

**Wilderness Ethics: Henry David Thoreau's Romantic Passion**  
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**Abstract**

*This article highlights the importance of wilderness in the American mind. Although wilderness had long been viewed as an ungodly place, transcendentalist American literature proved the opposite. Thus, this article proposes to discuss the way Henry David Thoreau's works, particularly Walking (1862), could foster new attitudes towards wilderness. In addition to the analysis of the symbolic and aesthetic dimensions of wilderness in Thoreau's works, this discussion seeks to measure the ecological dimensions of his works by highlighting his passion for preserving wilderness.*

**Keywords:** *Wilderness, preservation, primitivism, transcendentalism, ecotheology.*

**Primitivisme et Onirisme Ecologique chez Henry David Thoreau**

**Résumé**

*Cet article se propose de cerner l'importance des étendues sauvages dans la culture Américaine. Contrairement à la vision chrétienne qui les décrit comme des lieux religieusement inappréciés, la littérature transcendentaliste américaine se propose de réviser cette vision à travers ses auteurs. Les œuvres de Henry David Thoreau seront au centre de cette discussion qui s'attèle à une analyse écothéologique dans l'ensemble de son œuvre et plus principalement dans son essai intitulé Walking (1862). De plus, cet article mettra en exergue la grandiose passion de Thoreau pour la préservation des étendues sauvages.*

**Mots Clés :** *Etat sauvage, préservation, primitivisme, transcendantalisme, écothéologie.*

**أهمية الثقافة البدائية في بناء الفلسفة الإيكولوجية لدى هنري ديفد ثورو**

**ملخص**

*يتجه هذا المقال صوب الدراسة النصية لأعمال الكاتب الأمريكي هنري ديفد ثورو الذي منح أهمية كبيرة للثقافة البدائية والطبيعة الخالية من كل قيود الحياة الحضارية المدنية. على الرغم من النظرة المسيحية السلبية للأماكن الطبيعية المتجردة إلا أن الفلسفة المتعالية غيرت جذريا انطباعات الأمريكيين من خلال أعظم كتابها وأهمهم هنري ديفد ثورو الذي كرس قسما كبيرا من عمله وحياته للأهمية الدينية والثقافية والمحيطية للحياة البدائية في الغابة. إضافة إلى دراسة الأبعاد الرمزية والجمالية للطبيعة من خلال أعماله وبالأخص مقاله المعنون Walking (1862) الذي يسعى فيه إلى إبراز مدى إجلال ثورو للطبيعة والذي بدوره يتجسد في فلسفته الإيكولوجية.*

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** *طبيعة، فلسفة متعالية، بدائية، إيكولوجيا.*

Wilderness is an important component of American culture and history to the extent that early American nationalists minted a new theory of the religious, aesthetic and romantic weight of wilderness in defining the national ego so as to distinguish the colonies from Europe. What is more, wilderness has become a source of pride for Americans.

In Western thought, Wilderness has a deceptive undertone at first glance. The Judeo-Christian tradition constitutes a significant formative sway on the attitude of the Europeans who discovered the New World toward wilderness. In the Bible, the latter is referred to as an uninhabited land where annual rainfall was not abundant. In order to distinguish deserts and wild lands from 'good' ones, the ancient Hebrews used various terms which all translated into 'wilderness'.

Religiously grounded in the Old Testament, this deceptive undertone is rooted in episodes of stories making a link between God's satisfaction and the state of the land. Understandably, drought and abundant rainfall were interpreted as either God's punishment and wrath or His blessing, respectively. Roderick Nash best put it when he stated, "since the amount of rain was beyond human influence or understanding, it was reasonable to give its variance a religious explanation"<sup>(1)</sup>.

The Old Testament reveals that the Hebrews viewed wilderness as a cursed land and that they related its hostile character with a lack of water. Moreover, it is stated that when the Lord desired to punish a sinful people he found drought to be the most suitable form of punishment, and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah can be good examples.

