

Simple Life, Rich Soul

--An Exploration of Thoreau's Ecological Thought

Lixuan Wu*, Yuqing Wang

College of Foreign Studies, Minnan Normal University, Zhangzhou 363000, China.

* Corresponding Author: 1175022840@qq.com

Abstract

Henry David Thoreau was an outstanding American philosopher, writer and representative figure of transcendentalism in the 19th century, and he was famous for his advanced ecological wisdom and profound naturalist philosophy. Combing the analysis of human alienation, Thoreau's ecological thought, and its harmony with Chinese ecological thought, this paper can better understand Thoreau's unique insights into ecological development and the expectations of different civilizations to learn from each other in peace.

Keywords

Henry David Thoreau; Views of nature; the study of ecological thought.

1. Introduction

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) was a highly influential thinker and literary figure in American history who was not only an essential representative of the transcendentalist movement but also a staunch naturalist. The second industrial revolution promoted the development of American social productivity and industrialization process, but the spiritual realm of the members of the society did not improve with the economic development; in contrast, the individual is enslaved by money, and all ethics and morality must give way to material interests, economic prosperity seems to become the only pursuit of the society, in this kind of era, Thoreau showed a deep sense of concern, he believed that the intrinsic value of the individual and social ethical and moral norms are suffering from the erosion of monetization and materialism. It can be calculated that Thoreau holds that people should pursue the enhancement of human nature, and the progress of the objective environment can only be a means to serve this goal. In human society, individuals, as an indispensable part of the group, cannot be independent of the group's survival and development, and there is inevitably a close connection between individuals. This connection is reflected in the division of labor resource sharing and emotional communication, and the formation of moral norms cannot be separated from group collaboration. However, the individual's fervent pursuit of material interests leads to interpersonal relationships being overshadowed by money and power, and material interests become the criterion for mutual relationships.

2. Return to Original Being

As has been widely acknowledged that the connecting role of emotions and morality in interpersonal relationships is gradually weakened. Thoreau saw that the advancement and progress of material civilization also brought about the alienation of human nature, so he opposed the fervent pursuit of material interests to cleanse the dusty soul. During the period when Thoreau created Walden, American society was full of money-worshipping and hedonistic ideas. People generally pursued social status and material wealth and lacked the

pursuit of the true meaning of the deepest heart, which contrasted with Thoreau's advocacy of spiritual freedom and inner richness of the way of life. He believed that humans should reduce the demand for material things and more in pursuit of the spirit of abundance. Erich Fromm states, "There is, rather, a superficial friendliness, and a more than superficial fairness, but behind that surface is distance and indifference." [1] The alienation of labor results in the alienation of man himself, which consequently leads to the alienation of the relationship between man and man. In capitalist relations of production, laborers are pitted against each other for limited work opportunities and wages, and indifference and unscrupulousness become the distinctive features of interpersonal relations. American contemporary playwright David Mamet once pointed out, "I think there are just too many people in the world. I think that's why we kill each other", [2] which also reveals, in a sense, the tensions between people in capitalist society. In the materialistic capitalist society, individuals regard others as manipulable objects to achieve specific goals, disregarding the value and dignity of others, and there is an imbalance in the interests and equity of the society as a whole, leading to severe interpersonal conflicts and contradictions. Individuals have been in an unhealthy ethical society for a long time, and it is difficult for many Americans to realize self-awareness and face a harsh crisis of faith. Therefore, Thoreau hopes to draw the essence of Eastern and Western philosophies and find an excellent medicine to lead the American people to clear the spiritual fog and rebuild the inner system. Thoreau believes that the critical reason for the spiritual dilemma of American society is the moral deficiency brought about by scientific and technological civilization, and the concept of simple life can ease the mental illness of the American people, replace excessive material desire with inner fullness, gradually find the true self, and restore mental health.

