

Gretchen Veevaert

EH 234

Dr. Sands

25 November 2012



Article Comparison: “*Walden’s* Transcendental Pastoral Design” and

“Thoreau and the Natural Environment”



Part I: Summary of Leo Marx’s “*Walden’s* Transcendental Pastoral Design”

Leo Marx’s critique entitled “*Walden’s* Transcendental Pastoral Design” evaluates Thoreau’s departure from main-stream society into the wilderness that is Walden Pond. Marx especially calls attention to the battle between the natural and man-made elements Thoreau has to contend with in his two years residing in the woods. His goal is to distance himself from society and live as simply as possible, yet he can never quite rid himself of the progressive elements of the world. For instance, Marx points out that, when writing *Walden*, Thoreau mentions the sound of the train in many instances with a varying opinion of it each time. Marx draws attention to Thoreau’s ambiguity when he says, “What are we to make of this double image of the railroad? On inspection the passage proves to be a sustained evocation of the ambiguous meaning of the machine and its relation to nature” (456-457). According to Marx, Thoreau seems torn between the benefits of progressive technology and a desire to remain true to the simplicity of nature. And, despite all of Thoreau’s efforts to come back to the natural world, in the end, it will all come to naught, as no place on earth—even a secluded place like Walden Pond—can be exempt from change.



Part II: Summary of Lawrence Buell’s “Thoreau and the Natural Environment”

Buell, in his critique “Thoreau and the Natural Environment,” claims that the purpose of Thoreau’s “pursuit of nature” was solely “one of fitful, irregular, experimental, although

increasingly purposeful, self-education in reading landscape and pondering the significance of what he found there” (528). According to Buell, Thoreau’s intention was not to call people to action to live a more simplistic lifestyle, but to experience the natural environment for himself and to call to attention the artful beauty that abounds in nature. Thoreau saw the natural environment as teeming with spiritual and artistic elements that must be studied and enjoyed by humanity. Buell also points out the parts of Thoreau’s writing that work against his argument. Buell criticizes Thoreau’s description of the Walden setting, as well as the fact that Thoreau’s writing alienates rather than includes the reader.



Part III: Response and Comparison



I believe that both authors of the critiques have valid points. Marx and Buell focus on separate elements of Thoreau’s writing, a fact that pays tribute to *Walden’s* diversity and Thoreau’s talent in composition. Out of the two articles, I found Marx’s to be the one I



connected with most because of his point about Thoreau’s struggle relating progress and change

to nature. Marx’s point resonated with me on an intellectual and personal level, as his argument piqued my curiosity and raised questions that I have contemplated myself. I particularly enjoyed the way Marx analyzed Thoreau’s words, especially in context of the railroad, and drew the conclusion that, despite his adamant support of living a natural lifestyle, Thoreau did, in fact, appreciate the progress and change that technology brought to society. Marx’s point stimulated my own thinking and caused me to question whether or not Thoreau was fully dedicated to his cause. Thoreau’s fluctuation between praising the train’s progressive symbolism and degrading it leaves the reader with a lot to consider.



Although I did not feel as connected with Buell’s article, he made some interesting

points. Buell’s critique made me rethink Thoreau’s motives for living at Walden Pond from his

attempt to prove a point to the idea that perhaps he went for his own self-education. The optimistic part of me wants to lean toward the latter explanation; however, the cynical part of me believes in the former. One element of Buell's writing that fascinated me was his point that Thoreau purposefully wrote an ambiguous geographic depiction of Walden Pond to solidify his point that nature, in itself, is a representation of art. One line from Buell's work that I especially appreciated was, "Thoreau's refusal to organize the Walden landscape tidily for his reader may be one sign of his intent to get us irretrievably lost in it" (541). I like this line because it shows Buell's stance on Thoreau's writing and also provides one explanation for the fact that the reader does indeed lose himself in the description of the landscape.



Both articles provided several interesting points that allowed me to question my previous assertions I had made about Thoreau as I was reading *Walden*. Marx caused me to wonder about Thoreau's own thought process as he was living out his experiment and Buell drew my attention to Thoreau's prospective motives for going to Walden Pond in the first place. I found Marx's



analysis to be more persuasive, as Buell's dismissive tone, at times, had a negative effective on his credibility. It was as if Marx was able to capture the complicated nature of human nature



reflected in Thoreau's work. Buell, on the other hand, seems to discount the very human quality of changes one's mind and being unsure about something. Still, both of these authors challenged my thinking and provided me with intriguing, controversial topics I may choose to experiment with in further compositions.

Works Cited

Buell, Lawrence. "Thoreau and the Natural Environment." *Walden Civil Disobedience and Other Writings*. Ed. William Rossi. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008. 527-543.

Print.

Marx, Leo. "Walden's Transcendental Pastoral Design." *Walden Civil Disobedience and Other Writings*. Ed. William Rossi. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008. 450-464.

Print.