

Short Study on Ecological Pictures in *Walden*

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Abstract

Walden is a literary masterpiece written by American writer Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), which records his living alone in Walden Pond, far away from money-obsessed society, embracing the simple life of nature with his heart, and demonstrating the harmonious ecological beauty of Walden Pond. In this novel, Thoreau vividly shows the harmonious and interdependent relationship between man and nature through the ecological pictures of the delicious evening and red squirrel in the Walden Pond, and emphasizes the unique spiritual value given by nature to human beings. This paper attempts to use literature research and graphic marking ways to appreciate the harmonious atmosphere of delicious night in Walden Pond and the lively state of red squirrels in winter from the Angle of plot and animal description. By combining theory with practice, the conclusion of this paper is: human beings should overcome the limitations of anthropocentrism, protect animals, respect nature, and establish a “community of love” with nature, the concept of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, or they will be punished by nature. In-depth exploration and interpretation of Walden Pond is of great significance for enhancing people’s awareness of ecological crisis, promoting ecological governance, helping people rationally view the relationship between man and nature, and respecting and protecting nature.

Keywords

Henry D. Thoreau; Ecological; *Walden*.

1. Introduction

Walden (1854), series of 18 essays by 19th century American writer Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), is a record of his life when he left the city and lived alone in a cabin by Walden Pond. This book is considered to be “the first work of American natural literature and the enlightenment book of the modern environmental movement” (Kan, 2023). With the rapid development of capitalist industrialization in the United States in the 19th century, people blindly pursued material comforts and excessively plundered natural resources. The roar and noise of the machine destroyed the harmonious sound of nature. The ecological balance has thus been broken unavoidably. “Thoreau criticized the social customs of commercialism and materialism, emphasized the unique spiritual values of nature, and expressed the idea of maintaining a balance between civilization and wilderness” (Su, 2002). He pointed out that, “[most] people do not care for nature, as long as they can survive, they will sell their share of natural beauty for a glass of rum.” This revealed Thoreau’s strong consciousness of ecology, which studies “the interrelationships of organisms with their environment and each other” (Pimm & Smith, 2024).

In a ecological vision, “nature has subjectivity and intrinsic value” (Xie, 2021). Thoreau embraced nature in Walden Pond, integrated into nature, and practiced his ecological thought with a minimalist lifestyle. To advocate the “harmonious coexistence” between human beings and nature, people must realize that human beings and nature are an interconnected life

community. The practical value of such ecological thoughts lie in the ability to protect nature and use natural resources in a rational way. Based on this, human beings should consciously maintain the harmonious balance of natural ecology. In order to strengthen such a consciousness, the paper will do a close reading in two ecological pictures in *Walden*, concerning a evening at Walden Pond and a red squirrel respectively.

2. An Ecological Picture of a Delicious Evening

The life after the dusk seems to be charm everywhere. That is the case of Walden as well. At the beginning of chapter 9, Thoreau accumulates a number of items of nouns, verbs and adjectives at the lexical level, which combine to place the reader in the situation of Walden Pond on a nice evening through showing a vivid, “delicious” ecological picture. Take an extract for instance:

This is a **delicious** evening, when the whole body is one sense, and *imbibes* delight through every pore {1}. I go and come with a **strange** liberty in Nature, a part of herself {2}. As I walk along the **stony** shore of the pond in my shirt-sleeves, though it is **cool** as well as **cloudy** and **windy**, and I see nothing special to attract me, all the elements are unusually **congenial** to me {3}. The bullfrogs trump to usher in the night, and the note of the whip-poor-will is borne on the **rippling** wind from over the water {4}. Sympathy with the **fluttering** alder and poplar leaves almost *takes away* my breath {5}; yet, like the lake, my serenity is *rippled* but not *ruffled* {6}. These small waves raised by the evening wind are as remote from storm as the **smooth** reflecting surface {7}. Though it is now **dark**, the wind still *blows* and *roars* in the wood, the waves still *dash*, and some creatures *lull* the rest with their notes {8}. The repose is never complete {9}. The **wildest** animals do not *repose*, but *seek* their prey now {10}; the fox, and skunk, and rabbit, now *roam* the fields and woods without fear {11}. They are Nature's watchmen-links which connect the days of animated life {12}. (Thoreau, 2004, pp. 129-130).

