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What I Have Learned from Reading *Walden*

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中文摘要

梭羅在華爾騰湖二年多近乎隱居的生活，以及他從中所體悟的哲理，一百多年來深受世人嚮往與喜愛。我們從閱讀 *Walden* 中，學習到一種閒適安樂，淡薄名利的生活態度。在梭羅簡樸的生活哲學中反省並沉澱自我，自他狀似孤寂其實熱鬧，雖然簡樸但卻豐富的生活，發現人生真正的存在意義與價值。從而拋卻世俗的價值觀，在自己心中找到個人的桃花源。

關鍵字 Solitude , simple life, nature



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What I Have Learned from Reading *Walden*

I have read the book *Walden* written by Henry David Thoreau three times. The first time I read *Walden* is when I was a junior high school student. At that time, being too young, I didn't bother myself to find out who Thoreau was, and I did not really understand what Thoreau tried to make people understand. I simply appreciated the beautiful writing and imagined what the lake Walden would be like. I bought a Chinese edition of *Walden* when I was in the third year of my senior high, but I didn't read it till five years later when I was settled down from my fifth move. I found it while I was putting my books onto the bookshelf and remembered how lovely the description about nature was in this book, so I sat down and had a browse through it. After a long term of drifting life in the city, it was undoubtedly the advice that was filled with wisdom to me. Nevertheless, I thought about neither the relationship between people and nature nor the true meaning of life. There was so much to do that I couldn't think too much about such questions. Now, many years after that, I read the English edition of *Walden* in class. My thought is more mature and I begin to appreciate the deeper meaning of the words that Thoreau wrote one hundred and fifty years ago. Thoreau tried to express a lot of his idea about the philosophy of life and the relationship of the nature and human kind. However, I am especially interested in the way he explained about living in solitude, his economical and simple life, and the beautiful depiction about the surrounding of Walden.

Solitude

Thoreau didn't mean to ode the beauty of Walden but to emphasize that people should learn to be in solitude and to purify their soul. He enjoyed being solitary and loved to think and write. He lived in the wood near Walden Pond alone for two years and two months, and proved that a person could live alone and survive with only his hands. Thoreau borrowed an ax, cut down pines to build his shelter (doing everything on his own), and grew corn, beans, and some potatoes for food. Except for those activities, he usually took a walk along the lake in the wood. He enjoyed the silence of the forest and appreciated the sounds in the wood -- the bullfrogs, the whippoorwill, the wind breathe in the tree, and even the train far away from the forest. He enjoyed living solitarily and appreciated the lakeside view in different seasons. His comprehension of life connected with the nature. What he tried to express through his life nearby Walden was people should sometimes explore their mind deeply and listen to the voice of their feeling.

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Thoreau didn't encourage people to live solitarily and self-exile from the society. He thought that people should give a different view to being in solitude. He didn't cut every contact with people while he was living in the forest near Walden Pond. In contrast, he still had some relationship with the society. To earn the supply of his necessities, he went to work in the village and sometimes contacted with his friends. Being solitary didn't mean one had to keep far away from the crowded but should be the quiet peace in one's mind. He was not a hermit. In fact, he got along with the villagers nearby Walden Pond well. Nevertheless, he was not solitary externally but in mind just depended on how clarified a person's mind was. His idea about "society" didn't have to be constructed by "people," but getting along with the creatures and the nature could be one. He didn't think that living in the town, working and talking with people means being socialized. A person talking to his own mind or getting along with the nature was also a kind of social activity. In chapter five he said:

Yet I experienced sometimes that the most sweet and tender, the most innocent and encouraging society may be found in any natural object, even for the poor misanthrope and most melancholy man. There can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of Nature and has his sense still. (p. 916, lines 11-15)¹

It is difficult for one to live alone in the woods, and not exception Thoreau was. Nevertheless, he overcame the feeling of loneliness. Only once he thought about living closely with others, yet he never felt lonesome.