The Industrial Revolution and technological progress have fueled the anthropocentric notion that humans are masters of the natural world and can exploit and transform it to satisfy their growing needs and desires. Thoreau notes that "Men have an indistinct notion that if they keep up this activity of joint stocks and spades long enough, all will at length ride somewhere, in next to no time, and for nothing". [3] With increased control over the natural world, humans have come to believe that they can do anything, ignoring the complexity and fragility of ecosystems and the interdependence between humans and the natural world. The effects of this phenomenon are nothing but numbness of life, unprecedented destruction and pollution of natural ecosystems, and a precarious living environment for people. "By avarice and selfishness, and a groveling habit, from which none of us is free, of regarding the soil as property, or the means of acquiring property chiefly, the landscape is deformed, husbandry is degraded with us, and the farmer leads the meanest of lives. He knows Nature but as a robber". [4] Driven by greed and selfishness, human beings treat the land as a mere source of wealth rather than as a valuable ecosystem, and this short-sightedness has led to the destruction of beautiful natural landscapes and the degradation of farming from an art of living in harmony with nature to a plunder of nature. Farmers, who used to be loyal guardians of the land, are now forced to become accomplices in the destruction of nature due to social pressure and false values. Thus, Thoreau strongly criticized the prevailing materialism, arguing that the value of nature should not be reduced to purely practical and economic values but that it has a unique spiritual and aesthetic significance. Nature provides a stage for not only those capable of conquering and utilizing it to demonstrate their power but also a sheltered harbor for those who feel exhausted and powerless amidst the competition and pressure of society. In the embrace of nature, all social labels and identity boundaries disappear, and everyone can find their own place and feel equal and free. "A society whose members have developed their reason to that point of objectivity which permits them to see themselves, others, nature, in their true reality". [5] The ideal state of society is the harmonious unity of man and nature, where the progress of human society does not depend on the sacrifice of nature, but rather on establishing an intimate

relationship with nature and mutual growth. Nature should not be an object of human conquest but of equal value to humankind. Respect for nature is an essential part of a sound individual personality, and it is only through an individual's inner growth and care for nature that true meaning and happiness in life can be found. "While civilization has been improving our houses, it has not equally improved the men who are to inhabit them". [6] Genuine progress should not only be a change in the external environment but should also include the inner growth and spiritual enhancement of human beings.

3. Walk into Ecological Literature

In the pursuit of material progress and fulfillment of desires, human beings not only consume and destroy nature's valuable resources but also turn themselves into tools of nature. "The principal object is, not that mankind may be well and honestly clad, but, unquestionably, that the corporations may be enriched". [7] This behavior caused great harm to the natural environment and caused humans to lose their freedom and dignity. Thoreau calls on people to re-examine their relationship with nature and to oppose the excessive pursuit of material gain at the expense of spiritual life and inner fulfillment. Thoreau's wisdom is precious in this era of collective loss of synchronization with nature. Following in Thoreau's footsteps and seeking quaint nature, spiritual freedom, and physical and mental health can help people free themselves from their busy and restless lives and provide humankind with a more balanced and fulfilling way of life. Fromm points out that "sound people love life", [8] and when individuals can establish an intimate connection with nature deep within their hearts, they can feel the richness of life and the mysteries of the universe, step out of their self-centered limitations, integrate their selves into a wider community of life, and, while respecting nature and at the same time respecting humanity.

Some scholars have integrated ecological thought into literary studies, intending to reveal the natural themes in literary works, analyzing the complex relationship between human beings and nature and promoting the harmonious coexistence of human beings and nature. Thoreau is also an influential writer and thinker in studying ecological literature. Thoreau's contribution to human society lies not only in his insights into the relationship between human beings and nature but also in the fact that his works and ideas are an essential source of inspiration for the field of ecological literature. Some scholars even consider Thoreau to be "a barometer of the pulsations, limitations, and promise of green thinking in America". [9] Thoreau interpreted the relationship between human beings and the natural world in *Walden Lake*. This work has become a classic in ecological literature for its profound ecological ideas, aiming to call on human beings to re-examine their relationship with nature and dissolve the dichotomy. "Literature, as an activity of humankind to aesthetically regulate their own ecology, has been deeply imprinted with nature from the very beginning and has always taken nature as an eternal source of creativity and aesthetic prototype". [10] Thoreau's ecological wisdom is contained in literary works. For Thoreau, nature is an aesthetic object and a source of inspiration. He recorded nature's biological activities and seasonal changes with detailed and delicate brushstrokes. Through his own practice, he showed the world how to achieve harmonious coexistence between man and nature based on minimal intervention in nature and to a certain degree, Thoreau's literary works are like a declaration of ecological ethics. His writings are full of reflections on nature's awe and ecological responsibility. Ecological and ethical thought provides profound thinking for humans to reconstruct ecological consciousness and solve the world's ecological crisis under scientific and technological civilization. Ecological literature and ecological civilization are not only literature and civilization that negatively point out environmental problems but also literature and civilization that actively put forward solutions and values.

