

The Construction of Self: Existential Elements in Thoreau's *Walden*

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Abstract: Henry David Thoreau's magnum opus, *Walden*, has long been acclaimed for its elegant language and rich implications, yet previous scholars have predominantly focused on its ecological research value. This paper aims to apply Jean-Paul Sartre's theories to explore the parallels between transcendentalism and existentialism, as well as their impact on the theme of self-construction within the text. It provides new perspectives and approaches to understanding Thoreau and *Walden*, attempts to bridge different philosophical schools. To some extent, it offers guidance on how individuals might seek to construct their selves.

Keywords: Walden; Thoreau; Transcendentalism; Sartre; Existentialism; Self-Construction

1. Introduction

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) was an American philosopher, poet, and environmental scientist, roles that are fully reflected in his main work, *Walden*. This collection of essays documents his solitary living on the shores of Walden Pond, depicting what he saw, heard, and thought over more than two years. Throughout the book, his admiration for simple living and love for nature are evident, with vivid language, rich content, and profound implications showing his deep reflections on various specific issues of human life in the world. He attempted to revive philosophy as a way of life, not just a mode of reflective thinking and discourse. Thoreau's work encompasses a wide array of information: he was well-versed in classical Greek and Roman philosophy, extensively engaging with everything from the Pre-Socratics to the Hellenistic schools, and was also an avid student of ancient classics and various Asian traditions of wisdom literature.

He was familiar with modern philosophy, from Descartes, Locke, and the Cambridge Platonists to Emerson, Coleridge, and the German Idealists, all of whom enlightened Thoreau's philosophical endeavors. He discussed his scientific findings with the leading naturalists of his time and read with keen interest and admiration the latest works of Humboldt and Darwin. His philosophical exploration of the self and the world led him to develop an epistemology that emphasizes perception, as well as a non-dualistic interpretation of spiritual and material life. In addition to focusing on ethics with an existentialist spirit, Thoreau also made unique contributions to ontology, philosophy of science, and radical thought. Although his essays have received much attention, his writings on natural science were not published until the late twentieth century, helping to provide a more comprehensive understanding of him as a thinker.

As a prized pupil of Emerson, Thoreau was deeply influenced by the transcendentalist ideas presented in his mentor's seminal work, *Nature*. However, a careful reading of *Walden* reveals the presence of many existential elements. It can be said that existentialism and transcendentalism share certain similarities to some extent. Thus, reinterpreting *Walden* through the theories of Jean-Paul Sartre, one of the most important philosophers of the 20th century and a leading figure in French atheism and existentialism, can offer readers a new perspective and approach.

2. The Individual and the Freedom of Choice

Thoreau lived in 19th-century New England, during a time when the Industrial Revolution was rapidly reshaping the world around him: he witnessed the forests he cherished being mercilessly cut down, the streams where he once rowed in his youth turned into power

sources for cotton mills, and new railway tracks unapologetically encroaching upon a corner of Walden Pond. On a broader national scale, America's democracy was still in its infancy, marked by pervasive inequalities and an economic system heavily reliant on slavery. More distressingly, there was a moral decay and a loss of freedom, which deeply troubled Thoreau. He viewed the war between the United States and Mexico as an unabashed act of resource plundering, feeling ashamed for his country yet powerless to change it. Subsequently, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was passed and implemented, darkening his serene Concord home with the shadow of slavery. Despite graduating from the prestigious Harvard University, Thoreau chose not to pursue success in conventional terms, disillusioned with reality, he sought inner freedom and peace by Walden Pond. "Let me lead a life of true poverty" [1]. In the beautiful lakeside forest, he built a cabin, farmed, fished, hunted, and lived a self-sufficient life of frugality and simplicity for two years. This lifestyle was seen as heretical and not accepted by people of his time. However, his experiment and practice outside societal norms were his personal choice, through which he realized his own values. [2]

