

The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English

Volume 1

Article 9

1999

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Recommended Citation

Capuano, Peter J. (1999) "Down and Out with Thoreau: Reversals of Perspective and Paradox in Walden," *The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English*: Vol. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor/vol1/iss1/9>

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Keywords

Transcendentalism, American Literature, William David Thoreau, Walden



Down and Out with Thoreau: Reversals of Perspective and Paradox in *Walden*

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Henry David Thoreau's literary account of the natural world in *Walden* presents us with one man's chronicle of life alone in the Massachusetts woods. Repudiating his fellow Americans' concerns of progress, betterment, and accumulation, Thoreau lived alone in spartan circumstances for over two years in an effort to confront the most essential aspects of life. The insularity and isolation of the author's most characteristic gesture, though, make it difficult to understand exactly what Thoreau wants his readers to identify as Nature's role in their own spiritual development. Some critics assert that Thoreau's presentation of the narrator in *Walden* as an exclusive and unqualified egotist prevents the reader from attaining any sort of higher truth or spiritual awakening. Thoreau, though, realizes the danger of his exclusiveness and foregrounds the idea of why he went to the woods without implying that everyone must perform the excursion in identical fashion. In this sense, Thoreau's ethic of individualism and seeming misanthropy belie his most important message of unification and serve to offer new paradigms through which to assess the crucial connection of the natural world to spiritual fulfillment.

In order to emphasize the importance of this connection between nature and perspective, Thoreau employs a variety of unconventional narrative techniques that not only help to qualify his own spiritual awakening but also serve to reverse or displace the reader's expectations at the same time. Thoreau's stay at Walden affords him with this unconventional perspective with which to accurately assess the human connection with Nature and its relation to a heightened spiritual awareness. This crucial new perspective greatly increases the scope of Thoreau's personal conception of living "deliberately" and eventually puts him and the attentive reader in communion with a higher spiritual force at the conclusion. It is this new perspective, reversed and consciously turned away from life's superfluous details, that

eventually allows Thoreau to say his "head is hands and feet" as he burrows and mines his way to transcendent truth in the woods surrounding Walden Pond. In an effort to draw the reader's attention away from the dross of traditional societal concerns and toward life's most visceral elements, Thoreau constructs his narrative within a larger pattern of reversed expectations and paradox intended to expose the corporeality of truth imbedded deep within the natural world.

A consideration of the facts surrounding Thoreau's personal life, however, does little to dispel common criticism that portrays him as an egocentric elitist claiming to know, infallibly, all that is right or wrong in society. Lending a certain credence to this criticism, Thoreau attacked the concerns of conventional society but lived alone for his entire life, absolved himself from regular employment, refused to pay poll taxes, and never married after graduating from college. Although wary of missing too much in harping on the text's isolationist nature, Lawrence Buell concedes that *Walden* "appears almost violently anticonventional" from his standpoint (Buell 135). George Hochfield is critical of Thoreau's insularity and, in his estimation, Thoreau presents the hero of *Walden* in an "absolute and unqualified light" because of his "demand for a total commitment from the reader" (Hochfield 433). This demand for absolute commitment on the reader's part causes Hochfield to see in Thoreau an unjust (and presumably unqualified) "take him or leave him" stance that reflects its author's unbridled egotism (Hochfield 433). Continuing his vituperation of Thoreau's exclusiveness, Hochfield takes a phrase from *Walden* and exclaims that "we ought to be cautious about someone who stands alone and excludes himself from 'the mass of men'" while trying to show us how to properly live at the same time (Hochfield 436). Thoreau's intentions, though, have far less to do with a Nestor-like promulgation of right and wrong than they do with the unification of the spiritual and the natural beyond (and beneath) a radical alteration of perspective. This altered and unconventional new perspective is consistent with Thoreau's own desire to live at Walden where he could confront the spiritual truth located at the "bare bones of existence" in the earth.

