Transcendentalism’s Advocacy and Perpetuation of Capitalist Ideology: The Physical and Spiritual Profitability of Henry David Thoreau

Geoffrey D. Borshof
Montclair State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/etd

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/etd/779

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Montclair State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses, Dissertations and Culminating Projects by an authorized administrator of Montclair State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@montclair.edu.
MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Transcendentalism’s Advocacy and Perpetuation of Capitalist Ideology

The Physical and Spiritual Profitability of Henry David Thoreau

Geoffrey D. Borshof

A Master’s Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts

January 2012

College: College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Department: English

Certified by:

Dr. Marietta Morrissey
Dean of College

12/30/11

Thesis Committee:

Dr. Monika Elbert
Thesis Sponsor

Dr. Tom Benediktson
Committee Member

Dr. Jonathan Greenberg
Committee Member

Dr. Dan Bronson
Department Chair
ABSTRACT

Henry David Thoreau is often perceived as a naturalist, a minimalist, and an anti-capitalist. However, more in-depth readings of *Walden* reveal numerous fundamental similarities between Transcendentalism and Capitalism. This thesis argues that Henry David Thoreau did in fact advocate a capitalist agenda not merely through his texts, but his lifestyle as well.

Much of Thoreau scholarship places an emphasis on several fundamental points including individualism, the right to ownership, support of the abolitionist movement, frugality, and Thoreau’s experience as an inventor and engineer. By examining these values and exploring the foundation of Capitalism through readings of Adam Smith’s *A Wealth of Nations*, it becomes clear that Henry David Thoreau perpetuated capitalist ideologies. Despite a constant yearning for simplicity, Thoreau was a self-interested entrepreneur who wrote *Walden* as a guide to economic and spiritual success. Thoreau wrote about a vast array of topics that taught his readers to capitalize on the importance of labor, value, and accomplishment. Through the exploration of these values, juxtaposed by the fundamentals of Capitalism, it becomes clear that much of the Transcendentalist movement was motivated by similar philosophies as Capitalism. This thesis makes that argument by addressing blatant misinterpretations about Capitalism, and comparing the two philosophies side by side.
TRANSCENDENTALISM'S ADVOCACY & PERPETUATION OF CAPITALIST IDEOLOGY

The Physical and Spiritual Profitability of Henry David Thoreau

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Master of Arts

By
GEOFFREY D. BORSHOF
Montclair State University
Montclair, NJ
2011
# Table of Contents

**Introduction** 3-10

**Part I: Capitalism v. Transcendentalism**

The Culture of Capital and The Transcendentalists 11-19
False Perspectives 20-25
 Literary Success in the Age of Enterprise 26-31

**Part II: Thoreau and Adam Smith**

Labor & Value 32-40
 Walden as a Guide to Economic and Spiritual Success 41-47
 Self Interest and Virture 48-59

**Works Cited** 60-63
Although Thoreau was an unquestionable advocate of simplicity, his life and works were entrenched in the philosophies of trade, business, enterprise, and economics, all of which are primary components of capitalism. Overall, economics was perhaps one of the strongest themes throughout Thoreau’s works. Within the confines of a capitalist system, economics refers not merely to a marketplace, but to the free market, which embodies the axiom that there must exist, a free exchange of ideas. Max Weber believed that “the market and its free play of forces was the basis of freedom and rationality” (Mueller 151). For Thoreau, the economy was both ideological and literal. These capitalist ideas and practices were part of Thoreau’s fundamental values, and they played a tremendous role in his theories, his works, and his life. Thoreau’s advocacy of capitalism may have been written as veiled subtext throughout his literary works, but in addition to his underlying subject matter, strong capitalist themes were prevalent throughout the course of his entire life. These themes were dominant in his ambitions and they were also expressed by his desire to perpetuate individualism and freedom.

Undoubtedly, there is a clear difficulty in labeling Thoreau as a capitalist, which exists in part due to his self imposed image as a minimalist, along with his never-ending pursuit of the ideal, all of which is subsequently immortalized by his published works. Because of Thoreau’s advocacy toward simplicity, much of the critical work about his life and time at Walden Pond confer that he was an anti-capitalist. However, such is not the case.

In “Thoreau, Extravagance, and the Economy of Nature”, Richard Grusin proposes
the idea that Thoreau’s experiment on economy at Walden Pond was actually motivated by the philosophies of laissez-faire capitalism. Grusin says:

Revisionist critics have challenged the traditional consensus that Thoreau went to live at Walden Pond in search of an organic and spiritual economy of nature with which to supplant the arbitrary and profane marketplace economy imposed by antebellum capitalism. Instead, they have suggested that the economy Thoreau practiced at Walden was not independent of the ideology of American capitalism but made in its image. (30)

Furthermore, Grusin draws upon Sacvan Bercovitch’s “The American Jeremiad”, which explains that Walden completely embodied “the myth of American laissez-faire individualism” (31). This view on total and radical individualism is certainly a cornerstone to the entire capitalist foundation, in that all people have the right to private ownership, which includes possession over one’s self. The right to both private and self-ownership correlates with Thoreau’s encouragement and political activism for the entire abolitionist movement. The fact that much of the American infrastructure was built on the backs of slaves in no way accurately portrays America’s capitalist roots. Capitalism does not support the suppression of one for the benefit of another, but relies on one’s own ability to strive for greatness, rather than stepping on the heads of those below. I also contest that Thoreau’s lifelong pursuit of the ideal and struggle to achieve the noblest and most virtuous self-image is another factor supporting the argument that he was a capitalist. In the first pages of Walden Thoreau says, “What a man thinks of himself, that it is which determines, or rather indicates, his fate”(2).
For Thoreau, it is not about public opinion or consensus that determines the success of men, but the greatness one can only find within, through an expression of ideas, work, and self-awareness.

However, there will forever remain a disparity between Thoreau’s ideologies and the pragmatism he was forced to exhibit while living in a society with its modern cultures and customs. This is not exclusive to Thoreau, but correlates to any philosopher who is unable to live exactly in the way they teach. Because of this premise, I argue that it is appropriate to examine both the finished products of Thoreau’s works in juxtaposition with elements of his life. Specifically, Thoreau’s published works will always be the views of an utopia, rather than an accurate representation of his values for everyday life.

In, “The Problem of Ideology in American Literary History,” Sacvan Bercovitch identifies that the perception of critical consensus about an artist’s ideological ambiguities is problematic. This is in part, my rationale to examine Thoreau’s ideologies in conjunction with his motivation, and the realities of his everyday life. Bercovitch says:

> When Robert Rantoul\(^1\) *footnote mine* invokes the tenets of laissez-faire to attack the abuses of capitalism, we claim that his views are contradictory or ambivalent. When John O’Sullivan advances the principles of minimal government, self-reliance, and American progress, we accuse him of using ideology to veil oppression. When Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman express that ambivalence and advance those principles, we say they’re creating ambiguities, criticizing the actual under the aspect of the ideal, and enhancing the possibilities of democracy. (638)

\(^1\) Robert Rantoul, Jr. (August 13, 1805 – August 7, 1852) was an American politician from Massachussets.
Becovitch illustrates the quintessential defense for capitalism as the ideal form of government and economic system because he explains that the ideal will always be flawed by the practice. Essentially, when analyzing the works of Thoreau, and applying his philosophies to the practice of daily life, they will always fall short. Perhaps ideology does “veil oppression” but the converse is also true. Oppression and corruption also veil the ideology of the capitalist system.

Bercovitch also says,

> The traditional dichotomy between art and ideology—a pillar of the old consensus—is problematic and has increasingly become a subject of debate for this generation...and it may even be that writers who translate political attitudes into universal ideals are just as implicated as the others in the social order and, in the long run, are perhaps more useful in perpetuating it. (639)

Although Bercovitch identifies the problem with analyzing ambiguities, in that it is in and of itself, ambiguous, he makes the bold suggestions that those ambiguities encourage the debate, which inconsequentially promotes and advocates the political ideology. In this vein, Thoreau’s ambiguities may have actually been intentional and his political discourse was an attempt to encourage his readers to constantly strive for perfection. I believe that Thoreau was well aware that success does not lie within the result, but the attempt. This “attempt”, which, for Thoreau was the never-ending journey toward total self-actualization and progress is inherently capitalistic because it suggests that the goal to success is achievable not by external factors, but simply by your desire and motivation to
Thoreau spent a majority of his life outside the solitude of Walden Pond and was quite engaged with society on multiple levels. It is even argued that Thoreau spent time at Walden Pond not to remove himself from society, but to find how he was distinctly connected to it.\(^2\) Thoreau’s role within society varied throughout different phases of his life, during which time he aggressively explored enterprise and capitalism in a multitude of ways. His contributions to society were not just that of a nineteenth century ideologue, a progressive thinker and activist, but also as an industrialist working both in and out of his father’s factory. Upon closer examination, it was not only Thoreau’s desire to become a successful writer and educator that paralleled core aspects of the capitalist system, but his overall work ethic, the lifestyle in which he was raised, and his purely individualistic nature.