Transcendentalists highlight the importance of the individual, as Emerson proposed the concept of "self-reliance": since individuals can subjectively recognize truth, they can stand independent of authority, tradition, and stereotypes, relying on themselves to improve and thus achieving societal progress. Similarly, Sartre believed that "existence precedes essence" [3], meaning people first exist and then define themselves. The self is chosen by each individual, it is their plan for their future, their intention of becoming a certain type of person. Thoreau constructed his self through a simple life—he cherished nature and a life of solitude and leisure. However, the "right" choice is a subjective truth, correct for the person making the choice but not necessarily for others. Thoreau did not wish anyone to imitate his way of life for any reason: by the time they grasped his current lifestyle, he might have already found another. He hoped for people in the world to be as unique as possible. Nonetheless, Thoreau was pleased to see individuals cautiously discovering and steadfastly maintaining the lifestyle that suited

them, rather than blindly emulating their parents or neighbors. He noted that young people could choose to engage in building, farming, or sailing, as long as it did not hinder them from following what they truly wanted to do. Thoreau not only found his own path but also offered advice to others. The world is constantly evolving, and the environment is changing day by day; it is impossible for people to remain static. He believed we should return home with new experiences and a newly shaped character, from travels, adventures, dangers, and daily discoveries. To feel, to practice, to shape, becoming someone is entirely a matter of each independent individual's free choice.

Regarding what kind of life to lead, Thoreau also provided his answer through personal experience: simplicity is everything. This is undoubtedly a vivid example of Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory. Maslow, a famous 20th-century American social psychologist, personality theorist, and comparative psychologist, categorized human needs into eight levels, from the lower to the higher: physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, cognitive, aesthetic, self-actualization, and transcendence. Although Thoreau pursued only the satisfaction of basic needs and a place to rest, advocating that people should only concern themselves with basic needs, it is evident from his narrative that what he truly valued was not material wealth but spiritual fulfillment. He maintained good relationships with his neighbors and villagers, was independent yet respectful towards others, continuously expanded his knowledge through exploration and reading, appreciated the myriad forms of nature at all times, and deeply analyzed and improved himself... He said, "Superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only. Life's necessities do not require money to be bought". In an era rife with materialism and consumerism, this statement serves as a tranquilizer, offering solace to the reader's soul and providing a simple and sincere model for how to live and interact with others. For each individual, it is essential to explore one's inner self, not to follow blindly, and to define one's unique goals and needs. After all, the right to choose freely lies in the hands of each individual. [4]

3. "Hell" and "Heaven"

"Lies and fallacies are esteemed as the soundest truths, while reality is considered absurd". Sartre also believed that the world is absurd, filled with sorrow and misery everywhere. "Hell is other people", suggesting that once individuals establish connections with others through various forms, they might lose their subjectivity and uniqueness, becoming ensnared in the gaze of others. In contrast, transcendentalists view nature with fresh eyes, seeing it not merely as material but as vibrant and alive, filled with God's spirit; it is a symbol of the Oversoul or God. Hence, nature is conducive to the mental well-being of individuals and has a nourishing effect on them. Transcendentalism advocates for a return to simplicity and nature, to follow its revelations, and accept its influence in order to reach a state of spiritual perfection. The inherent meaning of this concept is that everything in nature has a dual significance; the external world is a reflection of the internal world. In the various aspects of nature, one can find the sweetest, most gentle, innocent, and inspiring companions, even for those disillusioned with the world and the most melancholic souls. Thoreau stated outright that people have different characters and needs, but the wise ones seek treasures in nature. Therefore, nature serves as the transcendentalists' utopia, their heaven.

So, for Thoreau, was his retreat from the city and clamor, to the solitude of mountains and lake shores, his way of escaping "hell" to reach "heaven"? There are no two identical people in the world, and there are a thousand Hamlets in a thousand people's eyes. Living a communal life in society requires adherence to common rules, and it's easy for individuals to lose their distinctiveness in such environments and circumstances. Thoreau encouraged people to actively cultivate originality and bravery in trying new things. The key to achieving this lies in how to stay clear-headed amidst the crowd. For the most part, Thoreau believed solitude was beneficial to health. Even with companionship, even with the best of partners, one might soon grow weary, and the situation could turn quite bad. He loved solitude, having never found a better companion than loneliness. In solitude, people have more time to converse with themselves, presenting the best opportunity for self-improvement. In Thoreau's eyes, socializing was often cheap. However, he

was willing to communicate with thoughtful people and the spiritually rich nature.

