The Bean Field Quandary: Environmental Ethics in Emerson and Thoreau

Nicole Elaine Wittenburg

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The Bean Field Quandary: Environmental Ethics in Emerson and Thoreau

by

Nicole Elaine Wittenburg

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
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College of Humanities and Social Sciences
Department of English

Monika Elbert, Ph.D.
Thesis Sponsor

Marietta Morrissey, Ph.D.
Dean of College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Jonathan Greenberg, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Naomi Liebler, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Daniel Bronson, Ph.D.
Department Chair
ABSTRACT:

This thesis discusses Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau and their oppositional environmental perspectives. Specifically, the analysis focuses on Emerson’s *Nature*, “Self-Reliance,” “The Transcendentalist,” “Circles”, and “Hamatreya,” and Thoreau’s *Walden* and *The Maine Woods*. In these texts, Emerson conveys a predominantly anthropocentric viewpoint throughout his writings, while Thoreau’s view is ecocentric. In addition, both of their works contain contradictions regarding the environment. At times, Emerson speaks of nature as subservient to mankind but then shifts his tone to that of reverential awe for nature. Thoreau is conflicted by humanity’s impact on the environment, promoting vegetarianism but then renouncing farming. He also promotes young boys learning to hunt, but then despairs over the killing of a moose on one of his trips to the Maine woods. Despite these shifts in their environmental ethics, both writers were inspirational for later environmentalists. Additionally, this thesis shows how their anthropocentric and ecocentric perspectives have value for environmentalism.
THE BEAN FIELD QUANDARY:
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NICOLE ELAINE WITTENBURG

Montclair State University

Montclair, NJ

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Who shall describe the inexpressible tenderness and immortal life of the grim forest, where Nature, though it be mid-winter, is ever in her spring, where the moss-grown and decaying trees are not old, but seem to enjoy a perpetual youth; and blissful, innocent Nature, like a serene infant, is too happy to make a noise, except by a few tinkling, lisping birds and trickling rills? (Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 109)

**Chapter I: Introduction**

The works of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau are often viewed as part of the genre of nature writing. During the nineteenth century when industrialization was increasing, the beginnings of environmentalism were forming. Nature was being studied on a critical level in philosophy, literature, and science. A German scientist of the time, Alexander von Humbolt, sought to develop a scientific account of relationships within the natural world, fusing biology and geography. This comprehensive, scientific view of nature contributed to the intense interest in nature studies in the nineteenth century, inspiring figures like Thoreau to take a more literal, ecological, rather than spiritual approach to his transcendental writing. Emerson is more focused on understanding the human spirit and mind, and sought the divine in nature. Specifically, he felt by understanding creation he would find and unify with the Creator. His transcendental beliefs, which prioritize the individual self above all things, see nature as inspiration for the soul and a connecting force between the mind and spirit. He writes, "The universal soul, he calls Reason: it is not mine, or thine, or his, but we are its; we are its property and men. And the blue sky in which the private earth is buried, the sky with its eternal calm, and full of everlasting orbs, is the type of Reason. That which, intellectually considered, we call Reason, in relation to nature, we call Spirit. Spirit is the

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1 Romanic writers were also concerned with nature before transcendentalism.
Creator" (21). For Emerson, Reason, Spirit, and God are connected through nature. His quest to comprehend nature is spiritual, and yet Emerson always seems to keep nature at a distance in his attempt to repress the physical.

As environmental awareness has grown, new areas of study developed to address the increasing environmental crisis. In literature, environmental literary study is referred to as Ecocriticism. The theory seeks to study the relationship between literature and the environment, specifically in relation to environmental concerns. It is worth noting that Emerson’s ideas about nature, and his quest to comprehend the relationship between the self, the spirit, and the universe, are in some ways precursors to the ideas behind Ecocritical theories that seek to analyze the relationship between the environment and a text. Cheryll Glotfelty, one of the founding scholars of Ecocritical study, describes ecopoetics as “taking the science of ecology, with its concept of the ecosystem and its emphasis on interconnections and energy flow” (xxiv) to understand how literature itself functions in society. It is also no coincidence that one of the most prolific scholars within Ecocriticism, Lawrence Buell, is also a leading critic of the work of Emerson and Thoreau. When studying Ecocriticism, it is nearly impossible not to refer to Emerson and Thoreau and their work during transcendentalism. As such, one of the chief goals of Ecocritical theory is to reevaluate American nature writing and highlight the importance of the genre for its environmental significance. Both Emerson and Thoreau focus on transcendence of the self, but their views on nature’s role in this process differ greatly from each other, as well as containing seemingly contradictory ideas about nature within their texts. However, it would be difficult not to have contradictions when dealing with complex and intangible concepts such as human consciousness, nature, and the spirit.
Emerson’s Contradictions

