

# On Ecological Philosophy in Walden

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**Abstract**— *Walden is the representative work of Henry David Thoreau, the most influential transcendentalist writer in the United States in the 19th century. The paper discusses the relationship between man and nature from the perspectives of ecological philosophy, anti-anthropocentrism and the inner spiritual ecological connotation of man. It points out that nature can endow people with the elements of inner beauty, and her unspeakable purity and kindness always endow people with health and joy; human beings, like other animals and plants, are part of the biosphere of nature; human happiness, freedom and civilization do not necessarily depend on the abundance of material life, but, to some extent, on the harmonious coexistence with nature.*

**Keywords**— *Thoreau; Walden; Ecological philosophy.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

*Walden* is the representative work of Henry David Thoreau, the most influential transcendentalist writer, ecologist philosopher and politician in the United States in the 19th century. It is called as "one of the top 25 classics shaping readers' lives" by US Library of Congress. Lawrence Buell, a famous American ecological critic, respected the book as a "green bible", and Thoreau was also honored as an "environmental saint" (Buell, 1995), a "son of nature" (Huang, 2018) and a "saint who protects the nature and human nature" (Lu, 2011). For this reason, "Walden Lake has become a model of harmonious coexistence between man and nature" (Cheng, 2007). In the foreword to the 150th anniversary edition of *Walden*, John Updike, a master of contemporary American literature, wrote, "of all the American literary classics that have emerged in the mid-nineteenth century...this book contributes the most to American self-consciousness today" (Updike, 2004). In his book *Walden*, Thoreau recorded his seclusion at Walden Lake near the town of Concord, Massachusetts from 1845 to 1847. At the beautiful and quiet Walden Lake, just like a

paradise, "Thoreau kept observing, listening, feeling and thinking" (Song, 2011); Recorded his observations, analyzed and studied the information and experiences brought to human beings by nature. Up to now, Thoreau's masterpiece *Walden* is still able to cause a global audience to examine the real world and make people deeply aware that: Man is but one part of nature's biosphere; Human should have a beautiful landscape, ecological balance of the living environment; Human beings have the responsibility and obligation to protect the earth mother that we rely on for survival; Only by consciously integrating into nature, following the inherent spirit of nature, and respecting and conforming to the laws of nature, can we human beings truly return to the natural home of beautiful mountains and rivers, and the spiritual home of civilization and progress that we have been longing for for a long time, and ultimately realize the green development and sustainable development of the whole human society.

*Walden* is a prose work that has been deeply concerned by literary researchers all over the world. At present, scholars around the world mainly study it from the following aspects: Using comparative literature to analyze the ideas contained in it; From the linguistic level to study the language features; From the perspective of ecological literature criticism to interpret it, etc. In recent years, the representative figure abroad who is engaged in the research on the ecological literature criticism of *Walden* is American Lawrence Buell, who believes that Thoreau's ecological thought, lifestyle and personal cultivation have promoted the formation and development of American ecological culture. Scholars relevant to ecological literary criticism of *Walden* in China include: Xiangui Su, pointed out that "Thoreau's love of nature and the insight of natural harmonious relations, the emphasis on natural spirit and aesthetic significance, as well as the critique of materialism and capitalist economy provides a unique inspiration and support for the ecological ethics" (Su, 2002); Feng Chang believed that "the life

attitude of advocating material simplicity, spiritual wealth and harmony with nature embodied in Walden is of profound enlightenment significance for people who live in the realistic and flashy society" (Chang, 2018); Shaoxing Li pointed out that "the study of Thoreau's ecological thought has a positive enlightening effect on our re-understanding of the relationship between human beings and nature in the development of contemporary society" (Li, 2016). Nuo Wang, a Chinese scholar of ecocriticism and ecological civilization, holds that "ecocriticism is a literary criticism that explores the relationship between literature and nature under the guidance of ecocriticism, especially the thought of ecological integralism. It should reveal the ideological and cultural roots of the ecological crisis that reflect in the literary works, and at the same time explore the ecological aesthetics of literature and its artistic expression" (Wang, 2013). Albert Gore, the ecologist and former vice President of the United States points out that "the greatest threat to our planet is not the threats themselves, but the lack of awareness of those threats, the fact that most people do not realize that the ecological crisis will definitely lead human beings to the grave" (Gore, 1992). Therefore, it is the ultimate mission of ecological literature criticism to recognize the increasingly serious ecological crisis, deal with and repair the relationship between man and nature, and realize the harmonious coexistence and co-prosperity between man and nature. This article intends to analyze and explore the connotation of the ecological ideology of the work Walden from the perspective of ecocriticism, so as to play a guiding role in human's response to the global ecological crisis, the green and sustainable development of human society, and the social practice of ecological civilization and spiritual civilization construction of the whole human beings.