The defining characteristics of both capitalism and transcendentalism are contingent upon many factors. For the sake of this essay, the fundamental components of Capitalism and Transcendentalism are confined within the same set of parameters to create a balanced definition for each. Both theories are explored using definitions that encompass several facets. These include a study of their origins, their primary ideologies, and the public’s perception of these theories during the mid-nineteenth century. Reasonably, a theory only exists as conjecture until it is practiced, and subsequently, its pragmatic applications should also be considered. Like many philosophers, Thoreau’s literature is indicative of an idealist who was not able to live life

---

\(^2\) In Prophet in the Market-Place: Thoreau’s Development as a Professional Writer, Steven Fink suggests that Thoreau’s departure to Walden Pond was preceeded his desire to remove himself from society temporarily in order to gain perspective, so that when he returned, he would have a stronger understanding of his role within his society.
in complete conformity with his writings. His experience at Walden Pond was by his own words, an experiment, and although Thoreau had clear messages about simplicity and a desire to lead a more “virtuous” life, there were occasions in both his life and his works that indicate he was not always capable of practicing what he preached. In “Unreading Thoreau,” Henry Golemba explains

*Walden* proffers many “leading ideas” that are confidently asserted and clearly articulated. Its author does believe firmly that many waste their lives, that the railroad rides upon us, that nature can be rejuvenating and beautiful, that materialism exacts a dear price, that the thought and self-discovery are worthwhile pursuits. Still, these “leading ideas” are often wrapped within cloaks of obscurity and ambiguity. Certainty is frequently interwoven with uncertainty. (389)

Golemba implies that some of Thoreau’s ideas might not be so clear cut as he lets his readers believe. What Golemba insinuates by “leading ideas” is the generalities in which Thoreau speaks about things such as the railroad or the value of self-discovery. Methods of self-discovery are not universal, nor is all materialism detrimental to the pursuits of such discovery. The railroad is not entirely bad, and there may exist some benefit to technology. This is not the first time of many that Thoreau’s ideas are described as being at least somewhat ambiguous. Thoreau’s ambiguity is important because his lessons are not limited by a narrow point of view. Above all else, is the morality with whim men must conduct themselves. Furthermore, both Golemba and Bercovitch suggest that Thoreau was deliberately ambiguous. For Bercovitch, it might have been a tactic that Thoreau used for encouragement to his followers, in that he did not alienate their beliefs
with an idea that could only be construed one way. For Golemba, it is for more philosophical reasons that Thoreau shadowed ideologies and “leading ideas” with “cloaks of obscurity”. There were times, where Thoreau may have been more specific, perhaps when he advocated a very specific cause, but overall, his lessons of morality and virtue frequently come in subtext and are often shrouded within capitalist values.

Golemba mentions a level of “uncertainty” throughout Walden, which in some ways is nothing more than an obvious side effect of an “experiment”. After all, Thoreau was only able to hypothesize about the lessons and outcomes that would come about as a result of his time at Walden Pond. However, how Thoreau felt and conducted himself at one particular time was not necessarily a clear indication of how he would feel another day. The volatility of emotions, thoughts, feelings, and actions make it difficult to formulate assumptions about his truest beliefs and values, especially when relying only on Thoreau’s written words. Golemba identifies contradiction throughout various chapters in Walden. He explains that although Thoreau’s chapter on “Economy” is a discussion on living cheaply with a diet of simplicity, one should only do such under certain conditions. Golemba says,

Even simplicity can become highly complex. Walden’s longest chapter [Economy] might detail in extreme precision how economically and cheaply one may live, but the post-structuralist Thoreau advises no one to undertake his dietary regimen unless that reader already as “a well stocked larger” in reserve.

(389)

Contradicting elements of Thoreau’s philosophies exist throughout Walden. In “The Bean Field” he expounds the uncompromising importance and value of a life with virtue
by sowing seeds of "sincerity, truth, faith, innocence, and the like". However, shortly thereafter, says "Alas! I said this to myself; but how another summer is gone, and another, and another, and I am obliged to say to you, Reader, that the seeds which I planted, if indeed they were the seeds of those virtues, were worm-eaten or had lost their vitality, and so did not come up" (*Walden* 449).

Thoreau’s conflicting perspectives are an inevitability of the human condition. We are faced with the inescapable fact that Thoreau’s philosophies are consistently idealistic and the feelings and actions he encountered on a daily basis and activities would never be capable of maintain his impossible standards. This is not to insinuate total hypocrisy, but to highlight the level of double standard in which all philosophers live. Yet, Thoreau’s actions should at least somewhat support and affect his longstanding legacy, although they are often overlooked in post mortem critiques.
Part I: Capitalism v. Transcendentalism

The Culture of Capital and The Transcendentalists

It is when we look at the foundational principles of capitalism through multiple lenses by exploring its origin, its ideologies and its pragmatic applications, does it become easier to define the similitudes of Henry David Thoreau and his theoretical and literal advocacy of capitalism. In *The Relentless Revolution, A History of Capitalism*, Joyce Appleby offers a fairly comprehensive definition of the system. She says,

> Capitalism is a cultural system rooted in economic practices that rotate around the imperative of private investors to turn a profit. Profit seeking usually promotes the production efficiencies like the division of labor, economies of size, specialization, the expansion of the market for one’s goods, and, above, all, innovation. Because capitalism is a cultural system and not simply an economic one, it cannot be explained by material factors alone. (26)

The idea that Capitalism is, as Appleby says, “a cultural system” is an imperative one. Rather than a system built solely upon the idea of material economy and its marketplace, the fact that capitalism is cultural implies that it shapes, alters, and to an extent, defines the ideas, values, and development of the people who live within its infrastructure. In Phillip Wayland Porter’s “Wholes and Fragments: Reflections on the Economy of Affection, Capitalism, and the Human Cost of Development”, he explains that the cultural component of Capitalism manifests itself through various concepts such as notions of value, logic, and time. He says,

> Industrial capitalism has transformed much besides kinship, work, and personal
values. It has reshaped, extended and universalized such concepts as time, space, measure, and value. In service of industrialization, with its emphasis on rationality, flexibility, and efficiency of production, these ideas have been abstracted and standardized for everyone. (8)

Just as Thoreau was incapable of reaching the idealistic, utopist lifestyle for which Transcendentalists strive, the literal practices of capitalism will always be shadowed and tainted by the vulnerabilities and mistakes of the men and women who practice it. Undoubtedly, a level of negativity arises with any ideological theory that gets put into practice. In Appleby’s explanation, she says “In the beginning, capitalist practices provoked an out-pouring of criticisms and defenses” (26). However, she goes on to explain that inherently, capitalism breeds a level of competition, in which people invest their personal capital, which at any time might be a product or their labor. Consequently, this perpetuates the development of both technology and growth in the capacity to communicate and create.

Competition buffets all participants in the investor driven economy whether people are investing their capital, marketing their products, or selling their labor. The series of inventions that harnessed natural energy, first with water and coal fired steam in the eighteenth century, made economic progress dependent upon the exploitation of fossil fuels. (Appleby 26)

Several aspects of the previous passage seem to outright contradict Thoreau’s ideologies. Thoreau was an advocate of reducing one’s material possessions and often felt pity for the day laborer whereas the “industrialist” has a desire to exploit his workers, treating a man like a commodity. However, other components of the passage tend to strike at the
heart of Transcendentalism. Appleby mentions the key fundamental transcendental themes of innovation and progress, while simultaneously explaining that capitalism transcends the exclusivity of economics. For Thoreau, innovation and progress are both indicative of enterprise, as Leonard Neufeldt points out in “An Enterprise of Self-Culture in a Culture of Self Enterprise,” “the term [enterprise] referred to an admirable risk taking, a venturesome spirit, the shrewdness and diligence to conceive a design and follow through with it” (31). It is this initiative and “follow through” in a variety of careers throughout his life that helped define Thoreau as an enterprising individual.

Neufeldt also says,

Were we to consider the prevalence of the subject of enterprise in Henry David Thoreau’s writings apart from his cultural environment, we might conclude that in his literary performances a hard Yankee business head and literary inventiveness found each other and decided to live together in a self constructed and self regulated house of art. (23)

Thoreau respected the idea of commerce, specifically because in order to be successful in a commerce based economy, one must possess the trait of enterprise. In *Walden*, Thoreau exclaims,

What recommends commerce to me is its enterprise and bravery. It does not clasp its hands and pray to Jupiter. I see these men every day go about their business with more or less courage and content, doing more even than they suspect, and perchance better employed than they could have consciously devised. (335)

Although Thoreau was never an advocate of the accumulation of material goods, he respected the apparent fundamental qualities of those individuals that are able to achieve
a physical level of success. Ultimately, this outcome of achieved monetary wealth was scorned by Thoreau, but the inherent “bravery” required to succeed in “the age of enterprise” was a valuable attribute. Thoreau continued to admire those individuals that have the “three o’clock in the morning courage, which Bonaparte thought was the rarest” (335). The intellectual and emotional growth of a human being often seems overlooked by the material aspects of capitalism, which is perhaps why Appleby makes a point to explain that it is in fact a cultural system as well. Possibly, by designating commerce as brave, Thoreau recognized the insight into society one must have in order to interact socially, financially, and intrinsically. In order to be successful in commerce, one must understand the needs of either the individual or an entire society of individuals. Commerce does require bravery, for the ability to create a product or service that people want, also comes with the potential to fail. Additionally, competition leads to progress and profit, both of which lead to innovation. In *Life Without Principle*, Thoreau says “if I choose to devote myself to certain labors which yield more real profit, though but little money, they may be inclined to look on me as an idler” (350). Appleby explicitly states that capitalism is not merely an economic system and it would be falsifying the definition to perceive it as only that. The profit that Thoreau speaks of indicates a generalized benefit whose definition is not solely contingent upon financial gain.

There are many more similarities between Thoreau’s beliefs and capitalism than definitions of progress and innovation. Thoreau was involved in conventional business throughout his entire life. More importantly, his business was motivated by currency, even if Thoreau himself was not. Thoreau contributed to technological progress, profit motivated innovation, and business in the role he played for years at the pencil factory his
father founded in 1821. Thoreau studied his father’s business and spent years of his life developing a more effective pencil, which ultimately led to ‘Thoreau Family Pencils’ to become recognized as one of America’s leading pencil manufacturers. Additionally, it was Thoreau’s research of German pencil-making techniques that resulted in his successful attempts to improve the product, which added to his skillset and encouraged him to write “Civil Engineer” after his signature. As an engineer, Thoreau was dedicated to those key terms Appleby uses, such as innovation, specialization, and invention.

