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## An American Paradox: Thoreau's Simplification of Emerson



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“Simplify, simplify,” says Henry David Thoreau, like a stand-up comic using a well-trod catchphrase to appeal to a wider audience. Like that comedian, Thoreau is trying to make Ralph Waldo Emerson’s material appeal to a wider audience. Thoreau attempts to simplify Emerson’s philosophy for practical use by an emerging American culture. To do so, he infuses *Walden* with a unique sense of humor. He tries, and possibly fails, to resolve one of Emerson’s most conspicuous contradictions. Thoreau subversively employs a uniquely American sense of humor that deepens the meaning of Emerson’s philosophy for the everyday American, envisioning an inimitably paradoxical American society.

In *Walden*, Thoreau establishes a practical template for practicing Emersonian philosophy to an emerging America. Thoreau introduces himself as a “chanticleer,” an awakener reflecting his readers’ circumstances to gain their trust then subvert their expectations (Anderson 197). Thoreau encourages an upstart America to confront its perception of society.

At times, Thoreau contradicts Emerson’s viewpoint (Railton 52). “The universe is wider than our views of it,” Thoreau says in *Walden*’s “Conclusion”, countering Emerson’s thesis in “Self-Reliance”: “What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think.” Where Emerson proclaimed, “Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist,” Thoreau counters with a warning against embracing nonconformity just for its own sake (Emerson “Self-Reliance”). Thoreau asks, “Why level downward to our dullest perception always, and praise that as common sense,” encouraging a deeper interpretation of life (Thoreau “Conclusion”).

Emerson demanded unwavering dedication to the “triumph of principles” (Emerson “Self-Reliance”) which Thoreau amends to be accomplished without a “haste to succeed” (Thoreau “Conclusion”). Thoreau instructs the reader to “sell your clothes and keep your thoughts,” challenging a young America to embrace the solitude of nature to get closer to the divine as Emerson edified (Thoreau “Conclusion”). Thoreau provides evidence of Emerson’s belief. Thoreau tells a parable about a king who behaved “incapacitated for hospitality” (Thoreau “Conclusion”). He contrasts this with the man who lives in a hollow tree, whose “manners were truly regal” (Thoreau “Conclusion”). Though some would perceive the king’s royal status as closer to divinity, it is the man who embraces his connection to nature that is truly worthy of the divine. Emerson has set the conditions for the American enterprise to be awakened spiritually,

and Thoreau makes Emerson's conditions accessible by providing a practical guide to a waking America.

To make Emerson's philosophy more accessible to the common American, Thoreau intentionally infuses *Walden* with subversive wit, humorous wordplay, and winking metaphors. There is even wordplay right in one of his chapter titles: "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For". The repetition of the word "lived" suggests that Thoreau is endowing a deeper definition to the word "live." Thoreau employs this rhetoric to "expose cultural complacency... [and] puncture conventionalism" (West 218). Thoreau wavers between definitions of the word, sometimes meaning the literal act of residing in a location, and other times meaning the fullness with which a person's entire soul can occupy space and time through maximum effort and consideration. Within one sentence, Thoreau cunningly tempts his reader to a deeper examination of his intentions: "Well, there I might live, I said; and there I did live, for an hour, a summer and a winter life" (Thoreau "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For"). Cunningham notes that "[Thoreau] larded his lines with puns and submerged secondary meanings that frequently aimed for laughs" (18). Thoreau recognized his tendency to jest, counting "paradoxes... playing with words... [and] using current phrases and maxims" as a few of his personal faults (Cunningham 20). This internalized acknowledgment of his faults appears in *Walden* as self-deprecating asides.

Though he expounds the virtues of simplifying, which presumably includes minimizing unnecessary conversation, he admits that he "dearly [loves] to talk" (Thoreau "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For"). He ruthlessly mocks the breathless pace of an "unwieldy and overgrown establishment" with an undulating rhythm that comes to a halt with the stinging attack of a punchline, stating, "Men think that it is essential that the Nation have commerce, and export ice, and talk through a telegraph, and ride thirty miles an hour, without a doubt, whether they do or not; but whether we should live like baboons or like men, is a little uncertain" (Thoreau "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For"). The reader is charmed into Thoreau's perspective, seeing many of the activities of civilized life as "external and superficial" (Thoreau "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For"). The punchline's attack compels the reader to deeply consider what he deems essential.