Conversely, when the Lord wished to manifest his pleasure, the greatest help he could provide was to transform wilderness into "a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs." Conveniently, the perception of the parched wasteland as God's curse had resulted in a conviction that wilderness was the locus of evil, demons and fear.

However, Christianity also held the idea that wild country could be an asylum and a place of religious purity and monasticism. The Israelites' adventure during the forty-year wandering gave wilderness various purports. The Exodus experience set a tradition of departing towards wilderness for freedom and religious purification.

In classical mythology, wild places were believed to be inhabited by gods and demons. Pan, the lord of the woods, for instance, was portrayed as having the legs, ears and tail of a goat and the body of a man. Besides, Greeks who had to cross forests or mountains feared an encounter with Pan, and hence the word 'panic' that originated from the fear that haunted travelers upon hearing weird cries in the wilderness and assuming them to indicate Pan's approach.

In American thought, attitudes towards wilderness have been different and even contrasting. The greatest impact on the way Americans viewed wilderness is rooted in European religious and folkloric ways of defining wilderness. From the colonists' perspective, the New World and the wilderness thereof was a desolate and unwelcoming battleground. They repeatedly talked about their tribulations and struggles against wilderness, and their objective was to

conquer, tame and cultivate wilderness. After all, their relation with wilderness was utilitarian. Supporting this idea, there were many biblical references pointing to the desirability of taming the wilderness such as “increase and multiply, replenish the earth and subdue it”<sup>(2)</sup>.

The pioneers' situation and attitude urged them to use military metaphors to debate the advent of civilization. Myriad memorials and diaries represented wilderness as the ‘enemy’ which had to be ‘conquered’, ‘subdued’, and ‘vanquished’ by a ‘pioneer army’. Likewise, the New England Puritans saw wilderness as evil and therefore it was a moral duty for them to conquer and tame it. William Bradford, for one, expresses the Puritan fear and loathing of wilderness in his *Of Plymouth Plantation* when he commented on the conditions the Pilgrims had found themselves in, “Besides, what could they see but a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men--and what multitudes there might be of them they knew not”<sup>(3)</sup>.

Although at the time the Puritan stereotypical concept of wilderness was being spread in the colonies, there was an emerging counter-current that claimed wilderness as a natural beauty under the auspices of Thomas Morton. The latter manifested a sympathetic attitude towards wilderness and what William Bradford named ‘wild peoples’. In his *New English Canaan* (1637), Morton said a word for American wilderness, “And when I had seriously considered of the bewty of the place, with all her faire indowments I did not think that in all the knowne world it could be paralleled ... for in

mine eie, t’was Nature’s Master-peice”<sup>(4)</sup>.

Indeed, wilderness could not become the object of veneration and preservation instead of fear, repulsiveness and conquest unless the control of the Puritan thought on the American mind lessened. In literature, the period of Romanticism in America witnessed drastic changes as to the attitudes of American people towards wilderness due to the writings of such authors as James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving, Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson among many others. At this point in American history, Americans were urgently looking for something typically “American” which would distinguish America from the Old world. Thus, writers of this period helped to spread the idea that American wilderness was unique, exceptional and a source of national pride.

Wilderness lost much of its repugnance with the emergence of Romanticism in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. “Romanticism reflected a deep appreciation of the beauties of nature. For the romantics, nature was how the spirit was revealed to humankind. The romantic philosophers believed in the METAPHYSICAL or spiritual nature of reality. They thought that a higher reality existed behind the appearance of things in the physical world. Nature appeared to people as a material reality; however, because it evoked such strong feelings in humankind, it revealed itself as containing a higher, spiritual truth. Romantic artists tried to capture in their art the same feelings nature inspired in them”<sup>(5)</sup>.

One of the central ideas promoting the aesthetic and moral value of

wilderness in the Romantic complex was the philosophy of primitivism. Primitivists opined that man's delight and well-being is reduced in direct proportion to his extent of civilization. To put it otherwise, Primitivists sought a balance between civilization and noble savagery. Nash best put it when he wrote, "Captured in his wilderness retreats and brought back to civilization, the Wild Man supposedly made a better knight than ordinary persons. Contact with the wilds was believed to give him exceptional strength, ferocity, and hardiness combined with innocence and an innate nobility."<sup>(6)</sup>

Ergo, rather than conceiving of wilderness and civilization as dichotomous units, Primitivists believe that the amalgamation of the two is possible and can be harmonious in the sense that it forges a hybrid being capable of balancing the sophistication of civilization with the naturalistic aspect of wilderness.