Hochfield's assessment of Thoreau's demands for "absolute commitment" on the reader's part is, to some extent, valid. The fact cannot and need not be concealed that *Walden* does require an extensive commitment from the reader. In the most physical sense, the text is a written work that attempts to take its readers from a "hurry and waste of life" to a point of spiritual awakening and "Spartan simplicity" in a matter of a few hundred pages (Thoreau 92-3). Any endeavor that has such a proselytizing motive must be regarded as an extremely onerous task and, therefore, requiring a serious commitment from the reader. As a result of the inherent difficulty in generating a profound change in any reader's spiritual awareness, Thoreau employs several organizational devices within the text to engage the "committed"

reader.

A closer look at Thoreau's paragraph structure reveals a complex movement of prose that acts as a microcosm for the entire process of shifting perspective and spiritual awakening. These paragraphs frequently begin with long but deceptively simple sentence structures that describe very ordinary topics or actions for many lines. Following this elementary first sentence is a series of unconventional metaphors and comparison that take the reader to a deeper spiritual context. The last sentences of the paragraph often revert back to the ordinary and use puns to take the reader back to a place similar to the original starting point. As John Broderick notes, "the closing sentence—often humorous—serves two functions: it completes the release, but it also recalls the journey just completed" and, in doing so, Thoreau "has kept his reader aware of starting point and destination" (Broderick 136). This unique and unconventional prose structure enables Thoreau to relay a difficult and deeply personal feeling of heightened spiritual awareness to a large group of readers by offering them a new natural perspective from which to assess their own pursuit of life's truths.

Indeed, Hochfield's "absolute and unqualified" narrator of *Walden* demands a certain commitment from the reader in order to comprehend, mentally and spiritually, the microcosmic pattern of journeying that takes place in many of Thoreau's most powerful paragraphs. Buell argues that *Walden* demands a "sustained, minute, but open-minded meditation" on the part of the reader in order to relinquish autonomy to the natural and transcendent world (Buell 23). In a similar analysis, John Broderick states that "Thoreau's best paragraphs take the reader from the mundane 'known' to the transcendent knowable and back again" (Broderick 135-6). The first paragraph of *Walden* is characteristic of the out-and-back movement Thoreau employs:

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. I lived there two years and two months. At present I am a sojourner in civilized life again. (3)

The paragraph begins rather deceptively as the first sentence drags on and on but, nevertheless, appears simplistic in its composition. The committed reader, however, will notice that this first sentence is made up of short units or phrases enclosed in a series of commas that "put the 'I' at greater and greater remoteness from the world of the ordinary reader, removed by solitude, by locality, by personal construction of his dwelling, and by activity—manual labor" (Broderick 135). This section of prolonged detachment or removal of Thoreau from the reader signals the journey into the realm of the

“transcendent knowable” where spiritual awareness becomes heightened. The last sentence brings the reader (and Thoreau) back into a world from which he or she has just been removed, hopefully better off for experiencing an alteration of perspective.

In his assessment of *Walden*'s prose structure, though, Broderick fails to analyze the most trenchant example of Thoreau's singular paragraph format which brings the reader in and out of an intense spiritual journey to expose the truth located within the natural world. The paragraph appears about one third of the way through the book in “*Where I Lived and What I Lived For*”:

Both place and time were changed and I dwelt nearer to those parts of the universe and to those ears in history which had most attracted me. Where I live is as far off as many a region viewed nightly by astronomers. We are wont to imagine rare and delectable places in some remote and more celestial corner of our system, behind the constellation of Cassiopeia's Chair, far from noise and disturbance. I discovered that my house actually had its site in such a withdrawn, but forever new and unprofaned, part of the universe. If it were worth the while to settle in those parts near to Pleiades or the Hyades, to Aldebaran or Altair, then I was really there, or at an equal remoteness from the life I had left behind, dwindled and twinkling with as fine a ray to my nearest neighbor, and to be seen only in moonless nights by him. Such was the part of creation where I had squatted:—What should we think of the shepherd's life if his flocks always wandered to higher pastures than his thoughts? (87-8)

