



TRACING THE ROOTS OF MINIMALISM AND ESSENTIALISM IN HENRY DAVID THOREAU'S *WALDEN*

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ABSTRACT

*Published in 1885, Thoreau's book *Walden* is a timeless classic. Generations of readers have found inspiration and direction for happy living in the face of adversities through this record of his stay at Walden Pond. The contemporary popular publications on minimalism and essentialism have shown the necessity of the thoughts expressed by Thoreau in his book *Walden*. Greg McKeown's book *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less* and Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus's *Minimalism: Live a Meaningful Life* are the recent examples of such numerous publications on the topic. This paper traces the elements of essentialism and minimalism in this book. Thoreau proves through his personal experiences during his stay near the pond that it is possible to have joy, and satisfaction away from the society. The significance of his experience and the contemporary relevance of the philosophy are elaborated on in detail in this paper. The book does not only offers practical advices but also the philosophy behind the necessity for such life. The philosophical insights help the readers to have long lasting behavioral changes. The philosophical insights are brought out in detail and their contemporary significance is also highlighted. Thoreau's book *Walden* offers solutions to the problems of today's highly distracted generation.*

Key words: *Walden, Thoreau, Minimalism, Essentialism, Transcendentalism, Simple living, Philosophy.*

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INTRODUCTION

The timeless classics of literature have something to say to every generation. They offer fresh perspectives and have ability to guide the following generations to sail safely through the rough waters of changing times. Though every work of art has a deep connection with its times and society, some stand true to the test of time. They speak to the depths of human experience. The superficial flux, the chaos of turbulence and the organization of society cannot reach to those depths. The classics appeal and interact with those unchanging and ever wanted experience of living. Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* is an example of such a classic. Though the book was published more than a century ago, it still holds its place in every good library and serious parlance. The current young generation is living in the digital era which is also the era of abundance and extravaganza of luxuries and pleasures. It is also the era of unprecedented means and hype of seeking human connections through real and virtual platforms. However, the young generation does not appear to be happy, joyful, and harmoniously organized towards common good. The publications of self-help books and the popularity of the motivational sessions reveal this want of the generation for seeking direction and encouragement. The recently published books Greg McKeown's book *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less* and Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus's *Minimalism: Live a Meaningful Life* have become bestsellers. These books offer practical tips to lead lives according to the underlying principles. However, these books do not offer any long lasting solutions as the well thought logical and philosophical foundation to the tips is often missing. As such, Thoreau's *Walden* proves to be an important text because it can bring about the behavioural changes and cognitive change in the readers.

Henry David Thoreau was a Natural scientist also known as the Father of Modern Environmentalism. He is also remembered for his contributions to ontology, philosophy of science, and to the radical political thought. He was born at Concord in the family of four children. His birthplace Concord, in the state of Massachusetts, is famously known for being a home to a gallery of American writers like Emerson, Luisa May Alcott, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, Margaret Fuller, H. W. Longfellow, and many others. The great American fiction writer Henry James described Concord as "the biggest little place in America." ("Henry David Thoreau"). The place he selected for his solitary living was three kilometers away from Concord near a small lake called Walden. It was a piece of land owned by his mentor and friend the great philosopher Emerson. Only twenty seven years old Thoreau lived near the Walden Pond with an aim to reinvigorate philosophy as a way of life instead of treating it as a mode of reflective thought and discourse. His writings on the experience entitled 'Walden' are described as his meditations on the concrete problems of living in the world as a human being.

The book, however, has inspired the naturalists, environmentalists, and writers alike. Yet, the book is sometimes categorized into philosophical writing and sometimes into a

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memoir. As it has many other topics in it hence, it is often hard to categorize it in a rigid genre. The book contains the insights about how to study the ecology of a place. His method of collecting and analyzing the environmental data is used still today in Environmentalism. Many thousands of people visit his dwelling place near the pond every year. However, the original shack which Thoreau built above the pond is gone, sold for scrap and resold (Cheever 92). He felt that, around him there are most men who are full of misery: "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" (Thoreau 8). That is the reason why *Walden* is described as "an interesting antidote to living in the modern rat race" ("Henry David Thoreau" Biography).

