



RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Role of Nature to Self-Actualization in Henry David Thoreau's Poems

Mrs. Meldy A. Sajulga^{1*}, Dr. Nina Jen R. Canayong²¹ Caraga State University, Ampayon, Butuan City, Agusan Del Norte² Cebu Normal University, Cebu City, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

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Henry David Thoreau's importance as a poet was little appreciated during his lifetime, but his most noted works, *Walden* or *Life in the Woods* gradually developed a following, and by the latter half of the 20th century, had become classic texts in American thought. This text been used widely to address issues in political philosophy, moral theory, and, more recently, environmentalism. This study uses ecocriticism to find out the roles of nature to human's self-actualization in Henry David Thoreau's poems *Nature* and *The Inward Morning*. It specifically delves into the persona-vision-addressee transaction, imagery and their meaning, and the poems' theme. Results show that the persona in the poem is a satisfied and contented person who chose to live a life of seclusion in a pond. The poems' imagery are taken from areas of nature which are relatively unhampered and unrestricted such as meteor, comet, sun, wind, and other celestial bodies. Morning, dawn, and twilight are also used to symbolize renewal, rebirth and awakening. The poems' images also cluster around the central duality of freedom. Thematically, Thoreau's poetry reveals the human desire for freedom and action as they are opposed and are limited by restrictions of various kinds. In order to attain this freedom and self-actualization, man has to see nature as his or her great teacher. It is then recommended that the other aspects of Henry David Thoreau's poems be studied such as its versification, structure, and other poetic devices using other literary approaches.

***Corresponding Author:**

meldyacabo@gmail.com

I. INTRODUCTION

Henry David Thoreau is recognized as an important contributor to the American literary and philosophical movement known as New England transcendentalism. His essays, books, and poems weave together two central themes over the course of his intellectual career: nature and the conduct of life. Poetry was Thoreau's first love and throughout his life, he thought of himself as a poet. Despite this, his poetry was largely ignored for many years, the assumption being that his output was scanty and that the poems were mere appendages to his prose.

His naturalistic writing integrated straightforward observation and cataloguing with transcendentalist interpretations of nature and the wilderness. In many of his works, Thoreau brought these interpretations of nature to bear on how people live or ought to live. Thoreau's theory of poetry is inseparable from his theory of life and his informal metaphysics. To him, both life and art were simply ways of reflecting the universal.

Nowadays, a very recent literary technique has been used in both writing and interpreting literary text known as ecocriticism inspired by the life of Henry David Thoreau. Ecocriticism is a quite new literary aspect for many of its perspective users. Therefore, it is necessary to make it clear as to its

origin. In fact, globally speaking, literature itself originates from our love of listening and telling stories. This love of man to stories is based onto the richness of Mother Nature in things that fascinate and seduce physically and inspire man with new perspectives to look at the physical setting of everything they do.

In this query, it intends to find out the different roles of nature to human's self-actualization as expressed in Henry David Thoreau's poems *Nature* and *The Inward Morning* using ecocriticism. Specifically, the poems are analyzed using the persona-vision-addressee transaction, extracting the poems' imagery and their meanings, and lastly the poems' themes.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

This inquiry focuses on the role of nature to human's self-actualization using ecocritical perspective. As can be seen in Figure 1, the poems of Henry David Thoreau are subjected to close inspection through the persona-vision-addressee transaction, the poems' imagery and their meanings, and themes. After examining the passages, the role of nature is then drawn from the interpretations.

The origin of ecocriticism should be attributed to the desire of restoring the connections between humans and nonhumans. As to the temporary setting, Ecocriticism is a theory still in diapers. It did not officially get going until 1994 or so which means that most of the big players in ecocriticism are not actually literary critics. Like Thoreau, they are just people who think a lot about the ways humans interact with nature. And long before 1994, the world witnessed an eccentric cast of gnarly characters who wrote about how and why humans need to go green, a way to argue that we need to alter our relationship to nature, and the stories we tell about it.

Henry David Thoreau is the designated grandfather of ecocriticism, because of Walden. His work has inspired some of the world's most influential people, from John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King to Ernest Hemingway, Theodore Roosevelt, and even Gandhi. His humble, no-frills, authentic life has had a big impact on a lot of people all over the world.

