

## On Ecological Aesthetics in Walden and its Practical Significance

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**Abstract.** Through detailed studies on *Walden* and the author Thoreau's life, this thesis analyzes the aesthetic thought in *Walden* deeply. The aesthetic thoughts have some influences on other theories and bear some significance in real life. Thoreau expresses the thoughts about ecological aesthetics in *Walden* which suit the development of the society in our country at present. His ecological aesthetic ideas advocate simplicity and casualty and oppose blind follow and imitation. It not only tells people to choose the right way to live, but also encourages people to pursue real happiness.

### Introduction

**Background of the Study.** With the rapid development of science and technology in the contemporary society, human civilization has reached an unprecedented height, but at the same time, it has brought great pressure to natural ecological system. How to balance the relationship between human and nature is the major issue for us in order to build a harmonious society.

Destruction of the natural environment means the destruction of the exiting environment of mankind. With the economic development, destruction of natural environment is not an advisable action. It becomes a necessary thing for us to develop human ecology and draw the public attention to ecological problems. At this point, it becomes a need for our society to develop the ecological aesthetics. It has a great significance on our pursuit of the fast development of world economy, science and technology.

In *Walden*, people can learn the method to solve the problem between man and nature. *Walden* will give us a clear attitude to life. That is, if a person is satisfied with his daily life, he can enjoy his life more leisurely and more calmly.

**Objective and Significance of the Study.** Ecological aesthetics is to satisfy the needs of the reality. Thoreau's ecological aesthetics carries a profound and lasting influence on modern society. Analyzing Thoreau's ecological aesthetics in *Walden*, people will live harmoniously with nature by putting his theory into practice. This will make our life more wonderful.

**Structure of the Study.** This thesis uses the method of text analysis. It is divided into five parts. The first part is about introduction of the background, purpose and the significance. It also introduces the basic framework. The second part is the literature review, and introduces the meaning of ecological aesthetics briefly and puts forward the theme of this paper. The third part is to interpret the different perspectives of *Walden* by scholars both at home and abroad and to analyze the ecological aesthetics and its significance of *Walden*. The fourth part is about the practical effects of the ecological aesthetics in Walden. The last part is conclusion .

### Literature Review

**Definition of Ecological Aesthetics.** Ecological aesthetics is the combination of ecology and aesthetics. From 1990s, it becomes a hot topic in research areas. In fact, they are aesthetics questions that we usually research from the direction of ecology. Absorbing the important points of view of ecology into aesthetics, it forms a new aesthetic theory. Ecological aesthetics, in a broad sense, studies human and nature and the relationship between society and human. It is a kind of ecological law of contemporary ontology aesthetics.

New aesthetic ideas were stimulated by the new ecological philosophy. It researches on the relationship between mankind and nature in order to search the essence of beauty. The purpose is to use aesthetic view to solve ecological environmental issues and to rebuild harmonious coexistence among human, society and nature. Ecological aesthetics is produced in the context of post-modern economy and culture. This symbolizes the human being entered era of ecological civilization. From then on, environmental problems have become common problems of all mankind.

Ecological aesthetics is based on contemporary ontology aesthetics. It opposes the theory that natural resources have no value and advocates that human and nature should be harmonized.

## Studies at Home and Abroad

**Studies at Home.** In past studies, *Walden* has always been reputed to be a classic of Eco-literature. But in fact, *Walden* is more like an Eco-writing by using specific depictions of nature.

Compared with the studies of *Walden* abroad, Chinese scholars have got only limited research results. But with the ecological problems become increasingly severe in China, the studies of *Walden* are playing an very important role in today's China.

In the past few years, some Chinese scholars have put forward the concept of ecological aesthetics and held several seminars. With the purpose of putting the theory into practice, one professional association held a seminar named "Shan Xi Eco-literature Seminar on the Eco-literary Works like *Walden*".

There are a large amount of facets of analyzing *Walden*. Some scholars research on the poems in *Walden*, some concentrated on the images and some compared the Chinese traditional ecological ideas with Thoreau's. But this paper's research perspective is from the view of ecology. Both works "*Thoreau's Thoughts of Nature and its Implications for Ecological Ethics*" by Su Xiangui (associate professor of the Department of Philosophy of Peking University) (Su Xiangui, 2002: 2), "*Thoreau and Nature: Reflection on Thoreau's Walden Pond*" by Guan Chunhua (associate professor of Shenyang University) (Guan Chunhua, 2005: 3) researched on *Walden* from the ecological aspect.

Nowadays, scholars not only study the ecological ideas in *Walden*, but also investigate other Eco-literatures. There are some profound effective articles such as "*On the Contemporary Creation of Ecological Literature in China*" by Yang Jianlong (tutor of College of Humanities and Communications, Shanghai Normal University) and Zhou Xufeng (graduate student of Shanghai Normal University) (Yang Jianlong, Zhou Xufeng, 2005: 2) etc.

**Studies Abroad.** In the Western countries, ecological aesthetics includes three aspects: environmental aesthetics, ecological criticism and landscape science view. Each of them has its own evolution. Landscape subjects have its own character. It has a very rich history of evolution combined with the zeitgeist. Landscape subjects and ecological aesthetics mainly have three similar aspects (environmental aesthetics, ecological criticism, landscape science view), and the most important one is the similar ecological worldview between man and nature. Meanwhile, the key point of both landscape subjects and ecological aesthetics is the theories which are based on "Nature" and "Unity of Man and Nature".

In the 1990s, many scholars abroad wrote plenty of professional critical articles about *Walden* when they began to study it. Thoreau's ecological ideas not only heartened other Eco-writers, like John Burroughs, one of the outstanding nature writers in America in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, who wrote *Wake-Robin*, *Winter Sunshine*, and *Locusts and Wild Honey*, but also inspired lots of writers from all over the world to produce more works in the new theories such as *The Sacred Balance-Rediscovering Our Place in Nature* by the Japanese writer David Suzuki and British writer Amanda McConnell.