Emerson’s works contain contradictions regarding the relationship between humanity and nature. Specifically, he shifts from essay to essay, or even within a single essay, between treating nature as a sublime entity to speaking of nature as inferior to humanity, existing only to serve our needs. Emerson elevates nature in the following passage from his essay Nature:

Nature satisfies by its loveliness, and without any mixture of corporeal benefit. I see the spectacle of morning from the hill-top over against my house, from day-break to sun-rise, with emotions which an angel might share. The long slender bars of cloud float like fishes in the sea of crimson light. From the earth, as a shore, I look out into that silent sea. I seem to partake its rapid transformations: the active enchantment reaches my dust, and I dilate and conspire with the morning wind. (15)

Here Emerson expresses that nature has value outside of what it provides for the human body, and that simply experiencing nature’s beauty makes him feel closer to heavenly beings. In this experience, Emerson is transformed, opening himself to nature’s influence. Yet, a few pages later within the same essay, Emerson states “[Man] is placed in the centre of beings, and a ray of relation passes from every other being to him” (21). Here Emerson asserts that mankind is the center of all living things, and that it is through humanity that all other life is connected. While the first passage expresses reverence for nature and its ability to unite the human spirit with the heavens, the second passage reduces nature to only having relevance as it relates to humans.
At times, it seems as though he is illustrating a power struggle between humanity and nature, the dominant force fluctuating between and within his works such as in his poem “Hamatreya,” in which the earth laughs at humanity’s arrogance. He also contradicts himself as he discusses the human mind and spirit in comparison with the natural world in his quest for transcendence. The individual self is prized in transcendentalism, specifically an individual’s consciousness and spirit, which Emerson often contrasts with the physical world around him. His contradictions arise as he attempts to define the relationship between “Nature and the Soul” which comprises the universe, or the self and “the Not Me,” as he calls it (8). In essays such as “Self-Reliance,” Emerson indicates that transcendence of the human consciousness happens by renouncing the physical self, as physical elements are beneath the mind; physical nature serves as a tool for transcendence by inspiring the spirit with its beauty, but has no value or meaning otherwise. In contrast, in “The Transcendentalist,” he indicates that because of the individual human consciousness, it is never possible to be truly transcendental. In fact, “Only in the instinct of the lower animals” (whose instincts we find similarly within ourselves and should be repressed), “we find the suggestion of the methods of it, and something higher than our understanding” (197-98). After continually asserting that the individual, intangible Self is superior to all things, he then proposes that the method for transcendence can be seen in lesser creatures than humans, who apparently can never achieve true transcendence.

Thoreau’s Contradictions

Thoreau’s Walden and The Maine Woods also contain contradictions within and between the works. Within Walden in the chapter “Higher Laws,” Thoreau asserts that
“to abstain from animal food” is the ideal instinct everyone should have, but in “The Bean Field,” he questions the ethics of farming as it imposes an unnatural hierarchy onto the environment. He promotes a vegetarian diet but at the same time he finds farming and agriculture to be problematic due to his consideration for the non-human environment. Yet there is also a section within *Walden* where Thoreau tells the reader he recommends to all his friends that they allow their sons to go hunting, “*make* them hunters, though sportsmen only at first.” He then justifies this by stating, “it was one of the best parts of my education” (144). However, he also has the problematic, or perhaps naïve assumption that boys will outgrow the desire: “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” (145). In contrast, he expresses the deepest remorse and disgust when one of his traveling companions kills a moose on one of his trips in *The Maine Woods*, and also laments over the lumberers’ destructive use of forest trees. Thoreau ultimately struggles with how to deal with human impact on the environment, and his contradictions emphasize the complexity of the problem.

**Contrasting Perspectives**

Anthropocentrism is a perspective in which human concerns and values are prioritized above other living things, sometimes as if these concerns are the only experiences worth considering. Emerson is typically anthropocentric in his writing because he values the human, individual self as the ultimate existence on the earth. He continually promotes humanity over other living things, asserting views such as “The instincts of the ant are very unimportant, considered as the ant’s; but the moment a ray of relation is seen to extend from it to man...then all its habits...become sublime” (22), and
"nature is thoroughly mediate. It is made to serve" (28). Emerson values nature only so far as he sees its usefulness for mankind.

