵³. He is mentally and spiritually trapped in infancy who does not make the effort to develop his full self.

CONCLUSIONS

In the very first chapter of *Walden*, Thoreau says, "In making the life of a civilized people an *institution* [...] the life of the individual is to a great extent absorbed, in order to preserve and perfect that of the race"⁵⁴. His experiment at Walden Pond is his response to feeling as though his most valuable and sacred individual qualities were being swallowed up by the institutions of capitalism and industrialization. But what does his personal statement mean for the rest of society, and what does he owe to others? A famed figure though he was, he was still an individual with every right to undergo *Walden* (the text and experience) as a personal project for self-enrichment. As Bankston says, "The essay reminds us that we are not here to build the perfect world, but to live according to conscience"⁵⁵. Thoreau believed each person's duty belonged first to the maintenance of his self, or else all other efforts would prove futile.

Near the end of *Walden*, Thoreau tells the story of an artist who was so resolute and singular in his purpose of finding the right materials to make a staff, his friends deserted him and his city continued without him and eventually fell. The artist, however, was endowed with "perennial youth." Initially seeming like a tragic tale, the story turns around: "He had made a new system in making a staff, a world with full and fair proportions; in which, though the old cities and dynasties has passed away, fairer and more glorious ones had taken their places"⁵⁶. The moral of this story is that the concentrated power of individual will and passion can completely transform societies. The social effect of individual development is unparalleled innovation and progress.

Thoreau says of his own conclusions, "I learned this, at least, by my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours"⁵⁷. Thoreau's two-year departure from society communicates to audiences of both his time and ours that success is a personal determination, and self-care a birthright of all human beings. As long as the individual is allowed to "step to the music which he hears"⁵⁸ without judgment, his society will resound with the symphonies of success.

⁵² Bankston, "Thoreau's Case for Political Disengagement," 11.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Thoreau, *Walden*, 28.

⁵⁵ Bankston, "Thoreau's Case for Political Disengagement," 13.

⁵⁶ Thoreau, *Walden*, 308.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 304.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 307.

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