

# Thoreau's concept of the relationship between wilderness and civilization

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## Thoreau's Concept of the Relationship between Wilderness and Civilization

Henry David Thoreau was a factory worker, essay writer and teacher before he became an author. He was also a transcendentalist and an active supporter of the antislavery movement. Most importantly, Thoreau had a passion for nature and the environment, which is evident in his works.

Thoreau's voluntary determination to live in a small, self-built home in the wilderness, isolated from all other people, illustrates his dedication to the transcendental idea that possessions and concentration upon material wealth are merely distractions from the true process of living. His vision of a successful life, having actually followed through on the suggestions of his inner self, was to remove himself from society in order to connect more solidly with nature, the source of all goodness and truth. His ultimate goal was perhaps to inspire others to follow in his footsteps, insofar as learning more about the inner self through a more intimate connection with outer nature. It was this stance that caused other writers, such as William Cronan (1995), to claim that he was establishing a "dangerous duality" in which humans are considered to be living apart from nature unless and until they go to the wilderness. However, Thoreau's purpose was not this interpretation. Instead, he hoped to inspire others to follow their own inner guidance, rather than the external prodding of the materialistic culture.

Within a chapter entitled "Solitude" in his book, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, Thoreau addresses the issue by comparing his experience in the wilderness with the experience of 'civilized' living in terms of communication, companionship and engagement, all of which support the same type of closer identification with the natural world in all areas of life

that Cronon suggests. The first concept involved in Thoreau's consideration of solitude could be considered the opposite of solitude, in the form of communication. He begins this chapter of his book with a paragraph that highlights the deep sense of communication he gains with nature as he takes an evening stroll. The first sentence captures the essence of the rest of the paragraph: "This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore" (Thoreau 127). He continues to describe the temperature as perfectly attuned to his own sense of correct feeling, the sounds of the bullfrogs and whippoorwills as just the right note for the moment, and the breathless sympathy he feels for the falling leaves of the forest, "yet, like the lake, my serenity is rippled but not ruffled" (Thoreau 127). As the evening ends, he gains a sense of the reaffirmation of life, as the night hunters begin their prowl. Thus, he cultivates his sense of self by being in tune with the evening, regardless of where he is. This idea is echoed in Cronon for much the same reason. "Remember the feelings of such moments, and you will know as well as I do that you were in the presence of something irreducibly nonhuman, something profoundly Other than yourself" (Cronon 1995). This is contrasted against the more distant communication he shares with his fellow man, many of whom visit while he is away and leave behind some trace of their presence, "either a bunch of flowers, or a wreath of evergreen, or a name in pencil on a yellow walnut leaf or a chip" (Thoreau 127); these visitors also express themselves through nature. Whether together in a room or having just missed each other at his small house, Thoreau illustrates the intimate communication he can share with nature, which is impossible to share with other members of his species

who have no sensitivity for these things or connection to their natural selves. Given that the communication between himself and nature is so much more profound than that which he shares with most of mankind, it is unsurprising then that Thoreau launches into a discussion that addresses the human need for companionship. He begins this by quoting the statement he always hears: " I should think you would feel lonesome down there, and want to be nearer to folks" (Thoreau 130). To this observation, Thoreau points to the vast reaches of space that can exist between one person and another. " I have found that no exertion of the legs can bring two minds much nearer to one another" (Thoreau 130). The companionship Thoreau sees in the society of men is little more than a means of making life easier by living closer to those amenities that one utilizes most, such as the general store, the bar or the school. However, the fluctuations of these exterior things than become distractions to the mind that prevent one from living a full life. " Can we not do without the society of our gossips a little while, under these circumstances—have our own thoughts to cheer us? " (Thoreau 131). While he finds a great deal of companionship in communing with trees and the weather and the water at his home, Thoreau points out various ways in which society forces one to move away from inner thoughts and knowledge in order to dwell simply on the surface of the soul. " Society is commonly too cheap. We meet at very short intervals, not having had time to acquire any new value for each other. We meet at meals three times a day, and give each other a new taste of that old musty cheese that we are" (Thoreau 132). Again, these concepts of companionship in nature are reinforced by Cronon throughout his essay, such as when he argues that nature was not always

considered kind. "What Wordsworth described was nothing less than a religious experience, akin to that of the Old Testament prophets as they conversed with their wrathful God" (Cronon 1995). Thus, both Cronon and Thoreau encourage a more natural and closer connection to the inner self, using elements of nature as a means of achieving this, in order to fully appreciate the full self as a natural being. The proper measure of a man and how he spends his time, Thoreau says, is discovered in how engaged he is in the moment. He points this out by using the example of a farmer in his field. "The farmer can work alone in the field or the woods all day, hoeing or chopping, and not feel lonesome, because he is employed" (Thoreau 132). This kind of solitude is not considered lonesome or sad because the farmer is happily and fully engaged in practicing his particular trade. The difference between himself as a scholar and the farmer, according to Thoreau, is that when the farmer returns home in the evening, he seeks the comfort of family because he is no longer otherwise engaged. "A man thinking or working is always alone, let him be where he will ... [what the farmer does not realize is] that the student, though in the house, is still at work in his field, and chopping in his woods, as the farmer in his, and in turn seeks the recreation and society that the latter does, though it may be a more condensed form of it" (Thoreau 132). In other words, the scholar may not be actively engaged in doing anything more physical than simply taking a solitary walk down the street, but all the while, his mind is actively engaged in considering the thoughts of the moment. Like the wood that the farmer chops, these thoughts may provide no one but the scholar with any direct benefit, but the thinker is not any less engaged than the farmer is at his work. Furthermore,

while the farmer is limited by the weather, the time of day or the season, the thinker has no such limitations, being able to think at all temperatures, in all weather and in any season. His one limitation to this is when he finds himself in the company of other people, who will expect him to join in conversation and be reasonably polite to his callers or to those he visits. This too is something the scholar does just as the farmer, in those times when he is not otherwise engaged in his work. This need to think, to be actively engaged in the moment, is the concept in Thoreau's approach that Cronon misses in his argument. Throughout his chapter, Thoreau points out that the most common concerns against the idea of solitude are the lack of communication with others, lack of companionship, and the lack of engagement with the world. He argues against these ideas by highlighting how they are not necessarily elements of the condition of solitude, not necessarily negative and sometimes necessary to reconnect with the natural creature that is the full human. As he discusses these ideas, he demonstrates how his communication with nature is actually much more fulfilling and intense than any of his communications with people due to others' disconnection from the natural world. As far as companionship goes, Thoreau asks what it is that humans find so valuable about companionship, when in actuality it is quite shallow. Society expects humans to follow specific rules of discourse, following set patterns of manners and conversation that frequently prevents him from understanding himself or thinking those thoughts that help him connect with himself. The final accusation leveled against solitude is the concept that solitude for the thinking man equates with loneliness. Thoreau argues that this is not the case for him any more than it is the case for the

farmer or the worker who is engaged in an activity he loves. When he is busy at his work, the time passes quickly with no thought of a need for company regardless of the setting. Thus, Thoreau tries to explain to his audience not only why solitude is not the negative state most people perceive it to be, but is instead necessary for a thinking man to achieve any sense of real connection and communion with the fully natural human. Instead of establishing the dangerous dualism Cronon accuses him of, Thoreau argues for the kind of deep connection Cronon urges between civilization and nature by encouraging changes in our conceptions of civilized thought. Works Cited Cronon, William. "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995: 69-90. Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden and Civil Disobedience*. Edited by Paul Lauter. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000.