To make the analysis clearer, this paper adopts a set of graphic marking ways: The important adjectives are marked in bold; some key nouns are underlined; some verb items are shown in italics.



Figure 1. A pond after the dusk (Photographed by the corresponding author of this paper)

Browsing the material, Thoreau uses “delicious” {1} to modify “evening”, his pores “imbibes delight” {1}, he feels “strange liberty” {2}, showing his ease and pleasure. Nature is the mother of mankind, giving infinite precious wealth and providing with endless spiritual sources. Walden Pond is the habitat of the human spirit, transcending geographical constraints, just like a key to open people’s mood. The author enjoys the night of Walden Pond very much. In such an environment, he feels happy from the heart, immersed in the surrounding comfort and beautiful atmosphere, and expresses his praise for the natural scenery. Moreover, the author does not care whether the weather is “cool”, “cloudy” or “windy”, because nature has been “congenial” {3} with him. All these words clearly express the state of integration between the author and nature, and nature has become an inseparable part of his life. In addition, the sound

of “bullfrogs” and “whip-poor-will” {4}, and the state of “fluttering alder” and “poplar leaves” {5} added to the calmness of the night. From the author’s perspective, these animals, and plants, like him, are very excited and looking forward to the arrival of the night, illustrating the author’s embrace of the night changes of nature and depicting the harmonious coexistence of man and nature. In sentence {6}, the author uses simile to compare his inner “serenity” to “lake” and applies alliteration, such as: “rippled” and “ruffled”, vividly depict the relaxed state of mind and comfort in nature, revealing her feelings of being integrated into and loving nature despite being in a lonely place.

What is clear is that the narrator has a deep emotion for Walden Pond and the creatures around it, presenting a scene unique to nature. This is indicated in almost all sentences in the excerpt, especially in {8}, {10}, and {11}, by underlined nouns and italicized verbs. Through the description of the ripples on the water surface and the state of animals, the author vividly depicts the vibrant lakeside night scene, which makes people comfortable and relaxed. Readers can feel the sense of independence and freedom brought by the forest. The author uses metaphor to compare “fox”, “skunk” and “rabbit” {11} to “Nature’s watchmen” {12}, which shows that wild animals also carry human thoughts. All things in nature are connected and dependent on each other, and human beings are also a part of the connection, whether animals, plants, or water, they all have the right to live and develop freely.

3. An Ecological Picture of a Red Squirrel

In winter, the animals of Walden Pond are energetic, and the red squirrels are no exception. To demonstrate the interesting winter life of animals, the narrator takes the animal activities around the cabin in the winter morning as a starting point, and accumulates nouns, verbs, and adjective items at the vocabulary level. These items combined can guide the reader into the situation where a squirrel searches for an ear of corn and feels the beauty of the interaction between humans and animals. Take an extract from the essay for instance:

Usually the **red squirrel** (*Sciurus Hudsonius*) *waked* me in the dawn, *coursing* over the roof and up and down the sides of the house, as if *sent out* of the woods for this purpose {1}. In the course of the winter I *threw out* half a bushel of ears of **sweet** corn, which had not got **ripe**, on to the snow-crust by my door, and was *amused* by *watching* the motions of the various animals which were *baited* by it {2}. In the twilight and the nightfits the rabbits *came* regularly and *made* a hearty meal {3}. All day long the red squirrels *came* and *went*, and *afforded* me much entertainment by their manoeuvres {4}. One would approach at first warily through the shrub oaks, *running over* the snow-crust by fits and starts like a leaf blown by the wind, now a few paces this way, with **wonderful** speed and waste of energy, making **inconceivable** haste with his “trotters,” as if it were for a wager, and now as many paces that way, but never getting on more than half a rod at a time {5}; and then suddenly *pausing with* a **ludicrous** expression and a **gratuitous** somerset, as if all the eyes in the universe were eyed on him-for all the motions of a squirrel, even in the most solitary recesses of the forest, *imply spectators* as much as those of a **dancing** girl-*wasting* more time in delay and circumspection than would have sufficed to walk the whole distance {6}. (Thoreau, 2004, pp. 273-274).