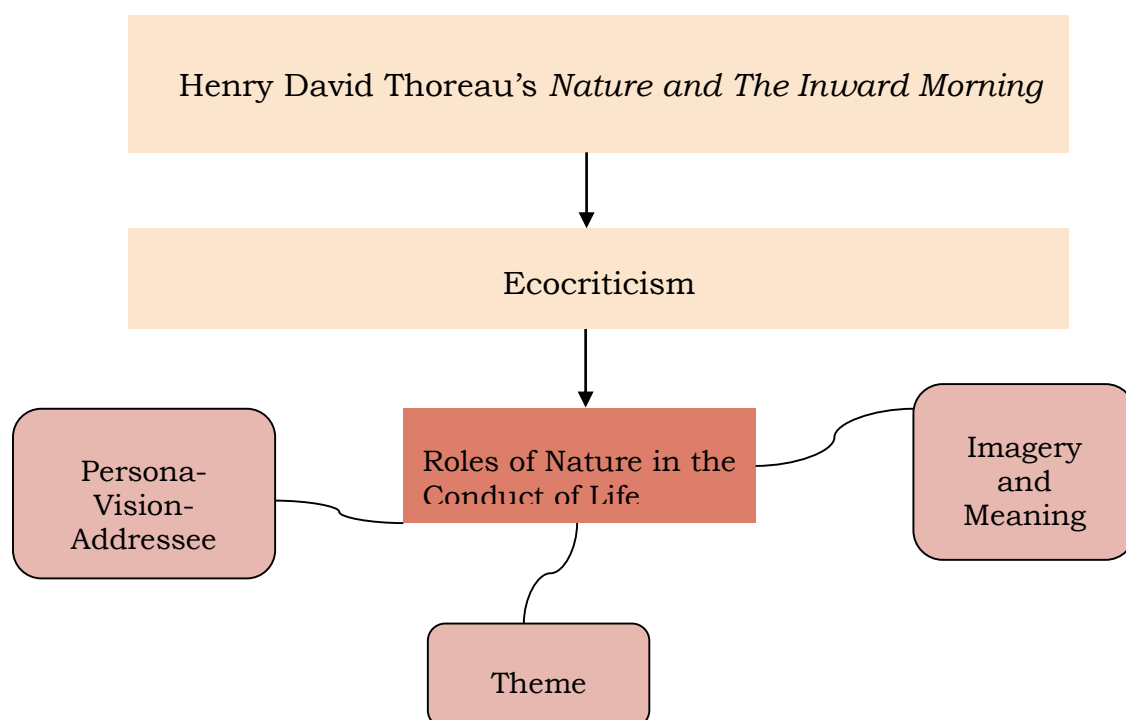


Figure 1. Schematic Diagram of the Theoretical Background of the Study

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literatures are necessary supporting the details for the research.

Ecocriticism has emerged as a dynamic and interdisciplinary field that combines environmental and literary studies. According to Rueckert, one of the pioneering figures in this field, ecocriticism aims

to examine literature through the lens of ecology, emphasizing the relationship between literature and environmental issues (Barry, 2009). Rueckert's essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* (1978) posits that by applying ecological concepts to literature, scholars can reveal the complex relationship between humans and their environment. However, as ecocriticism did not begin as an organized movement, early contributions to the field were scattered and often classified under diverse headings, such as pastoralism, human ecology, and American studies (Barry, 2009).

Ecocriticism is also defined as the study of literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary perspective, in which literary scholars explore environmental themes and analyze literature's role in addressing ecological issues (Association for the Study of Literature and Environment). This broad approach allows ecocriticism to intersect with fields like cultural studies, philosophy, and ethics, often being referred to as "green studies," "ecopoetics," or "environmental literary criticism."

Gomides (2006) offers an operational definition of ecocriticism, describing it as a field that analyzes and promotes artistic works raising moral questions about human interactions with nature while encouraging audiences to adopt sustainable practices. Joseph Henry Vogel (2006) further expands on this by suggesting that ecocriticism represents an economic school of thought, as it prompts discussions about resource allocation without purely technical solutions.

The development of ecocriticism has been influenced by environmental writers such as Henry David Thoreau, who is often regarded as the precursor to ecocritical thinking. In *Walden*, Thoreau illustrates how nature serves as a source of beauty, inspiration, and symbolism, presenting an ideal of harmonious living with the environment. Nature, for Thoreau, is both a model for ethical life and a profound influence on creative expression.