A disparity seems to develop between Thoreau’s ideologies and Capitalism in determining whether Thoreau was motivated or not by profit; however it is my contention that this is irrelevant because one does not need to be motivated by physical profit in a capitalist system, but rather, any form of self interest and the rightful desire to ownership of one’s ideas and property. The system itself promotes an infrastructure that allows individuals to pursue whichever goals they desire, and ultimately, be rewarded by them. The progress that developed from Thoreau’s innovation of using new clay with inferior graphite came about regardless of his personal motivation. Thoreau learned from those before him, developed his sense of value and sought to be successful. The pencil business itself was able to evolve and succeed because it existed within the capitalist infrastructure, to which Thoreau directly contributed.

Thoreau’s ingenuity and ability to use his engineering skills of which he was proud was nurtured in this capitalist environment and ultimately offered something that was both productive and beneficial to himself as a writer, his father as a businessman.

---

and the whole of America, as people were able to buy more affordable and effective tools to write down their thoughts, ideas, gripes, and perspectives.

A primary foundation of capitalism is contingent upon the idea and implementation of the Free Market. It is the Free Market that thrives in a capitalist system and simultaneously creates one of the strongest connections to Transcendentalism. The very notion of a free market contributes to capitalism’s underlying ideologies of individual rights and freedoms. The Free Market’s innate objective, perhaps determined by the words Free and Market is to create a system (whether political, economical, or philosophical) that provides those who practice it with freedom of choice. Thoreau’s advocacy of freedom was expressed in a multitude of ways, one of which was through his opposition to slavery. Choice might be an inalienable right, however Thoreau did not believe in total lawlessness. Choice might be the right of each individual, but Thoreau acknowledged boundaries, which ideally, should be governed by one’s own morality. However, in the instances where morality fails to prevent one from taking choice away from another, such as slavery, Thoreau respected the physical laws protecting the sanctity of life and the inalienable rights of each man, woman, and child. In “Higher Laws,” Thoreau said “No Humane being, past the thoughtless age of boyhood will wantonly murder any creature, which holds its life by the same tenure that he does” (Walden 492). It is the respect of the individual in addition to the restraint each person must have that are primary components of both Capitalism and Transcendentalism. This perspective is represented throughout Thoreau’s collected works, during passages when he spoke out against slavery, the government, paying his
taxes, and even admonishing meat as food, during a time when it was not commonplace to be a vegetarian.

In The Relentless Revolution, A History of Capitalism, Joyce Appleby also says “The adjective “free” as in “free enterprise” serves the ideological purpose of masking coercion in capitalism. People may be free to take a job or not, but they are not free from the need to work as long as they wish to eat” (24). Although Appleby indicates that the idea of the free market provides a false perception of capitalism, in that no one person is entirely free because they still must work, there still remains the option for one to choose. One must inherently work for survival but this does not necessitate that one has to perform any one specific task in order to survive. This places an emphasis both on freedom as well as the value of labor, even if it is only for personal sustainability. Appleby’s statement to be apropos within Walden. Throughout the book, Thoreau emphasizes both the notion of freedom and choice, but does not shy away from the need to work for survival, if only to find ways to feed oneself.

AFTER HOEING, or perhaps reading and writing, in the forenoon, I usually bathed again in the pond, swimming across one of its coves for a stint, and washed the dust of labor from my person, or smoothed out the last wrinkle which study had made, and for the afternoon was absolutely free. (450)

Thoreau hoes his garden, or writes to enhance his potential success as a writer, or reads to learn. Regardless of the task, he accepts this as labor and an inevitable aspect of being an individual in society. In Walden, Thoreau says,

WITH A LITTLE more deliberation in the choice of their pursuits, all men would perhaps become essentially students and observers, for certainly
their nature and destiny are interesting to all alike. In accumulating property for ourselves or our posterity, in founding a family or a state, or acquiring fame even, we are mortal; but in dealing with truth we are immortal, and need fear no change nor accident. (435)

Thoreau explains that with a bit more effort and though, men and women might choose to spend their time more productively with slightly more introspection. This does not change the value of work, but merely the structure. The result of the productivity might change if only encouraging a world with more poets, philosophers, and peace.

Two things overshadow many of the connections between Thoreau and Capitalism. The first is the inevitable flaw of human implementation, and the second results from a subsequent abundance of misconceptions about capitalist ideology of which the latter is often perpetuated by the former. When considering any theory’s ideology against man’s effort to practice it, there are going to be disparities. Essentially, ideas are perfect. People are not. Yet, often philosophers are not even held to any of the standards that their philosophies dictate. In this way, they are completely separate from their ideas and their actions. However, Thoreau believed we should also be judged by our actions. Perhaps we should not be judged exclusively by our actions, but without question, in many contexts, our actions help to define who we are. Thoreau’s philosophies and his actions are neither the same or entirely distinct. Often, Thoreau wrote about what he believed was the ideal way to live and was unwilling to compromise his perception of a utopian society. However, at the same time he spouted his philosophies, his desires and actions contradicted his beliefs. In Thoreau’s section, “Higher Laws” in Walden, he explains,
Moreover, when at the pond, I wished sometimes to add fish to my fare for variety. I have actually fished from the same kind of necessity that the first fishers did. Whatever humanity I might conjure up against it was all factitious, and concerned my philosophy more than my feelings. (491)

Spirituality was a lifelong process for Thoreau, and part of that journey was reconciling the differences between what he said and what he felt. For example, Thoreau discussed a desire to kill and eat animals after promoting the benefits of vegetarianism. Thoreau did believe that the more enlightened individuals were vegetarian, but that belief did not assist in accomplishing enlightenment, since he could only control his actions and not his desires. If Thoreau’s feelings were the beginning of his spiritual journey, his ideologies were at the end, and his actions were the bridge between the two. Therefore, I judge Thoreau’s true values on a combination of his actions and the ideologies toward which he strove, of which there are both parallels and disparities. However, Thoreau’s actions must be exonerated to at least a certain extent. Thoreau’s daily practices might represent a component of his beliefs, but they would never be able to fully actualize his ideological concepts. Capitalism should be explored in the same way. While the pragmatic applications are important and influence our perspective of the capitalist philosophy, I believe Thoreau’s opinions of the capitalist system were too negatively influenced by those individuals who failed to practice it correctly.
False Perspectives

In *Capitalism, Democracy and Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery*, John Mueller explains that capitalism suffers from obvious negative image problems. He says that:

Although capitalism is generally given credit, even by its many detractors, for generating wealth and for stimulating economic growth, it is commonly maligned for the deceit, unfairness, dishonesty, and discourtesy that are widely taken to be the inevitable consequences of its apparent celebration of greed...

But capitalism actually tends, all other things being equal, systematically, though not uniformly, to reward business behavior that is honest, fair, civil, and compassionate, and it inspires a form of risk-taking behavior that can often be credibly characterized as heroic. (5)

For example, those businessmen that reward their staff with respect and adequate compensation achieve a stronger work ethic and higher level of productivity from their team. Mueller implies that it is not capitalist theory that is flawed, but those who practice deceit and dishonesty. In fact, honesty and compassion are the characteristics that are rewarded within capitalism. Although Capitalism advocates the right and the success of the individual, it is through a cumulative effort that we learn from each other and develop a stronger understanding of the needs and desires of the community. It is through shared information that we can achieve the greatest results and these are the traits that must be kept within our line of vision if we are to maintain Thoreau's fundamental values during our implantation of Capitalism.

After a brief excerpt explaining his short time in jail in *Walden*, Thoreau exclaims,
You who govern public affairs, what need have you to employ punishments? Love virtue, and the people will be virtuous. The virtues of a superior man are like the wind; the virtues of a common man are like the grass; the grass, when the wind passes over it, bends. (460)

It is this virtuous behavior that Thoreau believes should govern man’s actions. Loving virtue will function as an important guide throughout life’s journey and it is the same love of virtue that Mueller explains should govern business in true capitalist behavior. Mueller continues to explain that,

Capitalism’s image mismatch causes problems. In particular, it can hamper economic development because the often unacknowledged capitalist virtues are necessary, or at least extremely helpful, for economic growth: without them, countries can remain mired in poverty. Fortunately, because it furnishes a business with a competitive advantage, virtuous behavior can arise from normal competitive pressures and does not need to be artificially imposed by outside authority. (7)

Blatantly, the outside authority that Mueller speaks about is government. Compelled by virtuous behavior, the market in a capitalist society will govern itself in the same way Thoreau believed people should govern themselves and without the interference of The Government. However, without virtuous behavior, the market will fail to govern itself and create a need for more regulation, less freedom, and less choice, all of which are inherently anti-capitalistic. Thoreau demonstrates this idea in what is perhaps one of his most well known *Civil Disobedience* quotes, “The government which governs best, governs least” (203). Time and again, Thoreau implies that people should be able to
govern themselves, the same way that the free market should be able to function without regulation. It is my contention that Thoreau would have advocated business and economic growth had laborers not been continually exploited. Often, the level of productivity increases when laborers are not overworked, and when they are content with their working conditions. The practice of virtue within the division of labor might have changed Thoreau’s tone, given the chance that economic growth for some, didn’t leave others mired in poverty. In “An Enterprise of Self-Culture in a Culture of Self Enterprise,” Neufeldt also says “The language of Walden, reregistered business as a moral/vocational term, commerce as the profitability of resistance to mass culture, and the profit as “virtue” and “extra vagence” (24). Neufeldt implies that Thoreau’s perception of business is fully integrated with morality in exactly the same context how Mueller says business should govern itself. Thoreau doesn’t distinguish the behavior one should practice in business from the way one should lead his/her life. In fact, they should perfectly coincide, a point substantiated by Neufeldt and Mueller. The exploitation of the worker, and the subsequent goods produced by that exploited labor are corrupt aspects of capitalism in practice, but do not exist within its ideology. In this way, capitalism must be absolved to a certain extent rather than endure the typical blame it has received in fact due to the inevitability of human flaw.