Ecocentrism is a perspective that is nature-centered (as opposed to human-centered, or anthropocentric) and values all life in the biosphere equally. Thoreau is ecocentric because he values nature in its own right, not simply because of what it provides for humanity. He exemplifies this perspective throughout his works because he never asserts that only mankind has intrinsic value, and instead highlights various aspects of nature, big and small, from the sounds he hears in the woods, to pine needles, to bean fields, to the changing of the seasons. Every aspect of nature is worth his attention and study.

In this paper I will examine select works of Emerson and Thoreau—specifically, Emerson's essays, *Nature*, "The Transcendentalist," "Self-Reliance," "The Over-Soul," "Circles," and his poem "Hamatreya" and Thoreau's *Walden* and *The Maine Woods*—for three Ecocritical purposes. First, I aim to showcase their distinctly opposed positions toward the environment; anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, respectively. Second, I aim to highlight the contradictions and conflicting ideals within their texts as they relate to the human-nature relationship. And third, I aim to show how both the contradictions within their texts and their contrasting points of view have value beyond the literary canon as constructive tools for the environmental movement.

Many other critics have examined the works of Emerson and Thoreau with a focus on their concepts of nature or the contradictory propositions within their texts. Joel Porte's work *Emerson and Thoreau: Transcendentalists in Conflict* states that Emerson's disconnect with nature led to his reduction of the environment to a symbolic analysis.
such as the chapter “Language” in *Nature*, infused with his moral and emotional perspective. In *Environmental Renaissance: Emerson, Thoreau and the Systems of Nature*, Andrew McMurry analyzes both Emerson and Thoreau for the way in which they contributed to the two forms of environmentalism; “shallow” and “deep.” Shallow ecology is the more practical idea for environmental reform, deep ecology is the more radical condemnation of humanity’s actions for the sake of environmental well-being. He also notes that in Thoreau we see “the stirrings of a more ecocentric vision” (50) and that Emerson’s contradictions were reflective of the contrasts between the natural order and emerging social-industrial forces in America at that time (72). Alan D. Hodder’s *Emerson’s Rhetoric of Revelation: Nature, the Reader, and the Apocalypse Within* provides an in-depth study of Emerson’s *Nature*. Hodder specifically looks at the Christian influence in the text’s apocalyptic undertones, as he sees *Nature* to symbolize both destruction and creation for Emerson.

Laura Dassow Walls has established the argument that both Emerson and Thoreau were in fact “naturalists” in the scientific sense, not just philosophically, which shaped their views towards nature. In *Emerson’s Life in Science: The Culture of Truth*, Walls asserts that Emerson’s role in natural science, was to “remind [naturalists] always to connect their studies of nature to the study of man” (97), maintaining a human-centered focus even when studying the natural world. In *Seeing New Worlds: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth century Natural Science*, Walls similarly provides evidence that over the course of his travels and writing, Thoreau was scientifically influenced by the work of Alexander von Humboldt, and that Thoreau’s experiences bridge the gap between the seemingly oppositional worlds of science and poetry. She states, “In his
walks, surveys, travels, and reading, Thoreau was moving away from a grand and abstract transcendentalism toward detailed observation of the specifics of nature, in all its unaccountable diversity” (115). In Thoreau as Romantic Naturalist: His Shifting Stance Toward Nature, rather than forcing a consistency or larger meaning, James McIntosh also finds contradictions within Thoreau’s writing, specifically looking for what he calls “programmed inconsistency” in what he classifies as Thoreau’s “philosophical contrary mindedness” (11). Buell argues Thoreau’s ecocentric perspective throughout The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of the American Culture, stating, “Thoreau’s politics of nature were further complicated by his deepening commitment to nature’s interest over the human interest” (135). In works such as Walden and The Maine Woods, his concern for the environment is clear, though it took him almost a lifetime to develop. In fact, Buell states, “We should think of Walden both as product and process, a work that took nearly a decade of accumulated experience and revision to complete” (118). His experiences in nature continually changed and shaped his perspective. Specifically, Buell argues for understanding Thoreau’s struggle with ecocentrism to solidify his own relationship with the natural world, in an increasingly industrial society. He also validates Thoreau’s use of the “pathetic phallacy” as legitimate criteria for environmentalist action. Other scholars also address Thoreau’s nature-centered perspective, such as Philip Cafaro whose essay, “Thoreau’s Environmental Ethics in Walden,” dissect the various ethical considerations Thoreau struggles with in the text, specifically his vegetarian leaning and contradictory ideas about hunting. In