Consistent with the out-and-back narrative format, the paragraph begins with a deceptive first sentence that appears rather simple in its content while simultaneously auguring the journey yet to come. The sentence houses many portentous words like “changed,” “universe,” and “attracted” that all play major roles in the reader's eventual journey through the paragraph. The middle sentences take the reader from a mundane starting point to a remote and more “celestial corner” of the universe where Cassiopeia's Chair resides. Here, Thoreau emphasizes the human potential for realizing truth in the simplicity of the natural world as he refers to his own remoteness in astronomical terminology. Thoreau hints at the enormous depth of the human spirit by claiming that “he was really there” at the celestial corner of the universe and then reinforces the expansiveness of this notion by comparing himself to a star “twinkling with as fine a ray to [his] nearest neighbor.” By bringing the reader to the edges of the universe and figuratively “near” constellations barely visible to the naked eye, Thoreau sets up the reader for the last sentence about the shepherd, which brings him or her back to the temporal world of the journey's starting point.

In this sense, Thoreau creates a new perspective for the reader by elevating the spiritual awareness and then emphasizing that awareness in a return to the mundane. A complete and indefinite immersion in this world of heightened awareness would be far less effective than the out-and-back structure that Thoreau utilizes. Had Thoreau decided to take the reader into this new natural and spiritual realm without using a return mechanism, the later perspective would be acquired but without any tool to assess the progress made. Perhaps Broderick captures the essence of this journey best when he argues that "the movement of Thoreau's prose enables us to go somewhere else and, thus, extract the maximum benefit from both the going and the coming back" (Broderick 139). Understanding where one is in relation to where one has been yields more resources with which to pursue truth and "live deliberately."

Like many Thoreauvian critics, George Hochfield remains entirely unconvinced that the journeying nature of *Walden's* prose has this capacity to awaken spiritually the reader. Citing his belief that Thoreau's own physical separation from society precludes his credibility to inform other how to live, Hochfield avers that "Thoreau never speaks with hesitation about matter of which he is no less ignorant than the rest of us" (Hochfield 435). On another level, Hochfield doubts that Thoreau ever underwent a spiritual awakening at Walden Pond and criticizes an egotistical Thoreau for labeling as frivolous what the great part of his neighbors see as important: "perhaps Thoreau is right [about his own beliefs] but perhaps he doesn't know his neighbors and the world they live in very well" (Hochfield 436). He continues, writing that "the Nature that is allowed to emerge in *Walden* is predetermined by the need of Thoreau's relation with it, and is not the result of any experience imaginatively combined" (Hochfield 442-3). Thoreau, though, realizes the danger of his journey's exclusivity and uses his own experience in the woods to focus the reader's attention on the potential for spiritual awakening possible when viewing life from nature's perspective where the conditions of living have been radically simplified.

Throughout *Walden*, Thoreau emphasizes the role that his simplified perspective, gained from journeying "far from noise and disturbance," plays in his own connection with the natural world. Thoreau intends his personal perspective to awaken his readers to the possibilities of confronting life in its simplest form; the changed perspective is not so much a complaint about the way we live as it is a device to show his readers the way life might be. Consistent with the thrust of his own spiritual awakening, Thoreau spends far less time repudiating life's superfluous "details" than he does emphasizing the importance and simplicity of truth located below his countrymen's traditional concerns. In the section "*Where I Lived and What I lived For*," Thoreau criticizes the way that life from the traditional perspective appears rushed and "too fast," but before he does so, he takes an entire paragraph to foreground the

reason why he went to the woods. The first sentence of this paragraph contains five uses of the word "I" as it describes Thoreau's phenomenological pursuit of truth: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived" (Thoreau 90). Thoreau uses this sentence at a critical juncture in his text in order to establish the reasons that compelled him to go to the woods and to preface what he discovered socially and spiritually as he came to perceive life from a perspective rooted in the earth. The critique of modern life that follows represents his own interpretation of our squandered spiritual potential that becomes apparent from a natural perspective located beyond society's traditional concerns.