For Thoreau, virtuous behavior and business should always be intertwined. A requirement for good business is contingent upon virtuous behavior. In their article, “The Economic Design of Walden,” Thomas Birch and Fred Metting explain that, Economic, personal, and natural growth became united in Thoreau's mind.

For Thoreau, economy defined as proper household management involved
philosophical and ethical questions of human conduct—how to live and what to live for. So even though he spoke the business vernacular of his townspeople, Thoreau differentiated his economy from theirs. (590)

Birch and Mettings’ statement is in lock step with the capitalist ideology that the pursuit of business and commerce should be practiced with morality and maintain virtue in order to profit. As we see from Mueller’s explanation of capitalism, it is the corruption and worker exploitation that hinders the successful practice of capitalism. Despite the fact that philosophically, Thoreau underscores the value of simplicity and nature over the value of material wealth, the practical aspects of his life and his lengthy discussions and recognition of economy are in reality, less extreme than his ideas.

The virtuous behavior that Thoreau indicated should govern life, and Mueller says should govern business, is the connection between business, labor, profit, individualism and transcendentalism. In reality, Thoreau sought to combine his ideologies about morality with modernity. His aversion was man’s departure from ethics as people became immersed in greed. However, if those living through New England’s growth in the industrial revolution incorporated Thoreau’s proposed values in their daily lifestyle, Thoreau himself might have been more of a proponent of this growth, labor, and progress. In the same essay, “An Enterprise of Self Culture in a Culture of Enterprise, “Neufeldt continues,

One of Thoreau’s reasons for conducting his two-year experiment at Walden Pond was to drive his vocational ideals into a corner in order to determine whether his art of life could be secured by terms tolerable to his society yet compatible with his aspirations as a writer. (24)
Neufeldt, along with other literary critics explain that Thoreau did not leave for Walden Pond to exclude himself from society. In, “The Personality of H.D. Thoreau,” Tyrus Hillway says that “Thoreau did not flee to a retreat at Walden Pond because he could not bear the society of his Concord neighbors; he did so to prove a point in his philosophy” (Hillway 328). The philosophy Hillman speaks of is that man can live a frugal, self-reliant, and spiritual life. Steven Fink also suggests that Thoreau left society to gain perspective, and again, Neufeldt argues that in helping to decipher his relationship with his art, his life, and society, he would be in a stronger position to succeed as a writer and a leader. Hillway continues to argue that it wasn’t even Thoreau’s disdain for society that encouraged his criticisms, rather he had a “desire for its adulation” (Hillway 328). In part, it was Thoreau’s ambitions to become an outspoken critic, a leader, and a reformer, which make him inherently capitalistic. Thoreau believed that through effort, intelligence, and an understanding of society’s needs he could affect change and advance civilization.

Neufeldt continues to explain that Thoreau wanted to purchase property rather than squat his entire life validating Thoreau’s support of personal ownership. In addition to Thoreau’s desire to own land, he sought professional success as a writer. Thoreau’s aspirations to acquire his own property, succeed in his desired career, and educate his followers are all representative of a true capitalist system. This is the same system that Appleby explains rewards innovation and Mueller says rewards virtuous behavior. Neufeldt explains that Thoreau’s motivations to move to Walden Pond were not merely to connect with nature, but find the balance between art and life, which he would later try to integrate into society and from which he would ultimately profit.
But the move to Walden was not without precedent. In Feb 1841, less than a year after he published his first literary work (a poem), he reported that he was thinking of purchasing or renting a site in retirement in which the art of life and the life of art could meet under one roof. Both Emerson and Fuller seemed to have understood his desire to find a writer’s studio and succeed in his Career. (Neufeldt 31)
Literary Success and The Age of Enterprise

Thoreau’s attempt to prevail not just a “professional” writer, but also a successful one, greatly influenced his actions and perhaps dictated much of his interaction within society. In his book, Prophet in the Marketplace: Thoreau’s Development as a Professional Writer, Steven Fink points out that “The mythologizing of Thoreau into a writer who somehow stood outside of and remained untouched by the cultural conditions of his profession (a myth that Thoreau himself is largely responsible for creating) pervades Thoreau scholarship” (4). Furthermore, Thoreau’s attempt to succeed in the literary profession is not the lone example in the Transcendentalism movement. Other proponents of Emerson and Thoreau’s ideas also had shrewd business skills that they attempted to utilize. It is business skills, and an understanding of the marketplace that promote the type of progress upon which the capitalist infrastructure is continent. For Thoreau, the marketplace was an audience to purchase and read his work. Everything from Thoreau’s technological development of pencils, to the publication of his thoughts and desires to influence others and the market advocate enterprise. Neufeldt explains, “The list of eastern liberal ministers and transcendentalists with impressive business acumen is long, and includes notables like Theodore Parker, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Cyrus Bartol, Henry Bellows, James Freeman Clarke, and Convers Francis” (27).

Neufeldt also explains that many practitioners of Transcendentalism were advocates of business and the Free Market. Even Ralph Emerson’s avid interest of the Fitchburg Railroad in the spring of 1844 was justified by an investment he had in the
company.  

(Despite the fact that Thoreau hated the railroad and its incessant noise, he was still willing to benefit from Emerson’s financial success while squatting on his land). This is not merely about Thoreau’s attempt to profit from his success, but the idea that Transcendentalism itself was a business. The spread of the Transcendentalist philosophy was blanketed in professionalism, profit, hierarchy and growth. The very fact that so many notables not only had business acumen, but also utilized their knowledge to create a market for their ideas is indicative of that fact. This market, (perhaps less examined amidst the rise of the industrial age), was a market of printed literature, schools, lectures, lyceums, and notions of change. Thoreau was no stranger to both successful and failed business practices. In his essay, “Henry David Thoreau: Transcendental Individualist,” Charles Madison explains that,

In June, 1838, he joined his older brother John in organizing a private school based on advanced pedagogical principles. They soon had all the pupils they could accommodate, and the school flourished until March, 1841, when it was closed as a consequence of John's illness. (110)

Thoreau experienced a fair amount of failure trying to become successful as a writer, and Madison also explains that, “The next six months he tried hard to market his essays and reviews. But the editors and publishers he called upon gave him little encouragement” (111).

The most financially viable aspect of the Transcendentalism was the production of literature and the sale of books, journals, and newspapers. That is, these products had the highest capacity to generate physical currency. In addition to the monetary value

---

4 See Neufeldt’s chapter on “An Enterprise of Self-Culture in a Culture of Enterprise” where he explains that Emerson benefited financially from his investments in the railroad.
retained from the sale of those works, the ability to spread transcendentalist ideas essentially perpetuated a larger demand for the product, which in this case, were ideas themselves. As the Transcendentalists were able to grow a support base through the spread of ideological objectives, they were able to encourage the growth of their market place.

Of course, the profit from literary production was in no way exclusive to the Transcendentalists, but also to others who might place themselves in the category of ideological public educators, such as religious leaders and professional philosophers. Indeed there has always been profit in becoming prophetic. Steven Fink argues that Thoreau himself was a self-identified prophet, with knowledge of how to obtain a more spiritual life. This is in no way to imply that Thoreau’s attempt to become prophetic was an attempt to become wealthy. But, as explained in the introduction of this essay, financial motivation along with all other types of success are nurtured in the capitalist system, and are not dictated by the specific drive for wealth. Although financial gain is often the motivating factor within the capitalist system, the system itself is not dictated by people’s motivations, but their actions. There is a direct relationship between the results of Thoreau’s efforts and the infrastructure he utilized to obtain those goals. That is, nineteenth century American Capitalism was a system that allowed for the free exchange of ideas, which was able to result in any one or multiple variations of growth and success, whether personal profit or prophet-like status. Over the course of time, fame, respect, and profit often developed together. Neufeldt explains,

In the area of literary production, then, ministers joined other writers, including full-time professional authors, in producing formulaic sentimental romances
promoted for their virtuous influence, vaguely edifying and clearly sentimental religious books and tracts, exotic travel literature...treaties on domestic economy, and guides to success for the young man. There was an unprecedented commercial look to the various forms of human enterprise, including the literary profession. (italics mine) The major theme of the times was progress, the concept of progress was parsed by cultural definitions of success, and the economic component of these definitions increased markedly. (27)

The time in which Thoreau wrote *Walden* is often characterized as the height of the Industrial Revolution in America, bringing about a multitude of modern inventions, evolving definitions, and a variety of newly encountered problems. Although Thoreau was quite vocal in his criticism of the onslaught of what was turning into The Modern Age, the Industrial Revolution also represented an age of growth, innovation, motivation, and intelligence that Thoreau may have not entirely rejected. What Thoreau did reject were some of the unfortunate consequences of things like The Division of Labor, which at times, deprived men of their inner thinking and spirituality, a partial side-effect of the Industrial Age. But Thoreau was not averse to all aspects of this new age. Neufeldt says, It has been described as the beginning of industrial capitalism in America. A more appropriate characterization might be the age of enterprise. The term enterprise houses suggestions of a range of altering and altered assumptions, values, beliefs, agendas, and language. It also registers both the ambiguities of the new age and the ambivalences with which many literary artists viewed it. (25)

The "age of enterprise" might also be described as an age of experimentation, a term that Thoreau used frequently describing his time at Walden Pond.
Thoreau's usage of lexicon and the varied and potentially multiple definitions of any given word he used throughout his works are evidently important. Obviously, words and definitions are altered and shaped by their cultural usage. In his essays, Neufeldt discusses key capitalistic terms common in nineteenth century New England culture and popular works that are also themes displayed in Thoreau's philosophies. His definitions and examples pertain to the political and social times of the Transcendentalist movement, which offers a clearer understanding of Thoreau's probable meaning when he utilized these terms. The specific definitions are derived from the usage of the terms by political figures, presidents, authors, and standard speech. Using these definitions and focusing on enterprise draw extremely close connections associating Thoreau with fundamentally capitalist ideals. Neufeldt explains that certain terms such as profit, enterprise, industry, and corporations had evolving definitions that might have been utilized rather abstractly and were constantly changing based on the public figures using them at the time. Specifically, words such as "industry" might not have had the same definitions we think about today. Neufeldt says that,

Semantically, the economic transformation can be traced to alterations of key ideological terms such as commerce, business, profit, industry, and corporation.