2 The term “pathetic fallacy” is attributed to John Ruskin. It deals with the emotional personifying of nature and animals. Buell notes that for Ruskin, though personification can be at times essential, he criticized its use as excessive, giving it the stigma of “pathetic fallacy.” See also, Buell, The Environmental Imagination, 188.
perfect balance with Cafaro, Debra Segura’s essay, “Championing Nature so ‘Rife with life’: Ecological Consciousness in *Walden*” analyzes the ecological ethics Thoreau confronts from the other perspective; the harm human life has on plants.

**Importance for Environmentalism**

Neither Emerson nor Thoreau were environmental activists; their work remained predominantly intellectual, writing essays and giving lectures. Of the many notable environmental activists of the time, John Muir was specifically influenced by Emerson, referring to Emerson and his works as “his spiritual authority” (McMurry 195). In fact, he was even able to utilize Emerson’s anthropocentric perspective of nature as a way to encourage political action on behalf of the environment (195). An additionally important figure was George Perkins Marsh, who studied the human impact on the natural world in his book *Man and Nature* (1864), but even he was preceded by the studies of Bartram, Crévecoeur, and Jefferson (31). It is important to understand this eco-conscious zeitgeist as a context for Emerson and Thoreau’s philosophical explorations of nature. While Emerson seeks to understand the spiritual connection between man and nature, prioritizing human consciousness above all else, he still supported the work of the environmental activists, and encouraged attempts for political action on behalf of nature. His personal goals, however, remained metaphysical, and thus largely complicated by the abstract components of the self, the soul, and the conscious mind. Despite the contradictions that arise out of their philosophical writings, the attention Emerson and Thoreau’s works bring to the subject of nature was, and is, important to environmental studies, because it causes readers and audiences to consider and reflect upon their own personal relationship with the natural world. Both Emerson and Thoreau’s contradictory
environmental ethics lead to important questions for environmentalism and humanity. In both cases, these questions force readers to consider their own position in relation to the natural world, which is the first step toward environmental action.

Chapter II: Emerson's Contradictions within His Quest for Transcendence: Why His Anthropocentrism Matters

Considered the father of American transcendentalism, Emerson spread his philosophy through his poetry and essays. Emerson's works are now receiving critical attention from the contemporary study of Ecocriticism. For this reason, Emerson (along with Thoreau) is valued for his work's thematic emphasis on nature. By studying literature that explores environmental themes, ecocritics can achieve their goal of bridging the gap between the natural environment and conscious awareness of environmental concerns. For Emerson, understanding nature would be a lifelong quest to find closure for his intellectual obstacles, such as "how nature remains an unfathomable mystery, how nature might not even exist except as a mental construct" (Buell, Emerson 208) and as he says in Nature, "to what end is nature?" (7). Nature was something of an enigma to Emerson, and as Alan Hodder notes, "In spite of the caricature of Emerson as one of America's original Nature-worshippers, an armchair advocate of the great out-of-doors, there is nothing particularly trusting in Emerson's attitude to nature. On the contrary, there is a certain wariness here, even perhaps a little cynicism" (39). Despite feelings of wariness, Emerson's writing focuses on nature as he explores and seeks understanding of both nature and human beings' relationship to it.

In an attempt to further his understanding of nature, Emerson became deeply interested in natural science. Laura Walls notes that Emerson came to be an avid reader
of Humboldt’s scientific work, and that “throughout the 1830s, when Emerson was reading intensively in modern science, Humboldt became his model for the natural scientist who fused the chaos of natural particulars into a meaningful whole directed by a governing intelligence” (Walls, *The Passage* 252). However, Emerson’s personal goals regarding the environment remained focused on a spiritual relationship with nature as he sought individual resolution with the natural world. This chapter will focus on the contradictions within Emerson’s writing as he examines the mind, the soul, and nature, and the relationship between the three, and how those contradictions actually help to facilitate an understanding of humanity’s relationship with nature, despite his anthropocentric perspective.