Ashton Nichols (2011) contributes to this evolving perspective by advocating "urbanatural roosting," a concept that merges urban living with ecological awareness and encourages humans to minimize their ecological impact, similar to other species. Nichols' view represents a shift from traditional romanticized notions of nature to a more integrated approach that aligns urban and natural environments.

Despite its relatively recent establishment as a field, ecocriticism continues to expand, now critiquing not only how literature reflects humanity's troubled relationship with nature but also how literary texts can act as activist tools, promoting environmental stewardship. In analyzing literature's portrayal of nature, ecocritics argue that texts both mirror problematic human-nature relationships and offer solutions for environmental consciousness (Association for the Study of Literature and Environment).

Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism* provides a comprehensive overview of major themes in the field, including pollution, wilderness, and pastoral. Garrard asserts that literature not only reflects environmental issues but also has the power to shape public discourse, positioning ecocriticism as an essential instrument in promoting ecological responsibility (Garrard, 2004). This work supports the idea that ecocriticism allows scholars and readers to view literature as an active force for environmental advocacy.

Additionally, Lawrence Buell's *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* expands on ecocriticism's potential by arguing that literary imagination plays a critical role in fostering ecological awareness and responsibility (Buell, 2005). Buell's exploration of environmental ethics within literature provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how literary texts can influence public attitudes toward environmental sustainability.

Through these perspectives, ecocriticism emerges not only as a method for analyzing literature but also as a transformative force that redefines humanity's role within the environment, encouraging sustainable interactions and ecological mindfulness in both life and art.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research study is qualitative in nature using ecocriticism. Henry David Thoreau's *Nature* and *The Inward Morning* are subjected to ecocritical perspective. The poems undergo close inspection through persona-vision-addressee transaction, imagery and their meaning, and the poems' themes.

After examining the poems, the role of nature to human's self-actualization is then drawn from the interpretations.

V. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Phase one presents the persona-vision-addressee transaction of Thoreau's *Nature* and *The Inward Morning*.

Table 1: Persona-vision-addressee

| POEM | PERSONA Speaking | VISION Spoken of | ADDRESSEE Spoken to |
|-----------------------------|--|---|---|
| <i>"Nature"</i> | contented first person narrator living in nature (Walden pond) | nature's serenity and peacefulness | people living in town or city |
| <i>"The Inward Morning"</i> | satisfied first person narrator living in nature (Walden pond) | nature's beauty, cycle of seasons, celestial bodies | people who have become disenchanted with their routinized existence |

The persona in the poem *Nature* is a first-person narrator who expresses his contentment living with nature. He narrates that nature gives him solace and helps him discover higher truth of life. He believes nature establishes the basis by which human beings must gauge lives. Thus, he says to his reader his preference to be nature's student than to spend his life in the buzzing city life.

*For I'd rather be thy child
And pupil, in the forest wild,
Than be the king of men elsewhere,
And most sovereign slave of care:
To have one moment of thy dawn,
Than share the city's year forlorn.
(Stanza 3, lines 15-20)*

In these lines, the persona, in a more practical vein, sees his time at Walden Pond as a "border" life between the numbing over civilization of the town and a freer existence in the wilderness. The border life, he suggests, is fruitful precisely because it allows one to grow, to participate in the re-civilizing of one's own life.

In a similar fashion, the persona in *The Inward Morning* is a satisfied first-person narrator living in nature. He expresses his amazement of nature's behaviors and gleans precious lessons from each of them. The speaker asks his reader to attend to what is immediately present in nature: the action of birds, the shining of the sun, the trees, the flowers and insects, the sounds of night and morning, and silences both inner and outer.

*How could the patient pine have known
The morning breeze would come,
Or humble flowers anticipate
The insect's noontday hum,
(Stanza 5, lines 17-20)
Till the new light with morning cheer*

*From far streamed through the aisles,
And nimbly told the forest trees
For many stretching miles?
(Stanza 6, lines 21-24)*

The speaker wants his reader to learn attentiveness on what he or she has not perceived before, and, more important, in the process the persona slows down the reader's world so that he or she might understand what it would be like to undertake his or her own experiment in attentiveness. His aim is not to have others imitate his move to Walden but to have them consider their own possibilities for improving their situations, for overcoming their "lives of quiet desperation."

*Packed in my mind lie all the clothes
Which outward nature wears,
And in its fashion's hourly change
It all things else repairs.
(Stanza 1, lines 1-4)*

Phase two presents the poems' imagery and their corresponding meanings. Imagery consists of language that functions as a way for the reader to better imagine the world of literature. Imagery draws on the five senses.