## II. ON THE ECOLOGICAL PHILOSOPHY OF WALDEN

In his book Walden, Thoreau pointed out that nature can endow people with factors of inner beauty. When people enjoy the four seasons of nature friendship, life will not become a heavy burden; Simple, brave, nature-loving people will not produce vulgar sadness; It's so sweet and so rewarding to be in nature's company. If people live a simple life, it will reduce many crimes for the society. The reason why crimes, such as theft, robbery, and etc. occur in our

society is that some people have gotten too much, and some other people want to get too much. "When your thoughts gallop on the grand cosmic proposition, connecting you with nature again, there is infinite mystery in it" (Su, 2004). "Nature came straight to my eyes like a huge hanging painting. At the window of my wooden house little saplings grew merrily, and the wild sumac and blackberry vines climbed gaily, and the yellow pines rose high and tall" (Su, 2004). Around Walden Lake, the graceful alder and the breeze-shaking white poplar make people so exciting; the fox, the skunk and the hare come and go freely in the growth dense forest, brings the infinite vitality to the nature. The surface of Walden Lake is as smooth as a mirror, like a crystal embedded in the earth, crystal clear, clean and flawless. No one can take away the great wealth that nature has given to human beings, for she belongs not only to us, but also to our children and our grandchildren. The unspeakable purity and grace of nature forever "give us human beings warmth, health and joy" (Yang, 2004). When spring comes, the ice on the lake quietly melts. On the shore of Walden Lake various kinds of grasses like a green ribbon, quietly emerge from the soil, springing forth the new life; Various birds sing and fly here and there in the woods, their feathers bright; Plants begin to sprout, grow, bloom and bear fruits, and the breeze stirring them, adjusting the tiny swings at the poles and maintaining the constant balance of nature. It is nature that keeps us human beings healthy, energetic and peaceful. The vegetables and green plants provided by our mother earth are the best natural nourishment for us human beings. Fresh air is a magic bullet to keep us human beings healthy. The clear spring water is indispensable to our human beings life. It is nature that keeps human beings young and full of vigor and vitality, and brings us human beings hope and vigor.

"To live and let others live is a more powerful ecological law than to live and die." (Naess, 1973). Man is but one of the many members of nature's biosphere, and only "an infinitesimal part" (Chen, 2004). The natural biosphere is a huge unified whole, and the human biosphere is just a subsystem in this huge biosphere. The harmony and stability of the human ecosphere is the necessary condition to ensure the harmony and stability of the great biosphere of nature, at the same time, the development of human ecosphere is restricted by the great biosphere of nature. That is just

because the speed of human development of alternative resources can not catch up with the rapid depletion of non-renewable resources, the speed of pollution is far faster than the speed of pollution control. Jonathan Bate, a British ecological critic points out: "A healthy ecosystem is one that is always in balance. In such a system, predatory species can be allowed to exist, but only to the extent that the system can be balanced" (Bate, 2000). Rachel Carson, an American biologist, environmental movement advocate and ecological literature writer says, "The plants on earth are part of the great web of life, and there is a close and inextricable relationship between one plant and another, and between plants and animals. If we human beings are to leave the breath of life in nature for future generations, we must learn to respect the exquisite, delicate and fragile web of natural life, and even every connection that it contains" (Carson, 1962). All human activities must follow the inherent laws of nature, and their actions must be constrained by the overall interests of the ecosystem, and their demands on nature must be limited to what the ecosystem as a whole can bear. Therefore, human beings should live in harmony with nature, rather than being arrogant and above it. Man's conquest of nature is bound to alienate and antagonize nature and man. "If human beings continue to conquer nature irresponsibly, irrationally and without wisdom, then what can be brought to the earth and human beings themselves can only be complete destruction" (Carol B. Gartner & Rachel Carson, 1983). Mankind must be soberly aware that: "Without the sustainability of ecosystems, there can be no sustainability of human societies; Without the harmony and stability of the ecosystem, there can be no harmony and stability of human society. When the natural ecosystem completely collapses, it will be the day when the human race finally goes to extinction" (Wang, 2013).