In addition, Thoreau's repeated use of unifying images and metaphors in the ensuing paragraphs that criticize society only weaken Hochfield's argument that *Walden* is narrated by an "absolute and unqualified" egotist. By using a first person plural narrative technique, Thoreau includes himself in his own captious appraisal of society and, thereby, makes any reader's personal journey more accessible. The constant repetition of "we" allows Thoreau to re-enlist himself in the society of humankind that could realize its full spiritual potential through a simplified connection to the natural world: "we live manly," "we are determined to be starved before we are hungry," "how shall we get to heaven in season" (Thoreau 91). Thoreau continues his efforts to include himself in the society he criticizes as he says "Our life is frittered away by detail" and "Our life is like a German Confederacy" (Thoreau 91-2). At Walden, Thoreau experienced life from the most elemental perspective, and this allows him to differentiate between superfluous "detail" and the "elevation of purpose" that he finds to be paradoxically located below the traditional concerns of society. In order to reinforce his notion of "journeying" to the new natural perspective that allows him to make such differentiations, Thoreau constructs the last paragraph of this chapter in the same repetitious "I" narrative that he began with when he stated his reasons for going to the woods. Once again, this brilliant strategy takes the reader from the "I's" of the first paragraph to the "we's" of the middle sections and back again to "I's" in the chapter's concluding paragraph—ultimately leaving the reader with a new perspective and better resources with which to "live deliberately."

This microcosmic pattern of spiritual journeying that takes place in many of Thoreau's most powerful paragraphs acts not by itself to alert the reader to the possibility of new perspectives, but rather in conjunction with the steady emphasis of downward movement of prose in later sections of the text. Both organizational structures established by Thoreau, the out-and-back journeying and the prevailing downward movement of prose, serve to create a more truthful and fundamental perspective within which the reader can assess his or her own development. Not only does Hochfield reject Thoreau's

attempt to include himself in the reader's society, but he also contests the downward movement of Thoreau's prose; "Thoreau looks down upon the rest of mankind from a very 'elevated' standpoint" in *Walden* (Hochfield 434). According to Hochfield, Thoreau's "fierce concentration on themes of 'elevation'" isolates the narrator from the reader and, therefore, prevents any genuine "elevation of purpose" or unity in the book to transpire (Hochfield 433). Contrary to these assertions, Thoreau repeatedly depicts truth in *Walden* with a thrust beneath the text that is meant to be reached by *downward* rather than upward movement. In the colloquial sense of "getting to the bottom of things," Thoreau shows the attentive reader that truth lies not only in the conventional parameters of behind or beyond, but also *beneath* the "sandy bottom" of the stream (Thoreau 98).

In one sense, Thoreau shows us how it is necessary to travel into the mundane "known," to the transcendent knowable, and return back again to the known in order to gain the broad perspective from nature that is vital to our perception of life's elemental truths. In much the same way, Thoreau's emphasis on the downward movement of his prose forces the reader into a new (albeit lower) perspective where the "Spartan simplicity" of life and its truth become more apparent and more accessible. At these lower depth, the details of our existence that cause us to "fritter" our lives away no longer clutter our vision of the truth and, because of this crucial elimination, we see more clearly what Thoreau means by fronting only "the essential facts" of life.

Thoreau's stalwart dedication to the lower foundations of truth appears often in his criticism of society's unwarranted concern with "elevated piety" (Thoreau 326). This theme of lowering one's thoughts and actions to a new perspective in the natural world acts as an extension of his earlier advice for his readers to "simplify" their lives by reducing the number of their daily affairs. In his "*Conclusion*," Thoreau depicts the natural perspective and his ensuing spiritual fulfillment with words that describe a down (and not "elevated" attractional pull): "I love to weigh, to settle, to gravitate toward that which most strongly and rightfully attracts me; -not hang by the beam of the scale and try to weigh less, -not suppose a case but take the case that is" (Thoreau 330). Here, Thoreau uses the downward momentum of his words to highlight the idea that "truth" must be regarded at its most foundational terms in nature, beyond and below the dross of society's traditional concerns. Continuing to emphasize the "hard bottom" of truth in other sections of *Walden*, Thoreau exclaims that his "head is an organ for burrowing," and that "life near the bone" "is sweetest" (Thoreau 98, 329). The repetition of this "downward" vocabulary helps Thoreau to reinforce his message that spiritual fulfillment comes not from complicated pious perspectives, but rather from a simplified "coextensiveness of the human body with the inanimate earth" (Buell 170).