McElrath argues that, for Thoreau *Walden* was an important experiment in three significant ways: firstly, he wanted to resist the debilitating effects of the industrial revolution which comprised of division of labour, the mind dulling repetition of factory work, and materialistic vision of life. It also helped him in returning to simpler, agrarian way of life that was quickly disappearing in New England. Secondly, he reduced the time needed to sustain himself and found more time to devote his efforts to reading and writing. Thirdly, he wanted to find out if one can experience the Ideal or the Divine through nature (Thoreau 9).

He contemplates on the predicament of the people seeking profit and wealth that in search of wealth the lives of the people have become poor. "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation". The people lead lives of discontent and devoid of happiness. The word used by Thoreau *desperation* has deep religious connotations. It means the human life without any hope. He states his purpose why he lived near the pond all by himself for two years, two months and two days.). He states his purpose of writing the book: "I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbours up" (Thoreau 84). His stay at the pond started in July 1845 which lasted for more than two years and two months. In his definition of surviving on bare necessities even the society is an extravaganza. He elaborates that he can survive out of society if he wished to. He cries out "Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb nail" (91). The essential and the simple accompanied by the minimum needs he believed, one can live happily and peacefully.

During his stay at the pond, he was accompanied by such living things as the trees, and the wildlife around him. There, he contemplated on the human existence and the unique experience of being alive which one cannot have in the crowds of the city. In the forest, Thoreau contemplates on the human life and experiences through the behaviour of the wild animals and the insects. He notes the changes in the nature as the autumn paves way to the winter. The chilly frost and the falling snow bring with them the changes in the lives of the flora and the fauna. The animals and the insects make preparations for the coming winter so does the author.



The natural flow of life as observed in the nature is his mantra for life. Against the commonly held belief that the pond is bottomless, he concludes after measurements that though the pond is not more than a hundred feet deep, it fulfills a human need of infinity. Finally he concludes that, "It is not worth the while to go round the world to count the cats in Zanzibar". Being a Transcendentalist, he believed in the idea that there is no use in changing one's landscape rather than one's soul. He wanted to test his philosophy through life experience. To state the philosophy in short, it "emphasized the importance of empirical thinking and of spiritual matters over the physical world. It encouraged scientific enquiry and observation" ("Henry David Thoreau" Biography). The movement acknowledged that "matter and spirit both existed and that the reality of spirit transcended the reality of matter. The reforms, they believed, start with the individual, not with the group or society ("Henry David Thoreau" Britannica). Thus, he excluded himself from the society to know what lies in the spirituality and what one misses in the wilderness. This exclusion of the self from the society has also resulted in his endorsement for simplicity in living. The minimalism of Thoreau is from his lived experience; it is not a discourse emanating from an ivory tower.

Thoreau's life at the pond gives this strong message that one can live with the most minimal facilities and civil luxuries and still have the life of content and fulfillment. The commodities that we accumulate do not necessarily bring satisfaction and permanently lasting pleasure with them. The desire to stuff one's home with furniture and other things of utilities hardly guarantees the peace and exaltation of mind. He says that when one isn't satisfied with what he has, then he can add more material things to his possessions or, he can limit his desires. "Genius is not a retainer to any emperor, nor is its material silver, or gold, or marble, except to a trifling extent" (57). He is grieved to see the fellow Concord citizens toiling hard to fulfill their ever-expanding realm of desires. He chooses not to have too many desires that rob the life from a person. Anything that is more than the needs is disadvantageous. The questions however, were whether it was practically possible and did he live accordingly? Susan Cheever provides the details about how he lived in simplicity:

"As a traveler, he nearly always walked, carrying his few possessions in a folded-up handkerchief or a little folded paper. He dressed simply, an affectation which was extremely eccentric in a world where even ordinary women spent hours dressing their hair into complicated buns and braids and at least three layers of clothing were required of men and women for the simplest outing" (Cheever 143). This minimalist outlook of Thoreau is garnering a newer interest among the people. The contemporary society is suffering from the abundance of facilities, luxuries and amenities. Despite having the greatest facilities and comforts of all times, the people suffer from anxiety, loneliness and restlessness. The minimalist life of Thoreau has lessons for the mankind suffering from the ills of the current times.