Thoreau perceived deep within himself, and continually discovered, a natural inclination towards a higher form of life and an exploration of the spiritual life. Many people have felt a similar yearning. Beyond this, however, he also harbored a natural desire for a primitive, pure, and wild life, both of which he deeply respected. What Thoreau referred to as his "other instinct" was his closeness to nature. Through the seasons—spring, summer, autumn, winter—he observed fish swimming, listened to the hunting dogs, watched ants fight, and competed with diving birds; the patterns of leaves, the density of forests, the color of lake water, the thickness of ice, the size of bubbles all connected with him, and before him, "the world reduced itself to a dewdrop" [5]. Indeed, beauty is not lacking, it's the appreciation of beauty that is missing in people. In *Walden*, Thoreau employs a plethora of rhetorical, descriptive, and expressive techniques. Reading each chapter and section, one cannot help but marvel at his boundless yet vivid imagination. Most people take the scenery around them for granted, but Thoreau not only explored them in detail but also brought them to life with his brilliant writing, accurately documenting what he saw and heard in fresh and fluid text. Nature was his repository of materials, an inexhaustible source of wisdom and thought, his heaven. From this perspective, is the transcendentalist reverence for nature as "divine" essentially a denial of God? After all, nature is what is most closely related and accessible to people. Coupled with their emphasis on the individual and human nature, such as Emerson's belief that, in some sense, man is God, this parallels Sartre's denial of God in *Existentialism is a Humanism* and his advocacy for returning to the self, claiming autonomy over one's life. [6]

In fact, the attitudes of Sartre and Thoreau are not about escapism but about the pursuit of freedom [7], emphasizing the exercise of subjective initiative. In general, all those who sincerely come seeking pilgrimage and freedom, do not hesitate to leave the village and step into the depths of the forest. When feeling bound by relationships with others, one might as well, like Thoreau, occasionally enter into nature, enjoy freedom, and reclaim oneself.

4. Innate Goodness and Responsibility

Transcendentalists believe in the pure "supreme goodness" of humanity and that human nature is fundamentally good. This stance not only negates God but also affirms human nature. Thoreau was deeply influenced by the teachings of Confucius and Mencius [8], and in *Walden*, he also pays the highest tribute to the virtues of humanity. It is because human nature is fundamentally good that the return to simplicity is always filled with hope. On the path to constructing the self, the goal should always be to strive for goodness. This requires that when making free choices, individuals must also bear the corresponding responsibilities. According to Sartre, everyone should take responsibility for their choices. [9] He considered free choice a natural instinct of humans, essentially a legitimate choice made after defining oneself. Individuals not only exist alone but also form a vast collective—comprising every individual existence, with intricate and complex connections between them. When making a free choice, every individual must be responsible for that choice because, at that moment, the individual's existence is not only the "creator" of their own existence but also the "creator" for the entire human collective. Thus, an individual's existence cannot escape the mission and responsibility bestowed by the collective; they must take responsibility for their choices. Only under this premise can the choices made by each individual be considered truly free.

As long as we consciously strive with our spirits, we can transcend any action and its consequences, achieving a sublime state. In this state, individuals' spirits can rise above the influence of external things, take responsibility for their actions and choices, and achieve a higher level of self-awareness and self-control. This conscious effort not only enables people to face various challenges in life calmly but also allows them to more comprehensively understand and shape their life paths, thereby achieving inner freedom and excellence. Throughout Thoreau's life, he was not a true "hermit." *Walden* is filled with his reflections on worldly matters and thoughts on complex human issues. It can be said that while he lived by the lake, his heart was in the center of the universe. "Let every man mind his own business, and endeavor to be what he was made." As he reveals towards the end of the

book, his journey into the forest was about taking responsibility for himself; leaving the forest, then, was about taking responsibility for the society and era he lived in. At the same time, he left behind many immortal works, fulfilling his cognitive responsibility to future generations.

5. Conclusion

Reviewing Sartre's thoughts, whether in his literary works or philosophical theories, the emphasis on "praxis" is prominent. While revealing the absurdity of the world, he pointed out a practical path for people: to take action, actively plan for oneself, and make choices, thereby changing one's existential plight. Thoreau, through his practical experiences, showed the world that humans undoubtedly have the capacity to consciously elevate their lives. No matter how unsatisfactory life's circumstances may be, one should face them, embrace them, and bravely accept their challenges. Do not flee from them, nor curse them with foul language. Life is not as bad as imagined. By applying Sartre's theories to analyze the similarities between transcendentalism and existentialism, and their impact on the theme of self-construction in Thoreau's texts, it is clear that both Sartre and Thoreau offered valuable advice on the construction of the self. Through this work, by reading one's destiny and then steadfastly moving towards the future, living passionately from beginning to end, is one of the key reasons *Walden* has become a vital source of spiritual nourishment and widely admired.

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