Contrary to Hochfield's subscription to a detached and "elevated" narrator in *Walden*, Thoreau repeatedly instills this downward thrust within

the narrative in an attempt to strip away life's "shams and delusions" and expose the "hard bottom" of truth: "Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, . . . till we come to hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call *reality*" (Thoreau 9708). Not only does this passage's downward thrust contradict Hochfield's assertion of *Walden*'s general "elevation," but Thoreau's continuous use of "us" and "we" throughout the paragraph also repudiates Hochfield's original argument that its narrator is egotistical and exclusionary.

At one point, Thoreau describes Walden Pond as a "lower heaven itself so much more the important" and later speaks of "burrow[ing] [his] way through the hills" that surround this place of transcendent truth (Thoreau 86, 98). The downward thrust of the following passage reveals Thoreau's intentions to transcend (and reverse) the boundaries of time and space as he "mines" truth from the earth at Walden:

Time is but the stream I go a-fish in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars. I cannot count one. I know not the first letter of the alphabet. I have always been regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born. The intellect is a cleaver; it discerns and rifts its way into the secret of things. I do not wish to be any more busy with my hands than is necessary. My head is hands and feet. I feel all my best faculties concentrated in it. My instinct tells me that my head is an organ for borrowing, as some creatures use their snout and fore-paws, and with it I would mine and burrow my way through these hills. I think the riches vein is somewhere hereabouts; so by the divining rod and thin rising vapors I judge; and here will begin to mind. (98)

Juxtaposing the most remote portions of the universe with those closest to earth, Thoreau draws a comparison between the infinite scope of the human potential and our connection to the natural world. Just as "eternity remains" in the "sandy bottom of the stream" Thoreau exhorts us to see our infinite spiritual potential by emphasizing that the outermost limits of the universe are at once the innermost limits of the human soul. The simplified perspective he gains at Walden allows Thoreau to comprehend "how shallow" the understanding of our own spiritual potential really is. To emphasize this point Thoreau continues to compare the stars farthest out in the heavens to the pebbles embedded closest to the earth's soil. In this sense, the "bottom" of the sky is "pebbly" with the same elements that make up the stream bed and the vast geometry of space that lies between these fixed points houses our

spiritual potential. It is this meshing of dichotomous principles that allows Thoreau to complete the reversal as he claims that his "head is hands and feet" while he minds and burrows his way through the "shams and delusions" of life to expose the "hard bottom" of the truth in the earth.

One would rightfully expect that a text chronicling a journey of heightened spiritual awareness would rely on images of ascension and upward movement but Thoreau reverses this traditional expectation in order to emphasize the importance of perspective in the reader's pursuit of truth in the natural world. The downward thrust of Thoreau's prose acts in conjunction with a series of similar reversals and paradoxes to simplify and remove obstacles that impede the reader's eventual arrival at a spiritual awakening within the natural world. By challenging the ingrained habits of thought and actions with meaningful alternatives, Thoreau directs his readers to new perspectives and highlights these new perspectives with his extensive use of paradox within the text. As Joseph Moldenhauer notes, "the peculiar impact of the paradox lies in our recognition that an expected meaning has been dislocated by another, remaining within our field of vision but somewhat out of focus" (74). The new perspective gained by the use of paradox serves as an extension of Thoreau's reversal structure and it helps to show readers the difficult (and unconventional) truth that Thoreau himself has experienced. On this premise, the unconventionality of these truth becomes emphasized in a series of equally unconventional reversed expectations and paradoxes designed to broaden the reader's perspective, a broadening which eventually takes the reader on a similar journey. Perhaps Moldenhauer captures the essence of paradox in *Walden* best when he writes that "Thoreau translates the reader, raising him out of his conventional frame of reference to a higher one, in which extreme truth become intelligible" (75). Although these words may appear to be part of a metaphor of elevation, the frame of reference rises only in the sense of its capacity for truth—an ineffable truth which is revealed by a foundational perspective where "detail" has no place. The repeated patter of reversed expectations that pervade the text of *Walden* is consistent with the essence of Transcendental thought which accentuates the perception of a spiritual reality behind (or in this case beneath) the surfaces of concepts.