One of the leading Primitivists is French Philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau, who contended in *Emile* (1762) that modern man ought to embrace primitive aspects into his by and by distorted civilized life.

The changes that occurred in Europe at the level of the perception of wilderness left their imprints on American attitudes towards it. Washington Irving, for instance, claimed once, "No, never, need an American look beyond his own country for the sublime and beautiful of natural scenery."<sup>(7)</sup> Likewise, James Fenimore Cooper deplored in his writings the destruction of mountain areas, the Indian way of life and forest areas. He also condemned the slaughter of bird species in the name of progress.

Moreover, Nash writes "Cooper took great pains to show that wilderness had value as a moral influence, a source of beauty, and a place of exciting adventure."<sup>(8)</sup>

Henceforth, Romantic writers helped to promote the view that wilderness has aesthetic value and forge a sense of national pride in America's natural resources that were unparalleled in Americans' viewpoint. Furthermore, they managed to alter the stereotypical attitude towards wilderness.

Henry David Thoreau went far beyond this goal to advocate wilderness preservation through many of his works, notably, *Walden* (1854), *Huckleberries* (1862) and *Walking* (1861). He had surpassed the limits of a novelist to join the environmentalists in their struggle to preserve natural resources. Instead of viewing wilderness from a Puritanical perspective that underrated its virtues, Thoreau embraced Emersonian transcendentalism that revered wilderness. In one of his lectures at the Concord Lyceum, Thoreau's first words on April 23, 1851 were "I wish to speak a word for nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil – to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society."<sup>(9)</sup>

Thoreau criticized the champions of civilization and parted ways with the ecologists when he affirmed "in Wildness is the preservation of the World."<sup>(10)</sup> By so doing, Thoreau has become one of the acclaimed advocates of wilderness not only as a natural resource that should be preserved but also as a site of inspiration for literary scholars.

The compound of attitudes towards man, nature and God known as transcendentalism was one of the most influential factors shaping Thoreau's mindset as regards wilderness. "The core of transcendentalism was the belief that a correspondence or parallelism existed between the higher realm of spiritual truth and the lower one of material objects."<sup>(11)</sup> While denying the deistic assumption of the power of reason, transcendentalists agreed with deists that nature was the real source of religion. Therefore, nature reflects the currents of higher laws as commanded by God. Moreover the transcendental conception of man adds more depth to the idea of an attractive wilderness by arguing that "one's chances of attaining moral perfection and knowing God were *maximized* by entering wilderness."<sup>(12)</sup>

This ecotheological view is reflected in Thoreau's *Walking* through the exercise of "sauntering".<sup>(13)</sup> To Thoreau, taking a walk in nature is not limited to the mere exercise of walking or relaxing to escape the stress of civilization, however the main purpose of sauntering is to be enlightened. Thoreau best put it when he explained "so we saunter toward the Holy Land, till one day the sun shall shine more brightly than ever he has done, shall perchance shine into our minds and hearts, and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light."<sup>(14)</sup> It might be very well grounded, in this concern, to assume that Thoreau was alluding to the Great Awakening whose purpose was to revive interest in religion. However, instead of providing a theological resolution to New England's Declension<sup>(15)</sup> Thoreau invited his New Englanders to take a walk in the wilderness that would

surely, according to him, enlighten and awaken religious truths within the self. The ecotheological purpose of sauntering is achieved as soon as the saunterer comes into contact with wilderness that mirrors a highly spiritual truth. Therefore, transcendentalism had greatly achieved throughout Henry David Thoreau's subversion at the level of conceptualizing wilderness from a demonic entity to a divine locus.