**Perspective of the Theme.** *Walden* is a collection of essays which recorded the experiences of Thoreau at Walden pond. He spent two years there and lived a very simple life without any kind of help. During the two years, his living in Walden at last confirmed his ecological aesthetics -- Co-development is the best way of living for human and nature.

As we all know, Thoreau's ideas are precursors of Transcendentalism. In 1845, he went into

seclusion for almost two years in Walden Pond. As a member of Chinese Eco-criticism, Wang Nuo wrote, "Since the age of Thoreau, the Eco-literature of America has acquired the leading role in the field of European and American Eco-literature because of its profound ideas and significant influence." (Wang Nuo, 2002: 3)

In *Walden*, Thoreau calls for everyone to go back to nature. He believes that as long as we live a simple life, we can earn more happiness easily. He tells us that nature is our friend not a dominator. Loving nature, being low-key like the Walden Pond, living a leisurely life, and opposing devastating exploitation to nature by human being are gist of *Walden*. In *Walden*, Thoreau prompts the later nature writers to get rid of the human-centered ideas.

Thoreau's ecological aesthetic ideology is influenced by American Transcendentalism and Oriental philosophy, especially Chinese philosophy. At first, Emerson left a deep effect on Thoreau, and then Thoreau became a pioneer of Transcendentalism. But, his own ideas have began to form step by step since he was living in the woodland at Walden Pond. They both have a heart of love to nature, but Emerson still thinks human is more important than nature. Just the opposite, Thoreau believes that only nature can give people true happiness. He is familiar with the beauty in nature. In *Walden*, he refers to Confucius several times—"I will just try these three sentences of Confucius; they may fetch that state about again." (Thoreau, 1854: 72) Thoreau formed his own ideology by uniting the American Transcendentalism with the Chinese traditional philosophy. After reading *Walden*, people can easily discover his ecological aesthetics ideology which includes the thoughts of oneness between man and nature.

### **Practical Significance of Ecological Aesthetics Reflected in Walden**

Thoreau was an outstanding writer. In *Walden*, he recommended the Chinese classics many a time. We always believed that people ought to come from the nature at first and then return to nature at last. That is our traditional Chinese thought, and we called this idea "the oneness of man and nature". Thoreau's ecological aesthetics is same as this. The Chinese ancient scholars, the western writers, or the traditional beliefs and the rising theories all expressed the core requirements of all human beings—people are one part of the nature. Lao zi said, "Man models himself after earth, earth models itself after heaven, heaven models itself after Tao, and Tao models itself after its Nature." (Lao Zi, BC571-471, *Tao Te Ching*: 25) Zhuang zi said in "*On the Uniformity of All Things of Chuangtz*". "The nature lives with me in symbiosis, and everything is with me as a whole." (Zhuang Zi, BC369-286: 25) Taoism advocated that people should never destroy the nature, on the contrary, we ought to try our best to protect it. As one of the Chinese' s important religions, "the oneness of man and nature" (Zhuang Zi, BC369-286: 12) of Taoism constructs the Chinese traditional philosophy. Mencius' "all are for myself" and "people coexist harmoniously with heaven and earth" all express the wish for the combination of man and nature.

In *Walden*, we can see "simplicity" everywhere. The book tells us to live a simple life and keeping an ordinary mind. It points out that we should set up a correct consumption consciousness. This can help us to give up materialism. At present Chinese live on the base of the ecological sustainability. All people are controlling their material desire, and taking full use of their spare time to enrich their spiritual life. All of the above phenomena depend on China's ecological environment. People have to set up an ecological ideological system to educate people with the following concept: The trend of the social development requests us to enjoy properly and reduce the luxurious consumption and amusement. Because this can cause the waste and pollution of natural resources. There is a question for us to consider how to reduce the waste of resources and how to prevent the environmental pollution? We can get the answer from the lifestyle of Thoreau in *Walden*.

### **Conclusion**

Thoreau was a great author, philosopher and a pioneer of American Transcendentalism. His ecological ideology had a great influence on the current and later naturalist and environmentalist. In

a way, he opened a new era of ecology. In those early years, he lived with his family in Concord and fostered his interests on nature. In order to practice his ecological philosophy, he spent two years living at Walden Pond. *Walden* contained the beauty of nature as well as showed Thoreau's kind attitude towards nature. It can easily strike readers' chord to build an environment-friendly society. At the same time, Thoreau's ecological aesthetics provided a theoretical basis for Eco-criticism and environmentalism in order to build their philosophy.

Thoreau was a westerner. But from his work—*Walden*, we can learn that his ideas were more like a Chinese. When he was in Walden Pond, he began to observe the nature and civilized people. Due to him and his philosophy, there is a theoretical basis for solving the problems that rise from the increasing development of materialism.

In *Walden*, Thoreau put a key on protecting nature. And he advocated human and nature should live in harmoniously. Meanwhile, he also focused on people's spiritual civilization, which he concerned that living a simple life and looking inside is the origin of happiness. Without any doubt, Thoreau's writing style is the model of later natural writings.

This thesis is mainly talking about ecological aesthetics of Thoreau's work—*Walden*. The paper is also helpful to us to rediscover the beauty of nature, and help us to figure out the relationship between man and nature. Through analyzing the ecological aesthetics and its practical significance, this thesis comes to the modern society, people should build a harmonious relationship between mankind and nature. Meanwhile, it is also important to set up our spiritual civilization. But above all, living a simple life and keeping an ordinary mind is the best way to earn happiness.

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