To be alone was something unpleasant... in the midst of a gentle rain while these thought prevailed, I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature, in the very pattering of the drops, and in every sound and sight around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me, as made the fancied advantages of human neighborhood insignificant, and I have never thought of them since. (p. 916, lines 31-38)

Thoreau enjoyed being alone. Perhaps it was why he could live in the forest solitarily for so long. Somehow I don't think he needed people's companion, and I think what he thought was right. A person can do much more when he/she is alone, thinking or working. I admire his being able to withdraw his consciousness from his body. It is just like that a person whose spirit is aloof from his body is his/herself a bystander of his/her life. Observes every action and emotion and then relishes it.

¹ All the page references are to the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, shorter 6th ed.

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Being alone wasn't bad but helped with a person's clarity in mind.

Life

Thoreau rejected the desire of fleshpots. He went to Walden Pond, lived there with the fewest necessities but the most spiritual enjoyment. Thoreau had got a lot of inspiration from his natural and simple life. He thought that it would be worthy to live primitively if one could learn what the gross necessities of life are and what methods have been taken to obtain them. The word "necessary" for human, not the same as wild animals, were food, shelter, clothing and fuel. A person should ask for the basic necessities instead of luxuries, so that he/she would not live like a bondman of his/her own. Nevertheless, Thoreau pointed out that most people pursued luxurious external things which obstructed the rise of their spirit. People who lived in luxury would never be free in their soul because they would blindly chase for things they didn't need and were earthbound. He thought that simple life was a kind of wisdom. He said that the wisest persons have lived a more simple and meager life than poor. (Even the poor would seek a more luxurious life than they needed.)

The ancient philosophers, Chinese, Hindoo, Persian and Greek, were a class than which none has been poor in outward riches, none so rich in inward. (p. 859, line 39)

Thoreau claimed that he was neither to live cheaply nor to live dearly but to deal with his private business "with the fewest obstacles" (p. 862, line 36) living in the forest nearby the lakeside. What he said about "the obstacles" might mean the mundane routine work such as wearing and acting decently to win people's respect, which he didn't think was important. Why did people always want more clothes than they need? People scarcely considered about what was truly respectable, but what was respected. That was what Thoreau criticized a lot. The society respected people not because of their wisdom and knowledgeable speaking but because of their appearances. Not only in Thoreau's time but also nowadays, people do the same thing -- judging the values of others by their appearance. Those who are not satisfied with their good food, beautiful clothes, and everything in their life should read the book *Walden*. In which Thoreau not only advocated to eat simply, wear plainly, but also suggested people to live as naturally as they could.

Money can buy neither a piece of spare time nor the happiness in life. Many

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people are so rich that they are able to get every thing they want, yet on the other hand, they lack of the inner life. Their spirit is so poor that they don't even remember if they have ever been happy. A rich man gave his poor but happy neighbor a bag of gold, and his neighbor suffered from worrying about losing it from then on. A person with property might be more agonized than one who has nothing. Like Thoreau said, "and when the farmer has got his house, he may not be the richer but the poorer for it, and it be the house that has got him" (p. 870, line 19). We are bounded by the house, but not we live in it because we will not be able to move freely anymore. Most people work hard to make their wealth before they really understand the true meaning of it, and then they become the slaves of it.

People overemphasize the material life. However, our body will get old, and what makes us renew our life is not the finery and nice food, and the big house but the interior improvement. That indulging oneself in luxury will easily causes ones corruption in spirit. To live is a very simple and easy thing, yet to live meaningfully is not so easy. Less desire in materials will help a person's soul be clarified and arises. People nowadays spend too much time chasing outward trifles and ignore the really important thing in life. If we can get rid of the creature comforts, then our spirit will be truly free.