...Profit, both a *moral* (italics mine) and economic term in the speeches of Adams, Jackson, and Van Buren, came to signify simply financial profit.

Industry, in the early nineteenth century a synonym for diligence, self discipline, concentrated effort, and perseverance, gradually replaced the traditional manufacturers. (30)
The notion that industry is a synonym for diligence and self-discipline makes it a vital term explaining capitalism and transcendentalism. Additionally, although Thoreau made his aversion to greed blatant, he was not opposed to many innovations that came about as a result of the very innovation and enterprise inherently nurtured in a capitalist system. For example, in *Walden*, Thoreau explains,

Though we are not so degenerate but that we might possibly live in a cave or a wigwam or wear skins today, it certainly is better to accept the advantages, though so dearly bought, which the invention and industry of mankind offer. In such a neighborhood as this, boards and shingles, lime and bricks, are cheaper and more easily obtained than suitable caves, or whole logs, or bark in sufficient quantities, or even well-tempered clay or flat stones. I speak understandingly on this subject, for I have made myself acquainted with it both theoretically and practically. (344)

Thoreau’s passage is an indication that he believed technology was an asset to all mankind, if only because it is through the advantages of industry that we are able to live a more efficient, frugal, and self-reliant manner, all of which would lead to a more enlightened path. Additionally, the success of enterprise, invention, and industry are not exclusive to an individual and require collaboration. Thoreau’s time as an inventor and engineer encouraged him to appreciate the value of new ideas along with convictions developed from those ideas that already exist. After all, Thoreau’s ability to cultivate a better pencil was contingent on the research of German-making pencil techniques.
Part II: Thoreau and Adam Smith

Labor & Value

The idea that Labor is a driving force behind all progress is fundamental to capitalist ideology. Adam Smith, considered the founding father of Capitalism, helped delineate the theories that evolved into the modern capitalist system. Smith’s most well-known work, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, helped define primary components of capitalism, its connection with man’s basic nature as well as an individual’s inherent desire to communicate and share. The beginning of Smith’s introduction to modern capitalism focuses on the value of labor. First, it is the structured form of labor that helped capitalist theory manifest into an organized system. Without individuals performing labor in mass, capitalist structure would not have been able to develop. Smith said, “The greatest improvement in the productive powers of labour, and the greater part of the skill, dexterity, and judgment with which it is anywhere directed, or applied, seem to have been the effects of the division of labour” (*Wealth of Nations* 4). After he explains the development of the organized system of labor, Smith discusses at length, the notion that labor is a commodity in and of itself. This helped create and define the idea of value, whilst enabling any individual capable of working, an ability to offer something of value.

Labour was the first price, the original purchase-money that was paid for all things. It was not by gold or by silver, but by labour, that all the wealth of the world was originally purchased; and its value, to those who possess it, and who want to exchange it for some new productions, is precisely equal to the quantity
of labour which it can enable them to purchase or command. (*Wealth of Nations* 17)

Smith’s suggestions about the subjectivity of currency have tremendous implications. The notion that currency consists of more than a physical manifestation of money implies that in one way or another, all people potentially have something of value. This is a value placed on an individual’s capability, and when that value is combined with the masses, the growth and development of one becomes the progression of society. Often, the success and worth of a product is entirely contingent upon the effort one must put forth to produce or achieve it. Smith also says,

> The real price of everything, what everything really costs to the man who wants to acquire it, is the toil and trouble of acquiring it. What everything is really worth to the man who has acquired it, and who wants to dispose of it or exchange it for something else, is the toil and trouble which it can save to himself, and which it can impose upon other people. What is bought with money or with goods is purchased by labour as much as what we acquire by the toil of our own body. (*Wealth of Nations* 16)

Essentially, Smith is referring to “perceived value.” That is, a product is only worth the amount that a given individual or group is willing to pay for it. However, the perception of the worth by the consumer is influenced by the amount of effort one must put forth in acquiring said commodity. This places a tremendous amount of authority in the hands of the individual, or rather, the consumer. An individual is capable of determining the value based on how much he or she wants that particular product or service. The power of the
individual (or group of individuals) to create both the supply and demand dictates the market in which the supply is bought and sold. Hence, capitalism is the system that leaves the evaluation of products and services to the people and not the system or governing body. Therefore, it is truly the system of the individual. Unfortunately, those incapable of producing anything would be unlikely to succeed in a system such as this. However, because Thoreau and Capitalist idealists are emphatic about practicing business with virtue, the opportunity to take care of those in need arises frequently. It is simply a moral choice, and not an obligation or mandate.

Thoreau, like Smith, also recognized the value of labor. Although he often spoke out against the Division of Labor, claiming that “following blindly the principles of a division of labor to its extreme – a principle which should never be followed but with circumspection” (Walden 334), he still recognized the necessity and importance of labor itself. Thoreau’s concerns with the Division of Labor centered around the corruption that resulted from greed, dreadful working conditions, and the overall exploitation of the individual worker. Additionally, Thoreau spoke out against the diminishment of personal opinion and thought. At times, the Division of Labor propagated the belief that the individual laborer had others thinking on his behalf rather than thinking for himself. Thoreau asked, “Where is this division of labor to end? And what object does it finally serve? No doubt another may also think for me; but it is not therefore desirable that he should do so to the exclusion of my thinking for myself” (Walden 335). The idea that The Division of Labor limited the role for one to think for him/herself implies that it directly suppressed an individual’s right to think and choose for himself, which is closer to fascism than capitalism.
According to Thoreau, the ability for an individual to think for oneself is only one vital element of maintaining freedom while working to live. Along with understanding the value of self-labor, one must also be able to complete the physical task. Thoreau was a proponent of active participation, the same way he encouraged thoughtful contemplation. In “Economy,” Thoreau says,

The student who secures his coveted leisure and retirement by systematically shirking any labor necessary to man obtains but an ignoble and unprofitable leisure, defrauding himself of the experience which alone can make leisure fruitful. "But," says one, "you do not mean that the students should go to work with their hands instead of their heads?" I do not mean that exactly, but I mean something which he might think a good deal like that; I mean that they should not play life, or study it merely, while the community supports them at this expensive game, but earnestly live it from beginning to end. How could youths better learn to live than by at once trying the experiment of living? (Walden 344)

Despite Thoreau’s intellect and his encouragement of writers, poets, and philosophers, he never dismissed the value of physical labor, calling it part of the experiment that is life. Although the subject of people incapable of physical labor, such as those with disabilities, is not much discussed by Smith, Thoreau, or general capitalist theory, I’d claim that it falls into one of two categories. The first, is that despite the value of physical labor, it is not argued as a necessity for productivity. Thoreau frequently writes about the worth in work that requires thought and not physical strength. Second, those incapable of thought or physical labor could easily fall into the realm of charitable work. It is virtuous to take care of those who are unable to do so for themselves.
The strongest similarities between Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* and Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* are each found in chapter one of their magnum opus. While Adam Smith began with topics of labor and value, Thoreau commenced with a discussion on the economy. Following their introductions, readers of both texts are quickly schooled on how to become self-reliant. Secondly, labor and the value it produces remained a vital theme for both writers. It was only as a supplemental lesson that Thoreau continually warned his readers against the pitfalls of becoming all-consuming by work, neglecting the value of a spiritual life. Rather than discouraging hard work and its value of production, Thoreau wanted to emphasize the need for a healthy balance between the labor, the effort, and the capital.

In Alan Trachtenberg’s *The Incorporation of America: Culture & Society in the Gilded Age*, Trachtenberg discusses the same relationship between Capital and Labor discussed by Smith and Thoreau. Trachtenberg says that,

> The doctrine (Doctrine of Free Labor) was founded on the work ethic that promised personal advancement and security for honest labor, frugal self-management, and disciplined personal character. Were not these virtues precisely the ground of distinction between the free North and the slave South, between the true America and its internal enemies...Republicans viewed labor as the only sanctioned means to self-improvement. (Trachtenberg 74)

The relationship between capital and labor is obviously central to the development of capitalism. Labor, as we know, is valuable as a service or because it produces a commodity. It’s worth noting that the specificity of value is less significant to capitalist theory than the idea itself that an individual’s effort is worth something, be it physical,
intellectual, or spiritual worth. As Trachtenberg mentions, labor is a means to improving oneself. Thoreau’s chapter on “Economy” expresses the same fundamental values and lessons that Trachtenberg mentions upon which The Doctrine of Free Labor was founded. It is with frugal self-management and discipline that laborers would be able to advance, both personally and professionally.

Trachtenberg continues to argue that entrepreneurship lives within all individuals who are capable of any means of production, thus dubbing the middle class an entire group of “nascent capitalists”. Trachtenberg draws on Eric Foner who says “The aspirations of the free labor ideology were thus thoroughly middle-class, for the successful laborer was one who achieved self-employment, and owned his own capital—a business, farm, or shop.” With the small enterprise, the shop or farm, still at the basis of the Northern Antebellum economy, all producers seemed potential entrepreneurs, and workers nascent capitalists” (Trachtenberg 75).