Through the power of culture, art, and thought, they lead people to change their ideas and promote social practice to establish a sustainable and harmonious civilization system where people and nature coexist. As a pioneer of ecological literature, Thoreau, as early as the fire in Concord, "knew a truth few others fully understand: human beings are not separate from nature but fully involved in natural cycles, agents who trigger change and are vulnerable to the changes they trigger". [11] Man and nature are closely related. Nature is fragile, and human beings are also delicate. Any excessive destruction of nature will make human beings' situation more serious. Thoreau's ecological thought has influenced many ecological literature writers and environmentalists. They actively apply his ecological concept to the ecological protection of modern society and are committed to building the ecological awareness of all mankind. At the same time, Thoreau does not oppose the rational use of nature by human beings. It is in line with basic ecological ethics to develop natural resources rationally because the survival needs of human society cannot be separated from the support of nature. Thoreau's ecological thought not only covers the description of the love of nature and the current situation but also explains the position and influence of human beings in nature. By emphasizing the harmonious coexistence of man and nature, individuals can balance the relationship between human beings and nature, and avoid overemphasizing nature and ignoring the existence and role of human beings, guiding ecological literature works to develop in the direction of reflecting the relationship between man and nature in a more balanced and comprehensive way.

4. Communication with world

The potential and value of Thoreau's interaction and exchange with the Chinese thought community is a deep understanding of history and culture and forward-looking thinking on contemporary social issues. The dichotomy between man and nature is a drawback in Western ecological thought, where man is always regarded as the subject, and nature can only be an object to be transformed by the subject. As the master of nature, human beings can use and dominate nature at will. At the same time, the Chinese ecological field pursues the principle of "restoring the relationship between me and things, between human beings and the natural environment, to the origin, wholeness and direct harmony of human life. The ecological concept of returning the relationship between humankind and things, between human beings and the natural environment, to the originality, wholeness and direct harmony of human life, and treating the relationship between human beings and nature with inter-subjectivity" [12] is officially the glue that makes up for this shortcoming, and focuses on the spiritual linkage and ethical responsibility between human beings and the natural environment. There is an intrinsic connection and dependence between human beings and the natural environment, which is part of life's essence. By reflecting on the social reality of the United States and absorbing and borrowing from traditional Chinese culture, Thoreau puts human beings and nature on an equal footing and puts forward new thoughts on the relationship between human beings and nature. In *Walden*, Thoreau writes, "the deep Walden Pond and cool Brister's Spring,--privilege to drink long and healthy draughts at these, all unimproved by these men but to dilute their glass". [13] In order to change this morbid situation, human beings need to re-examine the relationship between material interests and nature, regard nature as a subject that coexists with human beings, and realize the nature of nature.

Taoism advocates the concept of "doing nothing", Taoist sages believe that the lack of Taoism and doing nothing will make it impossible to achieve transcendence and purity. Thoreau's deep understanding of and respect for nature and the nature of life aligns with the Taoist philosophy. Taoism advocates that individuals should be free from the shackles of worldly fame and fortune and pursue freedom and purity of mind. Thoreau's solitary life in Walden Lake is a vivid practice of his attempt to reach the high and pure state required by Taoism. He seeks inner peace by

lowering his materialistic desires and simplifying his own life, and this value and way of life coincide with Taoism's concept of purity and inaction. Thoreau expressed a strong interest in and fondness for traditional Chinese culture, noting that "In comparison with the philosophers of the East, we may say that modern Europe has yet given birth to none", [14] and that some of its ideological essences and values not only enriched his philosophy, but also profoundly influenced his life way of life. Lin Yutang once commented that Thoreau's outlook on life was "the most Chinese of all American writers", [15] which reflects Thoreau's recognition of the concept of the unity of heaven and man in Chinese thought, which emphasizes the close connection between human beings and heaven and earth, as well as the interaction and symbiosis between the individual and the whole.

