

Henry david thoreau's life without principles | analysis



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Working Through Life

In Henry David Thoreau's "Life Without Principles", he begins by describing a lecture he attended in which the lecturer was not interested in the topic he was speaking on, and instead the lecturer was more interested in the paycheck rather than his lack of enthusiasm and information for the topic he supposed to discuss. It was obvious that he was not knowledgeable in the subject and that he simply wanted the money. This led Thoreau to one of his main points: people should not work primarily for a paycheck; instead, they should do something they care about and make a living off of that. "Not only did he demand that we find work we love, he also began to realize that the pleasure we derive from work is also dependent on the social conditions as well, such as employer-employee relations and the materialistic pressures of a consumer culture" (Raymond 138). Thoreau further explains that neither business nor work nor the world in general stop for anyone. He is largely saying that the world is business-centered and will move on without regards to any one person or group of people. The world stops for no man or woman.

Thoreau gives an example of the social conditions holding him back in his life. He talks about a man on the outskirts of his town who wants to build a bank-wall and asks for Thoreau's help. Thoreau explains that if he does it, the townspeople would look at him as industrial, but if he chooses to do something that he would rather do, then he would be seen as lazy and uncooperative. Thoreau goes on to say that the way people actually have money is by being idle. He is saying that people can either make or keep money, but no action performed can influence that. People are either born into money, in which they keep it by changing and doing nothing, or they

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become popular by no force of their own making. For example, by Thoreau's logic, the only way to make money from being a writer or a lecturer is to be popular at it. He is saying that the social ladder determines where people go in life and whether or not they will be successful.

Thoreau once worked as a surveyor, and he used his employers when he was a surveyor as an example of the greed that people begin to display when they first become successful and start making more money. He states that his employers preferred for him to do subpar work because it took less time and allowed him to do more work, whereas the exceptional work that Thoreau wanted to do took too long for his employers' likings. " In the final segment of his life, from 1850 to 1862, Thoreau became deeply engaged in a single profession for an extended period of time. It was only through the praxis of surveying that Thoreau came to see that the way one works, and the quality of the product or service rendered by work, either adds or subtracts from the common good as well as the good for the individual worker" (Raymond 138-139). Thoreau knew that quality was better than quantity, but his employers and coworkers did not care. He even invented a way to measure cord-wood more accurately, but when he tried to introduce it in Boston, the measurer there told Thoreau that his employers did not want the wood measured correctly. The measurer said that he was already too accurate for his employers. This is something that carries through to today. Employers want employees to do their work quickly, even if it isn't always the best quality, instead of taking the time to do the work right. This is another theme of the lecture: people should not live life for the money that they make, but rather for the work that they love.

In the lecture, Henry Thoreau mentions that people's goals should not be to make money and die, but instead, the goal should be to get a good job and excel in it. He deemed this so important that he searched for this throughout his own life. "Scholars have traditionally equated Thoreau's vocation with his work as a writer, but the term avocation would more be more appropriate since Thoreau supported himself more by the sweat of his brow (as a teacher, handyman, surveyor, etc.) than by the ink of his pen" (Raymond 138). Thoreau searched to excel in every job he took, and he never settled for subpar work. In addition to teaching his audiences not to work for money over happiness and fulfillment, he is telling the employers not to hire someone who is just trying to get the job for the money rather than for the enjoyment of it. Working for success and fulfillment is important for both employees and employers, not just one or the other.

Thoreau basically says that mankind is a failure. He says that ninety-seven out of one hundred men will fail, and that bankruptcy is a definite and unavoidable outcome for everyone. He also says that to be born into money is to be still-born. What he means is that to be a successful man or woman, it is important to work for the money that is received instead of just having it handed over without effort. By this logic, people born into money are failures, because they do not know what it is to work for something they need or want. The remaining three men out of the original one hundred are successful because they are doing things they love and are making a living doing something they care about.