Table 2: Imagery and meaning

| POEM | IMAGERY | MEANING |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| <i>"Nature"</i> | meteor, comet, zephyr, river | freedom, limitless, unrestricted, eternity |
| | leafy din, forest, reeds, woods | serenity, peace, attentiveness |
| | dawn | renewal, rebirth |
| | pupil, child | innocence |
| | king of men, city | dominance, selfishness, restriction |
| <i>"The Inward Morning"</i> | sky, clouds, heaven | freedom, limitless, unrestricted, eternity |
| | pine tree, flowers, insects | values of activities in the present |
| | sun, summer | illumination, awakening |
| | Morning, twilight, dawn | renewal, rebirth |

In the poem, nature, meteor, comet, zephyr (wind) and the river are imagery used to represent freedom and being unrestrained. Images taken from astronomy are usually explained away as being the result of Thoreau's interest in metaphysical poetry. Astronomical imagery would have been used by Thoreau anyway for several reasons. First, the stars and planets are beyond the influence of earth and its affairs; in that sense they are free. Second, they are beyond any pre-occupation with time, and therefore are eternal. As a result, they offer Thoreau many opportunities to use them as vehicles for the expression of his ideas.

Woods, reeds, leafy din and the forest are also imagery used by the speaker to express serenity, peace, and attentiveness which are necessary in order for a person to perceive things which he or she has not perceived before which is helpful for self-cultivation. This is the very reason why the persona in the poem intentionally lived for two years in a cabin.

In keeping with one of the basic concerns of his life, Thoreau at times contrasts freedom of the individual with the restrictions that a state can impose on him. In here, he uses the image of a *city* and the *king of men* which represent the idea of restriction and dominance over an individual. Society lives under the state thus the persona in the poem prefers to live outside it. In the last stanza of the poem the speaker says:

For I'd rather be thy child

*And pupil, in the forest wild,
 Than be the king of men elsewhere,
 And most sovereign slave of care:
 To have one moment of thy dawn,
 Than share the city's year forlorn.
 (Stanza 3, lines 15-20)*

It can be inferred that the persona considered the state as often monarchical, implying rule of one man over another. This is also a direct reference to Thoreau's opposition of the American-Mexican Slavery during his time.

Similarly, in the poem *The Inward Morning*, the persona also uses images of celestial bodies such as the sky, clouds, and heaven to express his belief of duality-the physical and the ideal world. These images represent freedom and eternity. He also talks of the importance of valuing the daily activities of life as observed in the behavior of flowers, insects, and the trees.

The sun, in addition to being found frequently in a description of morning, appears as a symbol of something eternal or at least stable. The sun quite naturally was used by Thoreau, since it is a life-giving force, but in addition it is beyond the influence of earthly forces. From Thoreau's point of view, it is completely free and without restriction. All the images discussed so far are images of nature and images of freedom. In describing the sun, Thoreau says:

*What is it gilds the trees and clouds,
 And paints the heavens so gay,
 But yonder fast-abiding light
 With its unchanging ray?
 (Stanza 3, lines 9-12)*

The speaker concludes the poem by drawing a parallel between morning and a dawn within him, again emphasizing the relationship between man and nature.

*I've heard within my inmost soul
 Such cheerful morning news
 In the horizon of my mind
 Have' seen such orient hues,
 As in the twilight of the dawn,
 When the first birds awake,
 Are heard within some Silent wood
 Where they the small twigs break,
 (Stanzas 7 and 8)*

Usually, however, morning is presented in contrast with some other parts of the day: noon, evening, or night. These are times when activity is restricted either by the heat of a glaring sun, or the absence of light. Morning is always presented in a positive way and the other times of the day.

To summarize, both poems use several images such as clouds, smoke, and wind and it weaves them, together with a description of man, into a complex statement of the role of nature, of man, and of their relationship with the universe. *Nature* and *The Inward Morning* are produced by the freedom-restriction, activity-inactivity tension which is common to so much of Thoreau's imagery. This tension reflects one of his lifelong concerns: the extent of the individual's freedom within society. His selection of imagery is determined by the relationship between two conflicting ideas, freedom and restriction, which also comprise his basic thematic concern.