Individuals should remain skeptical and critical in accepting and applying any way of thinking and behaving; even if they appear correct and sensible, there may be limitations or application areas. Therefore, individuals must consider specific situations and make appropriate adjustments and adaptations to solve practical problems and challenges. While Thoreau absorbed and learnt from Chinese ecological thought, he still held fast to the roots of Western ecological thought. Thoreau points out that "No way of thinking or doing, however ancient, can be trusted without proof". [16] Thoreau not only studied Chinese ecological thought in depth but also incorporated its essence into his own theory and practice, thus creating a new realm of ecological thought. Thoreau's ecological thought is strongly characterized by pragmatism. He points out that "Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind" [17] and advocates that people should go back to the essence of life, and pursue the simple and natural way of life. It can be said that Thoreau pointed out the specific direction of individual development while focusing on the overall interests of nature. His solitary life by the Walden Lake has a profound practicality, which provides a feasible path for the practice of ecological thought and, to a certain extent, makes Chinese ecological thought recognized and spread in the Western world. Thoreau's ecological concept bridges Chinese and Western cultures and provides a valuable resource of thought and practice for solving global ecological problems.

5. Conclusion

Thoreau has been practicing and exploring all his life, and his ecological thought has transcended the limitations of the times and shown the world the way of transcending materialism and returning to the true self. He advocated that the world should reflect on modern civilization, attach importance to the harmonious coexistence of man and nature, and deeply understand the beauty of nature. Given this, human beings should improve their ecological awareness, recognize the lack of ecological and environmental protection, pay attention to the overall well-being of society and nature, and transform the possibility of the minimum ecological burden into reality. At the same time, Thoreau has an open mind and he explores the philosophy of traditional Chinese Confucian thought with an inclusive and open attitude, organically integrates Chinese and Western ecological thought, enriches the value connotation of ancient Chinese ecological thought in the cultural vision of the United States, promotes the diversity of Chinese and Western cultures, and builds the world's ecological cultural circle, which has laid a solid foundation.

References

- [1] Erich Fromm. *The Sane Society* [M]. New York: Fawcett World Library, 1955: 126-127.
- [2] David Mamet. *The Woods, Lakeboat, and Edmond* [M]. New York: Grove Press, 1987: 277.
- [3] Henry David Thoreau. *Walden* [M]. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004: 53.
- [4] Henry David Thoreau. *Walden* [M]. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004: 165-166.

- [5] Erich Fromm. *The Sane Society* [M]. New York: Fawcett World Library, 1955: 310.
- [6] Henry David Thoreau. *Walden* [M]. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004: 34.
- [7] Henry David Thoreau. *Walden* [M]. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004: 26-27.
- [8] Erich Fromm. *The Heart of man* [M]. New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1980: 52.
- [9] Lawrence Buell. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* [M]. Boston: Harvard University Press, 1995: 24).
- [10] Zhu Xinfu. *A Brief Introduction to American Ecological Literature Criticism* [J]. *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, 2003, (1): 139.
- [11] Laura Dassow Walls. *Henry David Thoreau: a life* [M]. Chicago: the university of Chicago, 2017: 173.
- [12] Zhang Hairong. *Ecological Ethics and Ecological Aesthetics* [M]. Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2005: 333.
- [13] Henry David Thoreau. *Walden* [M]. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004: 264.
- [14] Henry David Thoreau. *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* [M]. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1900: 140),
- [15] Lin Yutang. *The Art of Living* [M]. Beijing: Beijing Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 1994: 125.
- [16] Henry David Thoreau. *Walden* [M]. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004: 8.
- [17] Henry David Thoreau. *Walden* [M]. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004: 14.