A second element greatly affecting Thoreau's attitude to wilderness was his contempt of civilization that can be summed up in his following statement "Let me live where I will, on this side is the city, on that the wilderness, and ever I am leaving the city more and more, and withdrawing to the wilderness."<sup>(16)</sup> Thoreau opined that a technological civilization disrupted the early primitive patterns of life and hence his concept of voluntary simplicity. Moreover, he viewed simplicity as the *sine qua non* of a happy and harmonious life, a judgment that motivated him to move to Walden Pond and build a house on its shore. What is impressive about Thoreau's shift to Walden Pond in 1846 is that he chose the 4<sup>th</sup> of July to move into the house he constructed therein in order to celebrate his independence from city life. In *Walden*, Thoreau confesses to the reader, "When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only."<sup>(17)</sup>

Thoreau further states that only food, shelter, clothing and fuel are necessary in life and that all the other excesses after these basic needs are satiated are

significant of a shallow life, “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. With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meager life than the poor.”<sup>(18)</sup> Thoreau’s idolatry for simplicity is confirmed by his interest in American Indian cultures as a source of wisdom. Thoreau’s reverence for the primitive and simple American Indian life style did not only confirm a paradigm of his own philosophy of life but reverses the superiority-inferiority complex to turn it to the natives’ advantage. He confides to his Journal that American Indians “seem like a race who have exhausted the secrets of nature, tanned with age, while this young and still fair Saxon slip, on whom the sun has not long shone, is but commencing his career.”<sup>(19)</sup> By so saying, Thoreau implicitly invited the Saxons to learn from the Indian wisdom that teaches its adepts to live harmoniously with the natural environment. In fact, Thoreau’s logic is not ill-advised and this might be validated by Squanto’s<sup>(20)</sup> help to the Pilgrims after their first winter in the new World and that was integral to their survival.

For Thoreau, wilderness was a reservoir of strength and this is explained by the rise and decline of empires according to the tenacity of their wild roots. Human energy is extracted from wilderness as Thoreau opined “from the forest and wilderness come the tonics and barks which brace mankind.”<sup>(21)</sup> Thoreau further argued in this concern that it is not “a meaningless fable” that the founders of Rome were suckled by a wolf. He reasoned that “The founders of every

state which has risen to eminence have drawn their nourishment and vigor from a similar wild source.”<sup>(22)</sup> Thoreau further notes that “It was because the children of the Empire were not suckled by the wolf that they were conquered and displaced by the children of the northern forests who were.”<sup>(23)</sup>

In addition to all these valuable advantages, wilderness still conceals another overarching virtue according to Henry David Thoreau. This virtue is embedded in the freedom extracted from wilderness. When Thoreau moves to live in Walden Pond, he informs the reader of Walden about the purpose of his choice of the Woods as a homeland when he writes, “I went to the Woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life.”<sup>(24)</sup> Everywhere in his writings, Thoreau associates wilderness with freedom. In order to authenticate the bond between wilderness and freedom, Thoreau contrasts the wild free world with the civilized constraining world. He argued that people are chained by progress and the technological advances of capitalistic societies that enforce consumerism. Wilderness, on the other hand, empowers human freedom throughout its advocacy of simplicity that, in turn, optimizes our sense of independence from the constraints of civil life and therefore our freedom. Henceforth, wilderness is not only free but liberating also. In sum, Thoreau maintained that “all good things are wild and free.”<sup>(25)</sup>

Following this line of thought, wilderness preservation becomes more than necessary for all the good things it offers to mankind. Thoreau first trumpeted a clarion call for wilderness preservation in his essay *Huckleberries* wherein he insisted that “each town

should have a park, or rather a primitive forest, of five hundred or a thousand acres, either in one body or several—where a stick should never be cut for fuel—nor for the navy, nor to make wagons, but stand and decay for higher uses—a common possession forever, for instruction and recreation.”<sup>(26)</sup> Apart from its ecological worth, Thoreau adds a cultural dimension to the preservationist movement that values wilderness for the wisdom it brings to mankind. Thoreau warned against taming wilderness as it is detrimental to any civilization to “kill” wilderness. He explained that great civilizations like Rome and Greece were sustained by wilderness and that the extermination thereof is suicidal.<sup>(27)</sup>