Just as capital and labor are mutually reliant upon each other, (Capital does not exist without the labor needed to create it), there should also exist a relationship between labor and freedom. In his essay, “Thoreau’s Alternative Economics: Work, Liberty, and Democratic Cultivation,” Brian Walker explains that Thoreau’s perspective on the relationship between labor and freedom is such that they should work in conjunction, but often freedom is hindered by suppression, force, and the exploitation of the worker. Again, Thoreau’s primary grievance with labor, it not with labor itself, but that it all too often, functions inside of repressive conditions. Hordes of an undereducated and poverty stricken working class managed by organizations whose motivation for physical profit quickly led to the decomposition of personal rights. These were the suppressed working
conditions that hindered the creativity and progress advocated by both capitalism and transcendentalism. However, being the activist that he was, it may have been these types of conditions that encouraged Thoreau to promote the discussion about the relationship between individuals and their work. Walker says that,

...very few voices in our tradition discuss employment from the point of view of the individual laborer attempting to maintain freedom and equilibrium in relation to the world of work. A major exception is Henry David Thoreau's ([1854] 1995) *Walden*...more careful attention reveals *Walden* to be a carefully constructed study of the tensions between liberty and employment in times of economic change. (Walker 846)

When Walker uses the term "equilibrium," he alludes to the fact that much of Thoreau's work was a series of lessons on how to find a balance between oneself and the external world. Furthermore, Walker explains that finding a balance is contingent upon the idea that freedom is fundamental, especially in the world of labor. In Lance Newman's essay "Capitalism and the Moral Geography of *Walden,*" he explains that *Walden* is a book about finding the same balance or equilibrium that Walker discusses. So long as one can practice one's profession, earn a living, and not lose site of spirituality, and their inherent connection to nature, the system works. Newman explains that,

*Walden* is not a book that is mainly about the woods. It is about earning a living there. And its accounts of ascetic experience of nature mainly demonstrate what gets lost-along with reading, introspection, spirituality-when work dominates our lives. (Newman 137)
As much as Thoreau may have seemed extreme in his views, I contend that he was a moderate, because he believed in balance. Newman argues that as long as work is not the dominant force in your life, crushing any sense of spirituality you might have once had, then “earning a living” is a balanced and worthwhile endeavor. Furthermore, Walker takes the “worthy endeavor” of labor one step further by pointing out that when we think critically about the work we do, we are in a better position to develop a stronger understanding of our societal roles in within a spiritual context. He says that "Walden is one of the rare works of political theory that asks us to think critically about our relation to the work we do, and it gives advice as to strategies and practices we might adopt if we want to elaborate more flexible responses to the shifting economy of work in which we find ourselves" (Walker 846). This is also one mention of many, that Walden is not merely a book of philosophy, but a manuscript of economic advice, a point which is worth consideration.

In “Economy,” Thoreau’s attention to detail in obtaining goods and services is deliberate and tediously detailed. He wrote about the cost of every board, each nail, all the required tools needed to complete the construction of his house, and every minute of time he spent gathering and utilizing these tools. Unquestionably, Thoreau understood that commodities have value, but it is not based on the worth which society places on them, but rather the effort in which it is required to obtain and use them, the point made previously, corroborated by Adam Smith. Thoreau says,

If it is asserted that civilization is a real advance in the condition of man, - and I think it is, though only the wise improve their advantages, - it must be shown that it has produced better dwellings without making them more costly; and the cost of
a thing is the amount of what will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run (Walden 347).

There are two primary points to this passage. The first displays Thoreau’s acknowledgement of an item’s worth, which is virtually identical to Adam Smith’s definition. Recalling that Smith said the real price of everything is only the cost of the “toil” it takes to acquire it, and Thoreau merely labels that word “toil” as “life”. This “toil” or rather, “life” is ultimately the driving force that produces physical capital. Regardless of the metaphor, whether its toil, life, or effort, the method is labor, and the result is capital, whose subsequent value is predicated upon all that it took to produce it.

The second point of the passage is about the evolution of intelligent work. Essentially, Thoreau wanted to teach us to be more capable and self-reliant, an effort that directly correlated to finances. Thoreau taught us to get the most with the least, capitalizing on the lessons we learn living in civilization, something he said is an “advancement in the condition of man.”
Walden as a Guide to Economic and Spiritual Success

There are several factors and influences that may have encouraged Thoreau to write *Walden* as a compendium of advice. In many ways, *Walden* is not only perceived as a guidebook, but more specifically as a guidebook to success. *Walden* was written to teach its readers how to best navigate both the cultural and economic system in which they live. It places an obvious emphasis on spiritual success, but also provides in depth instructions on how to practice sensible materialism and succeed in enterprise and professionalism. Although my following analysis of *Walden* as a Guidebook to Success contains examples of how Thoreau’s ideas and lessons in the actual text maintain capitalist themes, it must not be overlooked that the very idea of writing a Guidebook to success is in itself, inherently capitalistic. The effort put forth in the development and creation of *Walden* as a success manual was most likely motivated as much by profit as Thoreau’s desire to be an educator and advocate. Unlike the dismal sales of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Thoreau had 2,000 copies of *Walden* printed and sold for $1 a piece, of which he experienced moderate success.5

In Leonard Neufeldt’s essay “Walden and the Guidebook for Young Men,” he explains that Thoreau was very familiar with guidebooks for young individuals as he owned four of these guidebooks himself, which was commonplace during his time. This ensures us that Thoreau and his contemporaries were all familiar with this genre of literature. Neufeldt points out this type of guidebook was the predecessor for the modern success manual, and were quite popular in the mid eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. What’s important to realize is that although these books taught readers how to be

---

5 In Elizabeth Witherell and Elizabeth Dubrulle’s, "Life and Times of Henry D. Thoreau," The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau, she explains that *Walden*’s reception was considerably better than *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, and continued to sell even better after Thoreau’s death in 1862.
successful (at least in theory), there was also a market for the literary works on which Thoreau tried to capitalize.

Attempting to sell a guidebook obviously required Thoreau to offer actual guidance, of which there is quite a bit in *Walden*. Thoreau believed in leading by example, and *Walden* in a sense, is one long example of how we should live. In his essay, Brian Walker says,

Thoreau acts out writ-large versions of democratically pertinent skills, such as self-direction, the maintenance of ideals, economic awareness, and frugality. He writes frequently of the importance of setting examples, even if they may seem dauntingly strenuous. (Walker 853)

In teaching us how to live a more virtuous life, Thoreau broached a variety of topics and perspectives to give his readers the tools they need to succeed in achieving a life of virtue, an essential component of which is self-reliance. Using himself as the prime subject, Thoreau’s time at Walden Pond was not merely about developing the skills and values of "economic awareness" and "frugality", but demonstrating its pragmatism. Thoreau also implied that through a culmination of ideas, trials, and errors we can learn from each other, a benefit that helps to achieve both technological and spiritual progress.

Thoreau said, "Be sure you give the poor the aid they most need, though it be your example which leaves them far behind" (*Walden* 382). Although Thoreau believed we should be charitable and lead by example, he also drew a clear distinction between poverty and an individual’s ability to choose a better life. Thoreau believed in the advancement of humanity and valued the benefits and opportunities that led to what is perceived improvements. The passage worth repeating is, “it certainly is better to accept
the advantages, though so dearly bought, which the invention and industry of mankind
offer” (Walden 354) because it emphasizes the idea that Thoreau had some desire for
material progress. It is not just merely an improved habitat Thoreau alluded to, but also
the idea that society should benefit from all mankind’s progress. The unfortunate fact
that progress is often motivated by wealth is addressed when Thoreau said that these
advantages are “dearly bought”, but he also recognized that sometimes the benefits do
outweigh the price which is paid. I think that in drawing a clear distinction between what
we actually need, we can maintain a tighter grip on what it is we actually want.

Waste leads to unnecessary spending, and in his book of advice, Thoreau taught
his readers to save money in a multitude of ways. One such example was advising
people to undertake their own structural improvements. This reduces dependence on one
another, lowers costs, thereby increasing savings and helping to diminish the demand for
outsourced labor. This form of self-reliance also develops a stronger supply of self-
sufficient workers. The ability to build has a definite and tangible value. Through these
methods, one can achieve success, if only by leaving homelessness and poverty “far
behind.”

Frequently, Thoreau underscored the idea that progress, technology, and industry
came at a price, a point that is interweaved throughout much of his work. Yet, he does
not fail to see the value of this progress, and Walden promotes the balance between
industry and man’s reliance on it. What matters to Thoreau is that man is able to
maintain a grip on his natural and spiritual roots, while living and working in an age of
progress. But, with a strong sense of self, capability, and hard work, an individual is able
to maintain a healthy amount of choice as to what role he would like to play within
society and its economy. We choose to become producers of goods, consumers of goods, inventors of goods, or beggars of goods. And here, we get to the central theme of choice, which must inherently remain a constant variable in Thoreau’s ideology and that of capitalist ideology. With choice, we have freedom. Or, perhaps inversely, with freedom we have choice. The underlying axiom within Thoreau’s work is that one must never impose one’s freedom of choice on another, as it only applies to each person as an individual. It is in this manner that Walker describes *Walden* as a type of democratic advice book Thoreau hoped might benefit the working class. Thoreau wanted to teach those looking for work that they could find employment and success, while simultaneously maintaining their freedom of choice and virtue. Walker says,

Thoreau's central theme is that working conditions in a market democracy can easily undermine liberty and erode autonomy. His goal in *Walden* is to set out strategies by which people might enact their freedom when they face working conditions that are likely to threaten their autonomy and well-being. (Walker 846)

Thoreau’s definition of self-reliance directly correlates to an educated working class. Those capable of recognizing injustice would be able to enact solutions and maintain their personal freedoms. Perhaps he would have made self-reliance a synonym for self-employment.