Similarly, to clarify the analytical structure of the paper, the paper uses graphical notation: major adjectives are bolded; a few key nouns are underlined; some important verb items are highlighted in italics.

Thoreau’s description of the red squirrel is extraordinarily fantastic. In his eyes, animals have spirituality, and the relationship between man and nature can bring spiritual comfort. The author lives in a log cabin, and the red squirrel often climbs to the “roof” to “wake” {1} him. This anthropomorphic technique vividly personifies the squirrel’s behavior of waking the author, showing the close and friendly relationship between the red squirrel and the author, and

depicting a beautiful picture of harmony between man and nature. The author also seems to revel in the interaction with animals, “throwing out” {2} unripe “sweet corn” {2} to “watch” visitors to the hut, such as “rabbits” {3} and “squirrels” {4}. This also shows that Thoreau loved and was kind to these animals, willing to share food with them, and he was full of curiosity about animal behavior. Among them, the movement description of the red squirrel is depicted in a very delicate, full of pictorial sense. The red squirrel moves from a slow approach of “warily” {5} to a “wonderful speed” {5}. The behavior of “running over the snow-crust” {5} is likened to “a leaf blown by the wind” {5}, which is enough to reflect the speed of the red squirrel’s movement, the pace is very fast, and it reflects the squirrel’s strong desire for food. Next, the squirrel’s “ludicrous expression” {6} and “gratuitous somersault” {6} vividly depict the cute and funny side of the squirrel. The squirrel is likened to a “dancing girl” {6} and is like the focus of the stage. It seems that the “universe” {6} is all “eyed on” {6}, reflecting the squirrel’s confident and free state in nature, showing the author’s love for the squirrel.

It is not difficult to find that the Walden Pond in winter is full of unique charm, Thoreau is in nature, warmly embraces all natural things full of vitality. He loves “rabbits” {3} and “squirrels” {4}, especially {4}, {5} and {6}, where the underlined nouns and bold adjectives show the full vitality of squirrels. Not only that, but Thoreau loved the other animals of nature, and the little creatures he spent his days with at Walden Pond were as precious to him as the gifts of life. Like the author, these small animals yearn for freedom and live a simple and fun life. In the process of getting along with nature, Thoreau formed a tacit understanding of the soul with nature, and subtly explained the importance of reducing the pursuit and desire for material things and improving the inner spirit. He faced the mountains and rivers, recorded his thoughts and feelings, and had an intimate communication with nature. He explored the essential spiritual life, bravely broke away from the ideological prison of the complex society and created a new way of life that returned to ecology.

4. Conclusion

Ecologists in the 19th century advocated a simple material life and emphasized people’s attitude toward nature. “In the serene landscape, on the distant horizon, man sees something as beautiful as his own nature” (Emerson, 1971). The relationship between man and nature has become the center of ecological research. *Walden* embodies Thoreau’s ecological wisdom and life philosophy. His experience of two years and two months at Walden Pond became the most splendid sight in the heart of every American. Thoreau made the greatest contribution to American literature among the classics of 19th century American literature. Harding (1986) considered, “Thoreau did not hide in the woods, as people say, but chose to release his nature in a new way, thereby showing his boundless love for life and nature.” Although Thoreau’s creation of *Walden* is aimed at the ecological crisis that broke out in western capitalist countries in the 19th century, ecological problems such as environmental pollution, ecological diversity reduction and soil erosion are still serious issues facing the world today. Human beings should overcome the limitations of anthropocentrism, protect animals, respect nature, establish a “community of love” with nature and the concept of harmonious coexistence between man and nature. Otherwise, they will be punished by nature. For example, the Japanese government, despite the resistance of other countries, destroyed the ecology and arbitrarily discharged nuclear sewage, faced a water shortage crisis, and was punished by seawater flooding, tsunami, earthquake, and typhoon. In a word, Japan’s behavior has angered nature, destroyed the ecological balance, made its own country suffer serious casualties and property losses, posed a serious threat to the ecology and sustainable development of the whole earth, and destroyed the living space of man and nature. Therefore, in-depth exploration and interpretation of *Walden* is of great significance for enhancing people’s awareness of ecological crisis, promoting

ecological governance, helping people rationally view the relationship between man and nature, and respecting and protecting nature.

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