Elsewhere, Thoreau lets the reader believe that he is speaking about farming and seeds in a literal sense, stating that he has "always cultivated a garden" and "had [his] seeds ready", while subversively painting a metaphor for the determined exploration and preparation that he believes will lead to fulfillment in life (Thoreau "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For"). Thoreau winkingly claims to have made his move "by accident" on the Fourth of July, no doubt hoping for his reader to connect his endeavor with that most American quality, independence (Thoreau "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For"). In this independence, he

paints a humorous picture of his humble abode, claiming to have "more substantial shelter" than when he lived in a tent, even though his new abode merely provides shelter from the rain and amounts to little more than a glorified tent (Thoreau "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For"). While reminiscing about his tent and boat, he lets slip a pun about his boat having "gone down the stream of time", toying with the concept of a boat on a literal and metaphorical stream (Thoreau "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For"). These musings show the reader that Thoreau shares a uniquely American wit and can acknowledge his flaws and contradictions.

Thoreau possesses an ability to contradict even his own thesis, suggesting that he understands a paradox present in Emerson's philosophy. Emerson insists that "imitation is suicide," but in doing so he has influenced a litany of imitators (Emerson "Self-Reliance"; Keane 152). Using the common wit of the time to lure readers into adopting Emerson's philosophy, Thoreau risks that his reader may miss the main lessons (West 218). Keane notes the potential for Emerson's philosophy of self-reliance to turn "anti-democratic and dangerous" (Keane 150). By permitting his reader to "not keep pace with his companions" if he "hears a different drummer," Thoreau inadvertently deepens the paradox which Emerson created (Thoreau "Conclusion"). He risks creating an army of nonconformists, ironically conforming to the very values he has seeks to instill. Emerson warns of the "discontent of the multitudes" forming into a mob; misunderstanding Thoreau's attempt to clarify Emerson has led to mobs "absorbed by the anarchic individualism of the socially irresponsible Philistine" (Emerson "Self-Reliance"; Keane 150). Thoreau attempts to resolve this by reminding the reader of their life's impact on society, comparing life to a river's ability to shape the land:

The life in us is like the water in the river. It may rise this year higher than man has ever known it, and flood the parched uplands; event his may be the eventful year, which will drown out all our muskrats. It was not always dry land where we dwell. I see far inland the banks which the stream anciently washed, before science began to record its freshets. (Thoreau "Conclusion")

Thoreau knows that he must move on from this solitude in nature to discover more of what life has to offer. He has learned all there is to learn from the experience, recognizing that he has "several more lives to live" (Thoreau "Conclusion"). Thoreau knows that "here is not all the world," implying that he must deepen his relationship with his many outside responsibilities (Thoreau "Conclusion"). If he stays in the woods any longer, he would "fall into a particular route and make a beaten track for [himself]" (Thoreau "Conclusion"). But to fully embrace Emerson's philosophy and reject consistency, he must move on from the

woods, rejecting the “rut of tradition and conformity” (Thoreau “Conclusion”). Emerson asked something similar of

his reader, hoping to “pass again into neutral, godlike independence...[and] thus lose all pledge and having observed, observe again” (Emerson “Self-Reliance”). Leaving the woods is the logical next step for Thoreau’s faithful observance of Emerson’s philosophy. It is both an act of nonconformity for Thoreau to move on from his experiment, and an act of conformity to follow the practical instruction of Emerson’s philosophy. And so, the paradox persists.

This paradox is a defining element of a uniquely American philosophy that came from Thoreau’s simplifying of Emerson’s ideas for the common American, by deepening the meaning of his words and subversively employing an American sense of humor. As if presciently aware of being misunderstood by a modern America, Thoreau suggests that the work is only beginning. The burden that Emerson puts on his readers to succeed in this “triumph of principles” may seem daunting (Emerson “Self-Reliance”). But Thoreau shows us that it can be done. We can begin to try with each new dawn. We just need to wake up.

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