If one cannot do something that he or she loves because of a deficit or disability, he or she should not give up. "Thoreau had a minor speech <https://assignbuster.com/henry-david-thoreaus-life-without-principles-analysis/>

deficit, a difficulty in pronouncing the letter ' r.' Thoreau often made up for his poor presence at the podium by the subtle wit that ran through his lectures: however, his audience often missed his humor, and were sometimes disappointed with his talks" (Kugler 27). Despite having a minor speech impediment, Thoreau continued to lecture because it is something he cared about. He did not care that he sounded different. Instead of giving up, he tried to make up for his lack of stage presence with humor, and even with that, his audience often did not catch on to his attempts to win them over. The deficit never stopped him from teaching and lecturing because he loved it, which is what he tries to express here.

The best thing Thoreau says is that men lie on their backs and talk about the fall of man but do not make any effort to get up. He is saying that humans complain about their conditions in life, but they do not make any effort to change their situations. This continues to be a plight of humans. Even today, people complain about their lives, but do not change anything about what they are doing. And, in the same way, people complain about the world or politics or things on a much larger scale, but they never put in any effort to help change the bigger picture either. Since the presidential election of 2016, people have complained about who became president, but some of those complaining did not put in their vote. You cannot change the world without putting yourself into the equation and complaining about a situation will never change it.

Thoreau describes the California Gold Rush as the greatest or biggest disgrace to mankind. He explains that when news started spreading that some had discovered the gold, people just picked up and left to get rich.

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These people decided to leave their jobs and homes to go try to get lucky. They relied on luck to get them the gold and success but did not contribute anything to society. The people who went searching for the gold just sifted through soil until they either found a small amount of gold or until it was declared that there was no gold left. This is not an example of working for the enjoyment of it, because working for gold is not a lasting accomplishment. Working primarily for money leaves people with an unproductive and unfulfilled life. There is no shortage on things like wealth, products, and alcohol, but there is a shortage on how many years of life you can live, so why waste it on chasing something as short-lived as wealth?

Thoreau then describes a man in Australia who found a twenty-pound nugget of gold. Thoreau said that the man got on his horse and rode around the town, asking people if they knew who he was. Finding the gold made him believe that he was somehow more significant than others and that the world should know his name just because he got lucky and found a lump of gold. If he had had to work for that sum of money, instead of just finding it, he might have come to value those around him for their hard work in their respective fields rather than thinking his stroke of luck made him a better human than those around him. Working for what they have gives people a little humility because they actually earned what they got. In doing so, people often learn the valuable lesson of how hard it can be to work for what they want and need. When they learn that lesson, it helps them to be more understanding and sympathetic to those around them working hard for what they want and need.

The main theme of the lecture that one should work towards something he or she loves, but also for one to work for what he or she has rather than expecting it to come freely. People should not let society tell them what work they should do, because one person's idea of success and fulfillment does not always equal another person's idea of success. "As distasteful to him [Thoreau] as the prospect of satisfying the public's demand for his lectures may have been, he was clearly resolved to forgo the advantages of poverty and obscurity to satisfy that demand" (Dean 285). Thoreau did satisfy the demands of society, but that was because he like lecturing and spreading his knowledge. The point is that society is fickle. It works hard to try to make people into what it wants them to be, but it can turn around and ostracize them after. So instead of trying to please society, which seemingly can rarely be pleased, people try their best to do what pleases themselves instead.

Thoreau was not the most popular lecturer in some parts, but in others he was. Some people did not like that he was telling workers to prioritize wants of a personally satisfying job over financial needs and gains. "Although Thoreau's work-not-for-money idea may have seemed bizarre in New Bedford, it was much less so in Concord. At the same time that New Bedford was emerging as a very wealthy town wholly committed to the business of whaling, Concord was in a period of great transition, gradually moving into a world of modern agricultural capitalism" (Kugler 28). Just as Thoreau was not a universally loved lecturer, no one can be liked by everyone, which furthers Thoreau's point that working to please oneself is much more fulfilling than trying to please others who may not ever be pleased by anything.

Thoreau's lecture is still important today. We still struggle with all of the issues he wrote about in his lecture. Thoreau spoke about social pressures, and the materialistic world that he lived in. His lecture is still relevant today, especially regarding this, because everyone is trying to get the latest fashion and will do anything that will give them a boost on the social ladder.