### III. THE ANTI-ANTHROPOCENTRISM OF WALDEN

"The core of ecological holism is: to regard the overall interests of the ecosystem as the highest value rather than the interests of human beings; To consider the complete, harmonious, stable, balanced and persistent maintenance and protection of the ecological system as a fundamental measure of all things, and as the ultimate standard of human culture, way of life, science and technology progress,

economic growth and social development" (Wang, 2013). Thoreau wrote in the chapter "silence" of his *Walden*: In this quiet and beautiful evening, my whole body seems to become a whole, every pore into the spirit of joy. In the nature I fly, melt into its body, the weather is cool, the clouds with the wind, although the very ordinary scenery is not a bit strange, the whole environment is like the special beauty for me. The frock from the distance reminds me that the night is coming, and the nightingale's cheerful tune accompanied by the breeze makes people feel very comfortable. The graceful alder, slightly shaking poplar, quite impressive, I almost held my breath. The surface of Walden Lake was as smooth as a mirror, and one would not have thought of a storm if it had not been for the ripples of the evening wind. It grew dark and the wind continued to blow. Restless animals are always on the move, which is the best time for them to find prey. The fox, the skunk, and the hare, who did not know what it was, came and went freely and merrily in the fields and the woods. They bring life to nature and are the link between day and night. Nature gives health and joy to human beings, and at the same time she gives them compassion. If anyone grieves for the right reasons, the whole nature will be moved. The sun will fade, the wind will sigh sympathetically, the clouds will shed tears, and the trees will shed their leaves and put on mourning clothes. Shouldn't we human beings be connected to the spirit of the earth? Are we human beings not part of nature's biosphere?

In his work *Dialectics of Nature*, Engels pointed out that: "We must remember at every step: We rule over nature in no way as conquerors rule over nations, in no way as human beings stand outside nature --- on the contrary, we human beings do belong to nature and exist in it, together with our flesh, our blood, and our brain; All that we have over nature is that we are stronger than any other creatures, able to understand and correctly apply the laws of nature" (Yu, 1984). All the scientific and technological development, economic growth and social progress of human beings should follow the laws of nature. "Man is but a small part of nature" (Zhang, 2017), and the task of man is to enlarge his compassion and embrace nature. The total amount of nature has provided us human beings with enough abundant resources to sustain our existence, but the endless greed and increasingly extravagant lifestyle of human beings make their demands far beyond the carrying capacity and supply

capacity of nature. This vicious expansion of human beings has seriously disturbed the overall balance and stability of the ecosystem and seriously endangered the existence of all life in the whole system. The most fatal mistake that human beings have made lies in their self-centered and short-term interests, and their failure to realize the overall interests and values of the ecological system that lives well together with human beings and coexists harmoniously with human beings. Nature is a unified organism, in which any kind of organism has an inseparable relationship with certain other organisms and the whole ecosystem. Therefore, to destroy any of the links of the relationship, will inevitably lead to a series of relation damage, or even the whole system disorder. However, with time goes on, on the one hand, science and technology develop continuously, on the other hand, the continuous deterioration of the global ecological environment rises to the surface: global warming, melting glaciers; storms raging and deserts growing; forests dwindling and fresh water shorting. Industrialization has led to the rise of a large number of factories between the green mountains and the blue waters, with thick smoke, sewage and haze, depriving our future generations of the right to live between the green mountains and the clear waters.

We human beings could have lived more simply, more easily and more fully, because "a simple and unsophisticated life is beneficial to everyone, both physically and mentally" (Xu, 1985). However, "the reality is that human beings often struggle in the net of materials, and "have become the tools of their tools" (Such, 2004). Man's attempt to "conquer nature" is bound to worsen his relations with other creatures. "Human beings are only a part of nature, and they can never be separated from nature. Only by ensuring the continuous existence of the whole nature can they ensure their safe, healthy and long-term survival" (Wang, 2013). Only by caring about nature, returning to nature and caring for all living and non-living things in nature can human beings better understand and protect the mother nature on which we live. Only by respecting nature, by respecting the laws of nature, and by taking our due responsibilities to all species in nature, can we human beings ultimately save ourselves.