The system of reversed and unconventional paradoxes in *Walden* emphasizes the need for alteration of perspective in its endeavor to expose the corporeality of truth to the reader. In his essay, Moldenhauer carefully identifies several important aspects of Thoreau's "category of paradoxes":

[Thoreau's] constant reference to fish, berries, and other common natural objects in the language of coins, precious gems, and rare metals; his praise of the humbled simpleton as the exalted sage; his assertion that the woods and ponds are religious sanctuaries; his descriptions of his labors and pastimes, and his solitude as

Praising Thoreau for his "rhetoric of powerful exaggeration, antithesis, and incongruity," Moldenhauer fails to acknowledge that Thoreau's narrative within each paradox *reverses* the traditional narrow perspective in an attempt to furnish the reader with a different and more truthful perspective. In one such reversal where Thoreau uses the metaphor of farming. He says "let [the land] lie, fallow perchance, for a man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone"; then explains "For I knew all the while that it would yield the most abundant crop of the kind I wanted if I could only afford to let it alone" (Thoreau 82-3). In response to Thoreau's reversal of expectation and perspective, Moldenhauer understates the effectiveness of the paradox when he refers to it only as "a queer analogue to the commercial theory of increasing profits by lowering costs" (Moldenhauer 75). Not only is Thoreau's statement a "queer analogue" but it is also a complete reversal of the traditional commercial perspective and Thoreau's monetary reversal, here, culminates in this poignant exclamation: "Give me the poverty that enjoys true wealth" (Thoreau 86).

Thoreau realizes that a writer has to capture the reader's attention before changing the reader's opinions and, therefore, he employs several less conspicuous reversals intended to disrupt conventional thinking and offer more expansive perspectives of truth. The conventional narrow perspective sees "life frittered away by detail" whereas the simplified natural perspective achieved by confronting only the essential facts of life helps one "to affect the quality of the day" and to "live deliberately" (Thoreau 90). In an important reversal of common expectation that Moldenhauer fails to acknowledge, Thoreau speaks of his position in the woods next to a family of birds: "I found myself suddenly neighbor to the birds; not by having imprisoned one, but having caged myself near them" (Thoreau 85). Here, Thoreau confronts and reverses the ordinary circumstance in which one would keep a caged bird as a pet in the home as he claims that he himself was the one "caged" near the birds at Walden. In this reversal, Thoreau imprisons himself to become free in a natural world where the autonomy of the self is sacrificed for a simplified perspective that exposes the corporeality of truth embedded in this earth.

Thoreau also uses a similar pattern of reversed expectations while describing the physical location of his living conditions in order to emphasize the freedom that a simplified natural perspective confers upon its beholder. Paradoxically, Thoreau draws the reader's attention to this freedom by portraying his living site at Walden as physically cramped yet spiritually capacious. From the vantage point of his hut, Thoreau attests that he "could not see over or beyond the woods" which surrounded him and that the view from his door "was still more contracted" than the previous (Thoreau 87). Just as Thoreau burrows his way through the hills to the depths of life's most

essential truth, the downward thrust in this depiction of the hut's physical placement defies conventional expectations of being able to "see" beyond his lower depths. Given this rather tight description, the casual reader infers that Thoreau certainly felt cramped or confined by his hut's placement. In a reversal of expectation, though, similar to the freedom he acquires while caged near the birds at Walden, Thoreau reveals the liberating effect of nature when perceived from a standpoint uncluttered by detail: "There was pasture enough for my imagination. The low shrub-oak plateau to which the opposite shore arose, stretched away toward the prairies of the West and the steppes of Tartary, affording ample room for all the roving families of men" (Thoreau 87). Here, Thoreau draws freedom from the earth and seems to harness at least some of the infinite spiritual potential that connects remote regions of the earth to equally remote sections of the untapped human spirit. By describing the confined setting of his living situation and projecting upon it the commodious images of Tartary and beyond, Thoreau establishes the vital connection between the potential of the human spirit and the physical spaciousness of the natural world. Lawrence Buell accurately refers to this connection he claims Thoreau turns "nature to human uses, as a barometer of and stimulus to the speaker's spiritual development" (Buell 123).