Everyone needs the latest iPhone or the coolest clothes to let people know how successful they are. The world is still a materialistic and a social place, and Thoreau knew about the social pressures we experience today because he also experienced them in his own time. He says to not give in to the social pressures which is still great advice in today's time, because everyone, especially school-aged children and teens, experience a ton of peer pressure. Though many things have changed between Thoreau's time and now, his lecture can still teach people today that working for the enjoyment of something rather than for money or societal acceptance is ultimately the best form of success, and his life is the perfect example.

Many people today just choose jobs that they think will give them a good paycheck, but they do not care if it is something they love or enjoy doing. At the same time, though, many people complain about their chosen job, because they never cared about it to begin with. It is easy for them to complain about their careers, but they never try to change anything about their situations. Thoreau talked about the men that lie down and complain, but do not attempt to get back up, and people do that more today than before. People now expect to be handed everything without working for it. They see celebrities on the television who are rich and that have the "American Dream", so they complain about their lives because they do not

have the same kind of life. However, they do not consider the hard work and the rejection that likely came before the success that some of these celebrities have now achieved. If people wanted that life, they could make steps to change things and start working towards a different career like acting, but that kind of success does not come easy, and it requires a lot of hard work, which is part of the problem. The overarching point from Thoreau is that hard work for something that people love doing will pay off much more in the end than any job that only offer a high paycheck and prestige without the additional enjoyment of doing that job, even if that pay off is not associated with a monetary value.

Works Cited

- Dean, Bradley P. "Reconstructions of Thoreau's Early 'Life without Principle' Lectures." *Studies in the American Renaissance*, 1987, pp. 285-364. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/30228137.
- Kugler, Elizabeth. "Getting A Living: Daniel Ricketson And Henry David Thoreau." *The Concord Saunterer*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1987, pp. 25-36. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/23394555.
- Raymond, David B. "Henry David Thoreau and the American Work Ethic." *The Concord Saunterer*, vol. 17, 2009, pp. 137-156. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/23395077.

Annotated Bibliography

- Dean, Bradley P. "Reconstructions of Thoreau's Early 'Life without Principle' Lectures." *Studies in the American Renaissance*, 1987, pp. 285-364. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/30228137.

Bradley P. Dean goes through some of the history about when and why “ Life Without Principle” was written and includes a lot of Thoreau’s works in the journal. He summarizes all of Thoreau’s pieces that he mentioned. He wrote this to inform people about the pieces that Thoreau wrote and what was happening when he was writing them to give the readers some context behind Thoreau’s work. This journal is written for people researching Thoreau and his writings. The journal is relevant to my topic, because he is discussing events that were happening when Thoreau wrote and lectured on “ Life Without Principle”. It includes date and places that were important at the time.

- Kugler, Elizabeth. “ Getting A Living: Daniel Ricketson And Henry David Thoreau.” *The Concord Saunterer* , vol. 19, no. 2, 1987, pp. 25-36. *JSTOR* , www.jstor.org/stable/23394555.

Elizabeth Kugler has mentions several of Thoreau’s pieces, but she also writes about another writer and an admirer of Thoreau: Daniel Ricketson. The whole article is not about Thoreau’s “ Life Without Principle”, but it is about his stance on working and earning a living. She explains his stance on working for what you love instead of working for money, and she wrote about his variable popularity depending upon certain locations. Kugler wrote this to inform people about how these two men are connected and about Thoreau’s unmoving stance on earning a living. The article is written for people researching Henry David Thoreau and his life. The article is relevant to my topic, because Thoreau’s lecture is centered around his stance on working and motivations to work, which was this journal’s main focus.

- Raymond, David B. " Henry David Thoreau and the American Work Ethic." *The Concord Saunterer* , vol. 17, 2009, pp. 137-156. *JSTOR* , www.jstor.org/stable/23395077.

David B. Raymond explained what exactly what was happening at the time when Thoreau wrote " Life Without Principle". This journal is about the main events of Thoreau's life. It tells about his vocations and major jobs that he held during his life. Raymond wrote this article to inform people about what happened and was happening in Thoreau's life when he wrote his lecture. It provides some background context to why Thoreau wrote about the topics that he chose to write about. The article is written for people who are researching Thoreau's life and his motives for writing " Life Without Principle". This journal is relevant to my topic, because it explains his stance on working and which jobs, he had during his lifetime to make him take the stance he took on earning a living.