#### IV. THE INNER SPIRITUAL AND ECOLOGICAL IMPLICATION OF HUMAN BEINGS IN WALDEN

Thoreau's birthplace, the town of Concord, Massachusetts, is the birthplace of American culture and a beacon of spiritual civilization throughout the United States. People living in the world, on earth should live with what kind of attitude? Thoreau pointed out in the "simple life" chapter of his *Walden*: "The vast majority of luxuries, and what many people say makes life more comfortable, are not only unnecessary, but also a hindrance to human progress and development" (Su, 2004). "Human beings should return to nature and live a simple life" (Zhao, 2010), and the happiness, the freedom and the civilization of human beings do not necessarily depend on the great richness of material life, but, to some extent, on their harmonious coexistence and co-existence with all the natural things. The so-called development progress and hedonistic waste can only deprive human beings of clean, safe and healthy living space, and finally lead human beings to the road of ecological imbalance and self-destruction. Therefore, the development of human society should be a comprehensive development, including people's spiritual enrichment, aesthetic experience, personality perfection and poetic dwelling, etc. Among them, the continuous existence of nature and uninterrupted ecological balance are two indispensable important conditions.

The harmony between man and nature should be based on the principles of equality, friendship and mutual subjectivity. The relationship between human beings and all things in nature is an interactive subject relationship. The relationship between human and nature is between individual and whole, local and comprehensive, subsystem and mother system. Only when human beings realize that natural objects occupy unique and irreplaceable positions in the ecosystem and conduct equal communication with them as individuals, can the interactive subjectivity between human and nature be realized. It is directly related to human freedom, human survival and human self-realization to coexist with all the natural things and to establish and maintain the relationship of equality and fraternity between subjects. To this end, "human beings should take the integrity, harmony, stability, balance and sustainable existence of the ecosystem that is conducive to maintaining and protecting it as the fundamental measure of everything and the ultimate standard for judging the human lifestyle, scientific and technological progress, economic growth and social

development" (Wang, 2013).

The soil, the mountains, the rivers, the forests, the plants and the animals on which we human beings live are an indivisible whole, as Donald Worster, a prominent American environmental historian, has pointed out: "To be in harmony with the earth is like to be in harmony with a friend, you can't just cherish his right hand and cut off his left hand" (Worster, 1994). Compared with the existence of the earth and other species on the earth, human beings are mere passengers. We human beings should not deprive other species of the right to survive, and exist just for our own interests. It is our bountiful responsibility and obligation to maintain the biodiversity of the earth and protect the integrity of the earth. "The road is on the way, the way is at the foot, everything depends on human beings' own choice" (Lu, 2011). Only by consciously integrating into nature, following the inner spirit of nature, and following and respecting the laws of nature, can we human beings truly return to the spiritual homeland of happiness, freedom and civilization.

## V. CONCLUSION

Thoreau's *Walden* inspired people's ecological consciousness, awakened people's complex of nature and ecological friendship, and advocated people to choose the ecological way of survival. At the same time, it makes the people all over the world realize that nature can meet the needs of human life, but cannot meet the unlimited greed of mankind; Human beings are just one of the many members of the natural biosphere, and should get along with all the natural things equally; All human activities should follow the laws of nature and act in accordance with its objective laws. Only in this way can mankind create a better homeland, realize the sustainable development of human society, and return to the happy, beautiful natural homeland and spiritual homeland that mankind are yearning for. As Thoreau put it in the "conclusion" chapter of his *Walden*: "The years are passing inexorably like water, and tomorrow there is only a faint dawn. Darkness prevents us from seeing everything. It is only when we open the windows of our hearts and get ready for tomorrow that the light of day will come. There will be many more daybreak, for the sun is but a morning star" (Su, 2004). Therefore, we human beings still have a long way to go before we can realize the aspiration of harmonious coexistence and common prosperity between man and nature,

realize the dream of returning to the natural homeland with green mountains and clear waters, and the spiritual homeland of civilization and progress, and realize the ultimate goal of green development and sustainable development of the whole human society.

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