At this juncture it is important to acknowledge that Thoreau includes such emphasis on perspective, paradox, and reversal to draw the reader's attention away from the traditional concerns of society and towards the fundamental truths located within the natural world. At the point where we view the world from this lower level of truth and refuse to reenter life on the same terms as before, nature allows us to "witness our own limits transgressed," and the realization from this transgression helps us as humans to recognize a power that transcends our own earthly conceptions (Thoreau 311). By witnessing "some life pasturing freely where we never wander," the scope of our perspective increases enormously and it serves to solidify our participation in a universe "wider than our [previous] views of it" (Thoreau 318, 320). When the reader realizes and experiences this connection between individual human existence and nature, Thoreau attests that an elevated spiritual awareness emerges from the radical shift in perspective. It is the acquisition of this reversed but unified view of creation that compels Thoreau's readers to that "the whole tree itself is but one leaf," that all the fish in the pond are "all one active fish," and that despite its many forms, "all purity is one" (Thoreau 307, 311, 220).

The difficulty in interpreting Thoreau's awakening arises from his apparently contradictory diction that simultaneously emphasizes on pure spiritual power while containing Biblical echoes, quotations from metaphysical poets, and allusions to Greek and Hindu gods. In his essay "Five Ways of Looking at *Walden*," Walter Harding notes this difficulty when he says that "Thoreau creates a certain allusiveness in his spiritual awakening that is meant

to entice and attract the reader who wants to achieve his or her own spiritual awakening" (Harding 150). Harding continues, suggesting that Thoreau's responsiveness to nature's laws, his spirited condemnation of materialism and intense concern for simplified living, and his battle against societal tradition all play important roles in concealing the deeply spiritual elements in his journey to Walden. In effect, the downward thrust of the narrative even applies to the religious context of *Walden* insofar as its placement is below all of the other concerns that appear to conceal its significance.

Because the enormity of his own spiritual awakening at Walden resists definition within the narrow confines of modern religion, though, Thoreau criticizes the belittling aspects of formalized religions as he repeatedly emphasizes the constraints they place on an otherwise infinite human potential. Thoreau wants to remove these constraints (the "cages" and the "shallow water") and expose the squandered spiritual potential located below our traditional (and often religious) concerns: "a tide rises and falls behind every man which can float the British Empire like a chip" yet "We tolerate incredible dullness" from "sermons [that] are still listened to in the most enlightened countries" (Thoreau 332). Thoreau continues his criticism of formalized religion in the same paragraphs he mocks "the established order on the surface" where sermons offer "words of joy and sorrow" when they are really (underneath) "only the burden of a psalm, sung with a nasal twang" that leave humanity to "believe in the ordinary and the mean" (Thoreau 332). Thoreau's words, here, enjoin us to penetrate this "established order on the surface" and delve below the religion of words and into the transcendent truth embedded within the earth.

With time and energy spread out over many of life's superfluous details that cover our fundamental connection to the natural world, the infinite scope of the human potential shrinks dramatically to the point where "we think that we can change our clothes only" (Thoreau 332). Because "we are acquainted with a mere pellicle of the globe on which we live," Thoreau points out that our society has become a stagnation of perpetual social conformity that knows of nothing else (Thoreau 332). He wants us to acquire, through a process of casting off and shedding of the un-essential, the fundamental natural perspective that enables him to use the outermost limits of the universe to penetrate the innermost depth of his spirit as he mines truth from the land at Walden. Robert Pogue Harrison captures the essence of Thoreau's paradoxical acquisition of truth in the simplicity of the natural world when he states that "all that is to be learned about what real and not real lies in the exteriority of our inner lives" (Harrison 227). Thoreau wants his readers to see that the conventional search for meaning in society stunts the unlimited spiritual potential that is embedded within all of humanity's participants. Since Hochfield retains the rigid narrow perspective that Thoreau warns his readers against, it is no wonder that he never perceives any "such drama of unity" take

place in *Walden* (441). In his own way, though, Thoreau shows us that humans need “the tonic of the wilderness” in order to acquire the simplified natural perspective necessary to realizing that our lives are not stagnant at all—rather that “the life in us is like the water in the river” (Thoreau 332).

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