Phase three presents the themes of the poems. Theme is defined as the main idea or an underlying meaning of a literary work, which may be stated directly or indirectly.

Table 3: Theme

| POEM | THEME |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|
| <i>"Nature"</i> | Nature as teacher |
| <i>"The Inward Morning"</i> | Nature as teacher |

By analyzing the poems using persona-vision-addressee transaction and by studying the imagery and their meanings, a common theme for both poems is drawn out. Both poems express that Nature is the great teacher, and man can do no better than to pattern his life after the lessons nature has to teach.

In the poem *Nature*, the speaker's concern for having an active life is closely connected with his ideas about the individual. In order to act, man must be free. In order for anything valuable to occur, man must be unrestricted. Inactivity results when man is restrained, either by his own inertia, or by some outside force, usually society, often and nature can become one only when the individual is free to move about or to make choices, and Thoreau vigorously asserts this freedom. Most of Thoreau's work reflects the idea that man can be free in nature.

*For I'd rather be thy child
And pupil, in the forest wild,
Than be the king of men elsewhere,
And most sovereign slave of care:
To have one moment of thy dawn,
Than share the city's year forlorn.
(Stanza 3, lines 15-20)*

Thoreau couples his concern for the present in time with a concern for the present in place. As the individual can best experience life at the present moment, so can he best experience life by concentrating on his own locale. Thoreau's experiences at Walden Pond substantiated this belief in the universality of a specific place. Walden Pond, for Thoreau, is a little universe of its own. It was self-sufficient, depending on no inlet or outlet, fed by its own springs and mysteriously draining of the surplus. It was calm and serene, a small part of the eternal.

In the poem *The Inward Morning*, nature serves as a great teacher to man. Nature performs certain functions and allows the individual to perform certain functions. Thoreau continually shows a delight in nature, in the fact that nature is free, as he too is free. Nature is the translucent window through which Thoreau can see the outlines of this ideal. Beneath the annual death and rebirth of nature, he sees something again which transcends earthly restrictions and remains eternal.

The persona in the poem sees nature as guide to life and he determines to associate himself with it. At times, however, the connection between Thoreau and nature appears to go beyond the more formal pupil teacher relationship. In fact, Thoreau attempts to become one with nature, to melt into it or fuse with it. The poet has finally broken down the duality of the ideal and the real; he is one with nature. His body's fluids mingle with the melting snow; his blood becomes part of a stream. This fusion is a supreme reconciliation of man with nature, a oneness behind the dual projection of the ideal in the form of outward nature and man. Nature can teach man because it is a better projection of the Ideal. It is freer and less hindered than man and by becoming one with nature, also attains this freedom.

*Packed in my mind lie all the clothes
Which outward nature wears,
And in its fashion's hourly change*

It all things else repairs.

(Stanza 1, lines 1-4)

In vain I look for change abroad,

And can no difference find,

Till some new ray of peace uncalled

Illumes my inmost mind.

(Stanza 2, lines 5-8)

Generally, Thoreau's primary thematic use of nature is as teacher. There is a practical reason for this use, since nature continues to take care of its own. With no help from man, the birds build nests, the trees disseminate their seeds, and the waters keep themselves fresh and clean. This self-sufficiency is admired and emulated by him. In addition, nature has a peacefulness and dignity which appealed to Thoreau. However, he also finds a metaphysical reason for his choice of nature as his teacher. Nature is the meeting point of the ideal and the physical; therefore, by observing nature, Thoreau was observing the ideal at work and by imitating nature, he was approaching a correspondence with the ideal.

VI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study presents Henry David Thoreau's *Nature* and *The Inward Morning* as poems that articulate the role of nature for man's self-actualization using ecocriticism. The persona-vision-addressee transaction is discussed. In addition, the rich imagery in the poems and their corresponding meaning were also extracted. Thoreau's favorite images are taken from areas of nature-which are relatively unhampered. Meteor, comet, sun, wind, dawn, and celestial bodies appear to be free and unrestricted. Morning, dawn, and twilight are also used to symbolize renewal, rebirth and awakening. His poems' images also cluster around the central duality of freedom. Thematically, his poetry reveals the human desire for freedom and action as they are opposed and are limited by restrictions of various kinds. In order to attain this freedom and self-actualization, man has to see nature as his or her great teacher. The researcher recommends that other aspects of Henry David Thoreau's poem be studied such as its versification, structure, and other poetic devices using other literary approaches.

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