Finally, what is unique about Henry David Thoreau’s conception of

wilderness is his passion for the wild not only because it conceals spiritual higher truths but for a multitude of reasons that he detailed in the bulk of his works. Unlike his contemporaries, Thoreau did not value wilderness only because it supports a religious cause but attempted to draw other benefits from wilderness throughout his sauntering experience in the woods. Thoreau’s overemphasis on non-religious advantages of wilderness translates his utmost caution to avoid the devaluation of wilderness if religious enthusiasm wanes. This is particularly the reason why apart from being a source of inspiration for Thoreau, wilderness can be regarded as his greatest passion.

#### References and endnotes:

- 1- Nash. R. F. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2014, p. 14.
- 2- Genesis 1: 28.
- 3- Bradford. W. *Of Plymouth Plantation*. Rutgers University Press, 1952, p. 62.
- 4- Morton. T. *New English Canaan*. Applewood Books, 2011, Book II Chapter I, pp. 41-42.
- 5- Philips. J (et al.). *Romanticism and Transcendentalism: 1800-1860*. Second edition, Infobase Publishing, New York, 2010, p. 5.
- 6- Nash. R. F. op.cit, pp. 47-48.
- 7- Irving. W. *Sketch-Book*. Longmans’ English Classics, Longmans, Green and Co, New York, London and Bombay, 1905, p. 12.
- 8- Nash. R. F. op.cit, p. 76.
- 9- Thoreau. H.D. *Walking*. Arc Manor LLC, USA, p.7.
- 10- Ibid., p. 26.
- 11- Nash. R. F. op.cit, p. 85.
- 12- Ibid., 86. (emphasis in original).
- 13- Thoreau attributes the etymology of the word “sauntering” to a medieval practice of roving and asking charity to be able to go to la Sainte Terre, “SAUNTERING ... is beautifully derived “from idle people who roved about the country, in the Middle Ages, and asked charity, under pretense of going a la Sainte Terre”, to the Holy Land, till children exclaimed, “there goes a Sainte-Terrer”, a Saunterer, a Holy-Lander” in Thoreau. H.D. *Walking*. op.cit., p. 7.
- 14- Thoreau. H.D. *Walking*. op.cit., p. 49.
- 15- Declension in New England meant “a pervasive and steady turning away from the original goals of the founders by their descendants” in Greene. J. P. *Pursuits of Happiness: The Social Development of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formation of American Culture*. University of Carolina Press, USA, p. 55.
- 16- Thoreau. H.D. *Walking*. op.cit.,p. 20.
- 17- Thoreau. H.D. *Walden*. York Classics, York Press, 1995, p. 1
- 18- Ibid., p. 9.

- 19- Qtd in Fleck. R. F. *Henry Thoreau and John Muir among the Indians*. Hamden, CT, Archon Books, 1985, p. 5.
- 20- Squanto or Tisquantum (1580-1622) was a Native American. He taught the Pilgrims how to take advantage of Nature by teaching them how to cultivate maize and how to catch fish and fertilize crops following Native American methods.
- 21- Thoreau. H.D. *Walking*. op.cit., p. 26.
- 22- Ibid.
- 23- Ibid.
- 24- Thoreau. H.D. *Walden*. op.cit., p. 61.
- 25- Thoreau. H.D. *Walking*. op.cit., p. 36.
- 26- Qtd in Cafaro. P. *Thoreau's Living Ethics: Walden and the Pursuit of Virtue*. University of Georgia Press, USA, p.169.
- 27- Thoreau indicates in this concern that, "The civilized nations – Greece, Rome, England – have been sustained by primitive forests which anciently rotted where they stand. They survive as long as the soil is not exhausted. Alas for human culture! Little is to be expected of a nation, when the vegetable mould is exhausted, and it is compelled to make manure of the bones of its fathers" in Thoreau. H. D. *Walking*. op.cit., p. 31.