Within the context of labor, *Walden* emphasizes the practice of awareness and self-reliance, both of which incorporate morality and virtue. Virtue is often derived from both desire and the ability to choose a profession out of passion, instead of being a slave motivated by compensation. When one’s motivation is due in part to a passion for one’s work, then the quality of the work increases organically. When a laborer works too hard
for too little, there is an imbalance which develops feelings of injustice. If the benefits of one’s work does not outweigh the sacrifice of their time and effort put forth, than the work itself will suffer. Certainly, one will not practice their work with virtue or passion if the work itself is undervalued and exploited. In “Life Without Principle,” Thoreau says,

The aim of the laborer should be, not to get his living, to get “a good job,” but to perform well a certain work and even in a pecuniary sense, it would be economy for a town to pay its laborers so well that they would not feel that they were working for low ends, as for livelihood merely, but for scientific, or even moral ends. (Thoreau 351)

Here, Thoreau suggests that society should diminish the disparity between the work and the reward. If work is done with adequate compensation, than the result will be a higher quality and increased productivity. “Do not a hire a man who does your work for money, but him who does it for the love it” (Thoreau 351). In the instance of certain labors that must be performed not through passion, but simple necessity, as is the case with many undesirable tasks, its of the utmost importance that do not become all-consumed by that work.

I argue that a majority of the time, when labor is motivated by passion it becomes intrinsically capitalistic. For example, when individuals possess feelings of love and passion for their work, the work ultimately manifests itself into a particular field of expertise and specialty. It is this level of expertise, which Adam Smith calls “dexterity” and says is one of the primary factors which directly increase the productivity of labor. Smith said that “Each individual becomes more expert in his own peculiar branch, more
work is done upon the whole, and the quantity of science is considerably increased by it” (Wealth of Nations 13).

Smith argues that economic progress is brought about through a culmination of work done by those individuals who have different skills and are able to perform specific tasks as “experts”. Consequently, becoming an expert requires a level of independent thought, understanding, reflection, and observation, much of which is motivated by one’s passion for that particular field. Thoreau is a perfect example of this passion. Unquestionably, he fell within a category of philosophers who were considered to be expert thinkers, a profession he took seriously and one to which he devoted his life and his legacy. As a writer, perhaps Thoreau’s most refined skill was his proficiency for observation, critique, and analysis and then his ability to convey those observations and ideas coherently. Adam Smith claimed that these types of observations directly contributed to, and are also a result of The Division of Labor.

Many improvements have been made by the ingenuity of the makers of the machines, when to make them became the business of a peculiar trade; and some by that of those who are called philosophers or men of speculation, whose trade it is not to do anything, but to observe everything; and who, upon that account, are often capable of combining together the powers of the most distant and dissimilar objects. (Wealth of Nations 13)

According to Smith, Thoreau’s ability to draw conclusions and comparisons of both thoughts and objects that might otherwise have no obvious connection, directly contributed to the progress of society, the economy, and therefore, The Division of Labor. I believe that Thoreau’s ability to recognize the pitfalls of technology and
excessive materialism, his encouragement to reduce that materialism, and his advocacy of
individuals to connect, or rather, re-connect with nature were all partially responsible for
direct improvements to the economic infrastructure. This is true even if the only result of
Thoreau’s work were lessons of frugality and economic awareness to those who were
being exploited. Furthermore, according to Smith, the role of writer and philosopher
fulfills the same type of economic need as other trades, which equates Thoreau’s career
as a writer with that of any other occupation. Smith explains that,

In the progress of society, philosophy or speculation becomes, like every other
employment, the principal or sole trade and occupation of a particular class of
citizens. Like every other employment too, it is subdivided into a great number of
different branches, each of which affords occupation to a peculiar tribe or class of
philosophers; and this subdivision of employment in philosophy, as well as in
every other business, improves dexterity, and saves time. (Wealth of Nations 13)

Thoreau understood that philosophy had tremendous value, in the same way that Adam
Smith categorizes it as both business and employment. It is through philosophical
inquiries and assessments that society becomes better equipped to control various
situations and problems. Thoreau’s academic mind, coupled with his fascination of
technology encouraged him to analyze the physical and moral implications of such
progress. As a result of Thoreau’s observations, a new level of awareness was
incorporated into the design and development of new products and ideas.
Self Interest and Virtue

Without question, the virtue that Thoreau believed should govern business was often missing within its practices. As a result, corruption and greed perpetuated the negative characteristics of the capitalist system. However, according to Thoreau, it is possible for people to maintain autonomy and practice virtue while performing their labors. In a true democracy, individuals maintain their personal rights while contributing to society of their own volition, without imposing their views on others. In his essay, “Performing Conscience: Thoreau, Political Action, and the Plea for John Brown,” Jack Turner says that Thoreau was a spokesman of democratic individuality. Those within a collective, democratic system must have their personal, inalienable human rights. Yet, these rights are repressed through the ignoble actions of others, which impedes the progress of society. Essentially, personal rights, self interest, and individualism work toward the benefit of those within the collective. Self-interest does not discourage collaboration. In fact, capitalist theory implies that self-interest stimulates collaboration, as individuals motivated by self-interest are able to learn and benefit from one another.

In Sherwin Klein’s essay, “The Natural Roots of Capitalism and Its Virtues and Values,” Klein explains,

Nature’s wisdom, as seen in its harmony and balance, is displayed in economies and human nature. Competitive free enterprise, as a vehicle for exchange, functions within a cooperative context and exhibits virtues and values such as mutual help and benefit, trust, harmony, and friendship. (387)
Yet, trust and friendship often fall victim to the politics of corruption, a problem inherent in human behavior, and not the ideological system of free enterprise. In his essay, Jack Turner also addresses the idea that the public's practice of morality is something that Thoreau believed should infiltrate our actions not just as individuals, but as a society. Turner says,

"Public action that expresses and inspires an individual's recovery of moral agency is the form of political action Thoreau admires most. It may in fact be the only form of positive political action he would gladly endorse. It seems therefore that for politics to be worthwhile it must be politics in theatrical form on a grand scale, politics as democratic morality tale, politics which puts individualist virtues on display." (Turner 466)

Although Turner's essay focuses primarily on Thoreau as an abolitionist, it refers to Thoreau's admiration for virtue-based activism. Essentially, entire systems must function with a moral compass. This does not pertain merely to politics and government and is not exclusively about individual freedoms, but rather, profit based organizations, factories, and corporations must also be obligated to act in a similar fashion. Competitive Free Enterprise is the root of Capitalism, a view that advocates the same morality and "individualist virtue" Thoreau believed should be inherent within the practices of society's actions. Thoreau's anti-establishment views were not opposed to the idea of competitive free enterprise, but to the imposition of force and the exploitation of the worker. Neither of which, exist anywhere in capitalist ideology and occur only in a failed attempt of society to practice it.
Adam Smith, like Thoreau believed that it would be through a combination of labor, trade, and self-interest that every man would be able to obtain a higher standard of living. In Welch’s, “Adam Smith: Founding Father of Capitalism,” Welch says,

One particularly radical view in *Wealth of Nations* was that wealth lay not in gold but in the productive capacity of all people, each seeking to benefit from his or her own labors. This democratic view flew in the face of royal treasuries, privileges of the aristocracy, or prerogatives doled out to merchants, farmers and working guilds...Smith believed that the true wealth of a nation came from the labor of all people and that the flow of goods and services constituted the ultimate aim and end of economic life. (Welch 2)

Self-reliance for Thoreau was not about ignoring society. Thoreau’s temporary desertion to the woods was not to fully remove himself from society, but to educate his followers on the importance of self awareness and to reassert the value and importance of one’s relationship with nature. Through a stronger sense of self, the individual improves his/her lifestyle and all will benefit. For example was Thoreau’s focus on his own self-interest during his time at Walden Pond. The cultivation of the land, the building of a home, and the written account of living a life of natural simplicity arguably resulted in a dramatically positive set of circumstances. This includes everything from the philosophies he explored and the horticulture and preservation of the land on which he squatted. Thoreau recognized the increased value of the land after his departure. “I considered that I enhanced the value of the land by squatting on it” (*Walden* 23).

Self-interest does not necessarily develop from greed, but a force that manifests itself through one’s connection to nature and inherent spirituality. Prior to Thoreau’s
discussions about man’s instinctual bond with nature in “Higher Laws,” Adam Smith wrote about what he believed to be the driving force behind an individual’s actions and pursuit of self-interest. Smith called this force, “The Invisible Hand,” which is not only a driving force, but also is a part of man’s fundamental connection to nature. This idea contributed greatly to the development of modern capitalist theory. The Invisible Hand is a type of instinctual awareness undeniably motivated by individualism and the pursuit of personal gain. Smith said,

...He intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. (Wealth of Nations 234)

In “Higher Laws,” Thoreau wrote, “I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both” (Walden 74). For both men, the inherent pursuit of self-interest was not merely instinctual, but a way in which we are all connected to God and Nature. Most importantly, we all have an inner voice guiding us in the right direction. Problems arise only when we stop listening to ourselves. Thoreau exclaimed that,

If one listens to the faintest but constant suggestions of his genius, which are certainly true, he sees not to what extremes, or even insanity, it may lead him; and
yet that way, as he grows more resolute and faithful, his road lies...No man ever followed his genius till it misled him. (Walden 76)

For both Smith and Thoreau, the intuition to listen to one’s self was imperative to progress, both for the individual and in turn, society. Klein also explains,

The invisible hand, as a characteristic of the “wisdom of nature” guides self interest towards the production of wealth for the benefit of all by means of a free market system, which creates a natural balance and equity. Moreover, for Smith, self interest functions within the context of cooperation, which is provided by division of labor. Exchange implies mutual help and benefit of nurtures “a bond of friendship”-and therefore trust and concord-among traders and nations. (387)

Klein’s essay clarifies Smith’s feelings between nature and the self as a driving force between communication and what ultimately led to the free market system. This free exchange of ideas, predicated upon a greater understanding of personal desire bridges the connection between the philosophies of Smith and Thoreau. Society is contingent upon the strength and creativity of the individual. However, this individuality should not come at the expense of one person for the benefit of another. The balance, theoretically, is maintained by one’s own conscience and virtuous behavior. Doing what is right for oneself does not necessitate an act that has forcibly negative consequences for another. As Klein explains, there must exist a level of cooperation, or rather, respect for others, even when one acts out of his own self-interest.