His thoughts of minimalism and essentialism had their origins in diverse types of sources. He is called as a Classicist in philosophical ideas. His readings of the ancient Indian, Greek and Roman philosophies inspired in him an admiration for the ancient sacred texts. He writes, "How much more admirable the *Bhagvat-Gita* than all the ruins of the East!" (57). Owing to the ancient Indian sacred texts and spiritual traditions he took pantheist and pan deist approach. He believed that God is not separate from the world. The argument of this approach is that God is omnipresent and the very part of the world. In his description of the Pond in winter he equates it with Ganges. He also tells that he read *Bhagvat-Gita* every morning before going to the pond to fetch water. He admires the sacred text and calls the modern world and its literature is "puny and trivial" in comparison to the *Bhagvat-Gita*. He also ate an Indian diet of rice following the teachings of the Hindu sacred texts. Thus, Thoreau's simplicity or minimalism also owes to his readings of Indian and other classical texts.

His stay at the pond was also an example of his economical and interpersonal self-reliance. One can prosper as per his needs and lead a self-sustainable life. He stayed alone at the pond where doesn't have any human company. He says that one should not have the human company as a need but as a real human being. It shows he was not ill-disposed against any human company, rather, he wanted to have the human company not as a utility but so as to have real interpersonal experience. During his stay he was supported by his own labour. In the text, we often notice that *Self* is at the centre. He explicates that one can survive away from the society. He says: "A simple and independent mind does not toil at the bidding of any prince (57). What is noteworthy is that before his book was published Emerson's Essay *Self-Reliance* was published. The influence of the essay is unfailing.

Though he leads a minimalist, simple and essentialist life near Walden, he does live like an ascetic or a retiring person. For him, it is not a kind of sacrifice or suppression of desires. Nevertheless, he believed that one can lead a happy, fulfilled life with minimum possessions and facilities. In stating his purpose in going to the woods he says: "I did not wish to live what was not a life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life" (90). He thus wanted to have a life full of transcendental experiences and fulfilment. He says his attempt was to find out if life was mean or sublime. He wanted to see, "if it were sublime, to know it by experience" (91). Though he was away from interpersonal communication, he claimed he led a life of fulfilment. Cafaro comments about the book that, "This most asocial of books thus opens up the fundamental political question: What are the proper goals of human society? And it resoundingly rejects the modern answer—material prosperity and a fair distribution of goods—as insufficient and ignoble, a partial answer at best" (Cafaro 107). The material possessions thus, he believed are of the least use for living a life of fulfilment.



He does not measure success in terms of the material progress. He poked fun at the scientific discoveries which led to facilitating the transportation and habitation more luxuriously. The inventions like the train did help a quick transportation of the masses and the goods, however, it hardly assisted them in having a spiritual experience in their life. He didn't believe that traveling to far off places can have some transcendental experiences, rather he preferred to walk on foot to even longer distances. He criticized the train as 'a roaring beast' and 'a false idol of social progression'. He ironically asks if the invention of the train has added to the virtue of punctuality of the people. He also ponders over the so called freedom offered by the facilities spread out by the technology. He points out that in order to gain more freedom, the humankind has entered into a new kind of servitude to the schedules.

To conclude, though Thoreau's book *Walden* was published more than a century ago, it offers wisdom and ways of living to the cotemporary generations of readers. In the era of abundance and extravaganza the peace of mind and satisfaction is missing. The book is a precursor to the contemporary publications of self-help books. The recent publications about focusing on the goals, avoiding distractions, and living on the most essential are by those who have never experienced the travails and tribulations of living away from the society or have not personally observed thriving with the minimum facilities. Thoreau's book *Walden* is unique as it is a record of the actual experiences. It has practical advices for happy minimalist and essentialist living. It also offers important philosophical insights to reorient the readers in the direction of seeking true joy of living.

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