The nature

Thoreau was a writer who was also a naturalist, so his description in *Walden* about the nature view was very spontaneous. He described Walden Pond with very elegant words. "Both air and water being perfectly still, but the sky overcast, mid-afternoon had all the serenity of evening, and the wood thrush sang around," (p. 898, lines 41-43) described the intervals of a rainstorm in August. A mosquito is always an enemy of human, yet in Thoreau's eyes, it "was Homer's requiem: itself an Iliad and odyssey in the air, singing its own wrath and wanderings." (p. 900, lines 10-11) His depiction about animals was vivid and vigorous. "Hawks are circling about my clearing; the tantivy of wild pigeons, flying by twos and threes athwart my view, or perching restless on the white-pine boughs behind my house, gives a voice to the air; a fishhawk dimples the glassy surface of the pond and brings up a fish; a mink steal out of the marsh before my door and seizes a frog by the shore; the sedge id bending under the weight of reed-birds flitting hither and hither." (p. 907, lines 29-35) when I read this paragraph, I naturally thought of the description of the crab party in

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the book “*Dream of the Red Chamber* 紅樓夢.” In which described the girls had a crab party in the garden. The description of everyone’s movement was vivid, just like if I were there and saw their every single motion with my own eyes. Thoreau’s vivid description of those birds and animals was so natural as if he had observed them very carefully, yet he just simply coexisted with them in the woods, with peace in his mind. So that he could see and feel them so clearly.

Not only the animals attracted Thoreau but also the lake itself interested him. Thoreau wrote a lot about the lake Walden, and through his vivid and polished words, we seem to see the beauty of Walden Pond. The plants at the lakeside, the creatures in the water and in the woods around Thoreau, were so lively. The changes of seasons were also like poems. Thoreau thought that Walden was a beautiful forest mirror; it was Sky water. Occasionally, I thank God as Thoreau did for I lived nearby a lake in the country when I was a child. The lake, of course not as beautiful as Walden Pond, changed its views as seasons changed. In spring, the grass along the lake was verdant with small white wildflowers on it and the leaves glistened with dew in dawn. In fine summer morning, the scene nearby the lake misted over, like the veil of a mystic goddess. The fineness of the skies in autumn tempted me to walk along the lakeside, and it blew so wildly that one might feel like dancing with the wind. The lakeside was quiet and desolate in winter and the surface of the lake glittered with the reflection of sunshine. Though Walden is farther beautiful than the lake I lived by, I immediately got vibrations from what I have read. A person might appreciate the beautiful words in *Walden*, yet only those who had the similar experience living in or near the nature know how much partiality God has to them and can really appreciate what Thoreau saw through his mind. Nature is the great grace of God, and we mortal should feel an immense gratitude to Him.

Walden is a very quiet book. It’s a book of solitude, and it is a book about one’s experience to coexist with the nature. Walden Pond was a beautiful and peaceful place that a lonely person like Thoreau would choose to live nearby it to muse and to devote himself to writing. Bathed in the moonlight and enchanted with the marvelous view of Walden, Thoreau lived as an eremite far away from the other human beings. He chose to live with the truth instead of the earthen value. His clear and elegant works and thought lead the readers to a palace of plainness and find that simple life itself an enjoyment. Though the book was written one hundred and fifty years ago, it maintained the true meaning of solitude and the value of life, and it also gave the readers a different view to appreciate the nature. People nowadays are gradually far away from the true value life which they were supposed to admire. The peaceful and natural beauty of life has gone, and the anxiety and tension instead. While we are

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suffering from so many problems with the civilized society, Thoreau's *Walden* is undoubtedly a Utopia for us to yearn for. Thoreau said in his book that his purpose to live in the woods was to "live":

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and to see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. (p. 901, lines 9-11)

Truly, when we get old, standing on the edge of life and see back to our previous life, what were the worthy things we have done for people to remember us? Was our soul noble enough to be a "human?" Did we really enjoy our life spiritually? Being in the modern society, it is really a lesson for us to learn. Nevertheless, to live as naturally and simply as we can is something we should start to consider about. So that, we can say loudly when the time comes that we have really learned, enjoyed, and lived.

