

The paradox of  
language in henry  
david thoreau's  
"where i lived, and  
what i lived..."



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* embarks on a philosophical experiment with full intention in provoking conventionality. As an advocator of simplicity, *Walden* is ironically complex in terms of its sophisticated language and ratiocination, and the exactness in the execution of every observation makes it difficult to pass Thoreau's thoughts off as coincidences. Such a complex position regarding language is revealed by a close examination of Thoreau's classic chapter on nature, "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For."

In the chapter, "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For", Thoreau focuses on the exquisite intertwining of consciousness and nature as he writes with the noblest intention to promote frugality, resounding with the honest writing that he demonstrates throughout his entire quest for universal truth.

Thoreau focuses on the intricate sense of interconnectedness between nature and humanity, as he fills his monologue with intense symbolism and imagery to illustrate this parallel. Through the likening of "reality" (Thoreau) as "a hard bottom and rocks", and "opinion, and prejudice, and tradition" as "mud" and "alluvion", Thoreau employs abstract symbols in conscious efforts to synthesise landscape and soul as one. The mixed sense of confusion and enlightenment we receive from such radical philosophy is within Thoreau's deliberation as well. He relentlessly feeds us with bountiful of natural imagery, alluding time as "the stream [he] go[es] a-fishing in", and that his "head is hand and feet" which he "would mine and burrow" through "hills" of unimportant opinions in search of truth. Amidst his intellectual postulation, Thoreau inserts playful puns such as "mine" being neurological and geographical, and time being "current" which connotes both sense of present and the symbolical stream in the passage. Such

ambiguity intensifies the cohesion between spirituality and nature, thus offering the prose its transcendental quality.

Thoreau reinforces the paradoxical sense of arduousness in attaining simplicity through his complex language. The anaphoric repetition of “let us”, which evokes a sense of unification, encourages our participation in Thoreau’s revolutionary reformation of humanity. Thoreau also employs a multitude of narrative techniques to heighten the complex form of his prose. From “let us” to “if you” to “I”, Thoreau combines identity of nature, himself, and the rest of humankind to induce a palpable sense of connectedness between us and his exercise. He dares us to “spend one day as Nature” in an attempt to empower us since “nature” here embodies a continuous form of energy, a “morning vigour” unstoppable by neither physically “terrible rapid” nor emotional “perturbation”. While Thoreau suggests that this remap is “unrelax[ing]” and “upset[ting]”, he alludes our intellectual capacity to “Ulysses”, signifying divine strength in the human mind which he deems capable of overcoming the rigour in pursuit of conscious living.

Additionally, Thoreau challenges our retrospect of life by shattering conventional methodology. He instils a fresh allusion of to “drink[ing]” from “the stream [of time]” and evokes poignancy as he imagines “its thin current slid[ing] away, but eternity remains”, signifying the smallness of humankind in contrast with the limitless universe which parallels to the boundary of time which falls apart while eternity is unshaken. When he tries to “drink deeper”, he laments that eternity is akin to “the sky” that cannot “slide away” like the “shallow” time can. Thoreau’s underlying tone of <https://assignbuster.com/the-paradox-of-language-in-henry-david-thoreaus-where-i-lived-and-what-i-lived-for/>

distress as he “ cannot count” and “ know not the first letter of the alphabet” again augments the feebleness of humanity in relation to the vast knowledge that the universe has which we are powerless against since we are “ not as wise as the day [we were] born”. Yet he urges us to seek for “ the richest vein” and concludes the passage with the action of “ begin[ning] to mine”, reasserting his persistence to pursue universal truth. Amidst the complex writing that Thoreau employs to reveal sensitivity, there is a recurring composition of seeking revelation despite limitations that is patterned throughout his speech, therefore justifying the simplistic attribute that he pursues.

While Walden may seem erratic and self-contradicting in its perplexing effort to interlace man and nature to advocate simple living, Thoreau undoubtedly demonstrates cohesiveness in his beliefs and his writing as he lives as deliberately as he writes. Perhaps he wishes that we work through the layers of his complex writing to reveal simplicity, just as how he explores the abundance of nature to uncover truth. In examining his prose, we exercise the self-reliance and remapping of soul that he endorses.

## **Works Cited**

Thoreau, Henry David, and Henry David Thoreau. “ Where I Lived, and What I Lived For.” Walden. Champaign, IL: Project Gutenberg, 1995. Kindle File. 15 September 2014.