Adam Smith also believed that the division of labour represented a qualitative increase in production and progress. Welch explains that Adam Smith believed,
Individuals acting in their own self-interest would naturally seek out economic activities that provided the greatest financial rewards. Smith was convinced that this self-interest would in turn maximize the economic well being of society as a whole. (Welch 1)

Thoreau was a known reader of Smith’s ideas. Although Brian Walker pinpoints how Thoreau’s formula for placing a value on goods and services was the same as Adam Smith’s, Thoreau’s connection to Smith is deeper. Thoreau also utilized the pragmatic aspects of the capitalist philosophies of Adam Smith and Jean Baptiste Say, as pointed out by Birch and Metting’s “Economic Design of Walden” and Brian Walker’s previously quoted essay, “Thoreau’s Alternative Economics.” Thoreau was thoughtful and aware of how his processes and philosophies would develop the economy. Thoreau’s lessons on frugality and economic growth were attempts to teach his contemporaries about value and worth that could exist harmoniously with non-exploitative labor and positive, thoughtful, productive consumption. Birch and Metting’s essay demonstrates how Thoreau was able to transition the necessary consumption into positive growth, utilizing the philosophies of Adam Smith and Jean Baptiste Say. In their essay, Birch and Metting explain that,

Smith and Say maintained that abstinence (savings) was ultimately a productive act since it pro-vided funds for employers to purchase new capital and additional labor....Say based his pro-savings argument on a distinction between

---

6 In Walker’s Essay, "Thoreau's Alternative Economics: Work, Liberty, and Democratic Cultivation," he quotes Richardson “ saying that Thoreau was a careful reader of the works of Adam Smith, Ricardo, and Say.
"unproductive" and "reproductive" consumption: unproductive consumption destroyed economic value and reduced economic growth by using up produce for immediate gratification, whereas reproductive consumption (i.e., savings channeled into capital or labor purchases) was an investment that generated growth by creating new produce of equal or greater value. In Say's terminology, Thoreau was attempting to minimize unproductive consumption at Walden so that he could develop the fastest growing self-economy. (589-90)

Being frugal and minimizing costs and materials allowed Thoreau to save, which Smith and Say argue is productive, rather than reductive. By growing his own food, or carefully selecting the exact amounts of supplies needed to build his house, Thoreau was able to save rather than spend. By simplifying his needs, eliminating waste, and utilizing his materials efficiently, Thoreau continually maximized the value he pertained from every commodity.

Finally, we come to the most controversial issue of Thoreau's lifetime. That is, the resounding ramifications of slavery. Without question, Thoreau, and his colleagues expressed a tremendous opposition to the slave trade, displayed by a series of lectures and impassioned public cries like “The Plea for John Brown.” In Taylor Stoehr's book, Nay-Saying in Concord: Emerson, Alcott, and Thoreau, Stoehr explains that, “Traveling agents for the New England Anti-Slavery Society took the place of circuit riders, conventions supplanted meetings, but impassioned speech gave rise to the ecstatic conversion in the old way” (Stoehr 28). Essentially, Stoehr explains that a need developed for these lecture forums along with the style of a hands-on, practical activism on which the Transcendentalists built their reputation. Although it may seem callous to
examine the need for debate over slavery as business-like, there was a demand for ethical arguments, which was supplied by the Transcendentalists. The discussions were brought about by an ethical dilemma, and an activist cause that was of interest to the citizens of nineteenth century New England. It was the activists that fought to be heard and amend the system, because this need existed. Stoehr goes on to explain that,

As fast as old institutions faded, new ones filled their places. Often the empty shell was taken over by a more vital organism; thus the old religious “anniversary weeks” of the churches in Boston and New York became a forum for the radicals and publicists of every persuasion. Most important was the development of the lyceum system as a sort of secular ministry, with houses and edification in every center of population; by 1839 there were 137 lyceums in Massachusetts alone, some of them offering weekly lectures to audiences of thousands. *This network of mechanics’ institutes, mutual educations associations, and literary athenaeums began as scattered self-help in the 1820’s and transformed itself into a lecture circuit in time for Emerson, Theodore Parker, Horace Greeley, and even Henry Thoreau to profit by it.* [italics mine] (29)

Thoreau’s ability to assess the current political climate, speak his mind, and generate revenue, *regardless of intent*, highlights some innate capitalist tendencies.

Lastly, putting aside the business of lectures and the material value of information, Thoreau’s condemnation of slavery was rooted in his belief of human rights. More than generating profit, physical or other, from speeches, and fulfilling a demand of the times, Thoreau was arguing for the right to ownership. That is, one should only be allowed to own one’s self. Essentially, Thoreau’s opposition to slavery is an issue of autonomy and
the simple right *not* to be owned by the state. Thoreau’s continued rebuke of government was in part, due to his belief that he had the right to choose where, if, and how he spent his time or money. This extended far beyond slavery. Thoreau’s decision to spend a night in jail rather than pay his taxes wasn’t merely an issue of currency, but one’s right to decide how one’s personal property was used. And if Thoreau earned revenue through his labor, he owned his currency as much as he possessed himself.

Anything that threatens autonomy also threatens freedom. A threat to autonomy leads to the elimination of choice, thereby condoning slavery. Thoreau refused to be owned, and he fought against those who disagreed. That is, he opposed the state’s ownership of his personal property, he opposed the state’s ownership of men and women, and he opposed having his actions dictated by that of society. Brian Walker explains that Thoreau formulated detailed plans and practices to maintain his freedom within the society, and yet maintain his relationship with his peers. Walker says,

> Thoreau advocates a number of exercises and practices as means of offsetting the forces that threaten autonomy, liberty, and happiness...Household accounting methods, centered on autonomy, can establish an equilibrium between one's higher order goods and the practices of everyday life, particularly with regard to the relation between work and leisure... Replacement practices can be developed to encourage individual flourishing while offsetting both economic dependency and social relations of exploitation...(850)

Thoreau wanted to learn from others, and have others learn from him. Most importantly, he sought to maintain his freedom while being true to his nature. It is following one’s true nature that encourages physical and spiritual growth. Thoreau said, “I perceive that,
when an acorn and a chestnut fall side by side, the one does not remain inert to make way for the other, but both obey their own laws, and spring and grow and flourish as best they can...” (“Civil Disobedience” 217). None of these characteristics are materialistic, yet they maintain an incredibly strong connection to capitalism, in that enterprise is a foundation of each, motivating individuals to act on their desires for greatness. In this case, Thoreau, although exceptional, was no exception.

Capitalism is a system designed to nurture and perpetuate the success of the individual. It is because the individual is filled with self-interest, that man is encouraged to barter, trade, learn, and grow. Thoreau was not removed from the nineteenth century New England Culture of trade and business. Much of the Thoreau scholarship and criticism neglects to examine Thoreau’s dependence on the capitalist system, and more specifically, the literary marketplace. Thoreau’s success as a professional writer and lecturer was contingent upon many factors, including the need to have an audience and generate revenue.

Self-interest, personal growth, and individualism are all factors relating Thoreau and capitalist ideology, but moreover, when we recognize that Thoreau was not just a writer, but he was in the business of writing do those ties solidify. Thoreau wanted an audience to purchase the fruits of his labor, and he was thoroughly involved and affected by the industry that was literature. Thoreau was aware of appealing to an audience and worked tirelessly to develop something that people would be interested in purchasing. I contend, that in part, because of Thoreau’s need to attract an audience, and a paying one at that, he developed a persona to compliment, and enhance his work. In Steven Fink’s *Prophet in the Market-Place: Thoreau’s Development as a Professional Writer*, he
proposes the theory that Thoreau’s intention for spending time at Walden Pond was again, not to remove himself from society, but to establish himself as a visionary and leader. Fink even says that Thoreau went to Walden Pond to assume the role as an American Prophet. If this is indeed the case, or even if Thoreau was just your standard ego-maniac, the success that comes along with leading is far more profitable than following.

Finally, it has been readily acknowledged that Thoreau was not immune to the realities of his profession. We have already covered that he lived within the reality of publishing, selling, and earning financial gain for his thoughts, his ideas and his activism. Fink says, “As a public writer who published works during his lifetime through conventional and commercial channels, Thoreau was intent not only on finding an audience for his writings, but, whenever possible, on being paid for them as well” (Fink 4). Mentioned even earlier is the fact that Thoreau was quite entrepreneurial. Yet, beyond his experience and skills as a writer and communicator, he had more professions than just teaching and manufacturing pencils. In addition to surveying land early on, he worked in several conventional industries, while experimenting with unconventional and progressive methods working in agriculture, fishing, and construction.7

Birch and Metting continue to explain that,

Far from portraying himself as an idle outcast detached from the world of business, in “economy” Thoreau took great pleasure in associating his economic experiment at Walden with the self-employed, entrepreneurial ideal articulated and practiced by such famous mainstream Americans as Benjamin Franklin. (588)

7 See Stoller, After Walden, pp. 6-8.
Probably, Thoreau’s ingenuity was undervalued during his time, but Thoreau’s intellectual property was ultimately just as valuable as those tangible inventions created by the forward thinking inventors of his time. He did not merely contribute to our society in a philosophical context, but was fully integrated with our technological progress and business, as much as he was a surveyor and commentator of the balance between ethics, spirituality, and greed.
Works Cited