**Prioritizing the Self**

As a transcendentalist, Emerson was very interested in the idea of “the self,” the intangible entity of the mind and spirit of each individual. Through his writings, he strives to develop and convey an understanding of a lifestyle that will highlight and privilege purity of “the self,” supporting his belief that “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men,—that is genius” (259). To do so, Emerson reflects on the world around him, examining politics, society, and education. As David Robinson explains, “Transcendentalism was thus a moment in history containing both expansive hope and a sense of strife and embattlement, and marked by the emergence of new intellectual categories, new relations among persons and classes, and new ethical and political imperatives” (13). These new intellectual categories involve exploring the self and the soul, as well as the “new ethical imperative” of emerging environmental considerations. Emerson unifies these intellectual endeavors
through his writing, as he continually seeks to define the relationship between the self and the natural world as well.

By closely examining Emerson’s contradictions, it is possible to develop an understanding of his transcendental beliefs about nature and the soul by linking the contradictions together. However, despite nature’s importance to transcendentalism, Emerson seems to favor an anthropocentric approach in his writing, a term used by ecocritics to describe works which regard human beings as central to the universe, interpreting everything in terms of human experience. As Scott Russell Sanders states, “Listening for what nature had to say, Emerson was always a little too eager to hear the cultural mutterings of his own well-stocked mind, and thus his landscapes are less substantial than those drawn by many of the writers who followed his precepts” (188). Emerson’s individualistic, human-centered focus is important to understand because when Thoreau later diverges from Emerson, we see a clear distinction in how each writes about nature, Thoreau favoring an ecocentric point of view, which supports a nature-centered value system. Throughout his writings, Emerson sees nature below humanity in the hierarchy. His quest to understand nature is partially fueled by frustration to comprehend, but also partially by his desire to use, or even exploit nature to further his own intellectual and spiritual journey. For Emerson, nature’s purpose is to serve mankind as a tool for transcendence. As Joel Porte notes, “for Emerson, nature was a steppingstone to virtuous action.” He continues to describe Emerson’s view of nature as “lesser” than humanity, stating, “In Emerson’s view, nature is completely ancillary to moral science, and is best used when it serves to furnish rhetorical tropes” (61), such as the symbolic use of nature in the chapter “Language” from Nature. Because nature is
important to transcendentalism and other social movements of the time, it may seem out of place for Emerson to embody a seemingly “anti-nature” tone within his writing. However, Emerson’s anthropocentrism often shifts toward an awestruck reverence for nature itself, and if we understand Emerson’s goals for transcendence of the mind and spirit, perhaps we can understand his struggles and contradictions as his attempt to unite with nature beyond the physical world.

These contradictions, when attempting to define nature and humanity’s role in relation to it, express the human need to understand our place in the universe. It is natural, to some extent, that Emerson would contradict himself, because how can one truly define or explain nature or the sublime? Its unfathomable vastness goes beyond confinement in a single essay or lecture. This inconsistency does little to faze Emerson himself, who denounces “foolish consistency” as “the hobgoblin of little minds,” and questions, “Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood?...To be great is to be misunderstood” (265).

**Human-Centered Perspective**

One of Emerson’s many famous essays, *Nature*, has often been considered his quintessential transcendental piece. Although he does not uphold an unwavering stance on how he believes nature works with humanity, he clearly emphasizes nature’s importance as he seeks to “enjoy an original relation to the universe” (7). Always striving for the transcendence of the mind, he breaks his analysis down into eight chapters, which categorize nature into human ideals, such as “Commodity,” “Beauty,” and “Language.” Here we see that through the organization of *Nature* Emerson employs a human-centered focus by creating categories based on human constructed ideals. He develops throughout
the essay a belief that nature exists only to serve mankind, and that nature only exists because of humanity’s interpretation of nature: “Nature subserves to man...Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact” (20). Emerson takes away any meaning nature would have on its own, and further asserts, “All the facts of natural history taken by themselves, have no value...But marry it to human history, and it is full of life” (21). Only through unification with humanity does nature have value. As Gillian Mitchell states, “Nature in Emerson’s work, thus, is a term to describe all that is not the individual...In this way, then, Emerson states clearly that the ‘nature’ he will proceed to discuss will be something subordinate to man” (28). Although he implies it multiple times throughout *Nature*, it is most directly stated in the chapter, “Discipline,” when he asserts, “Nature is thoroughly mediate. It is made to serve. It receives the dominion of man as meekly as the ass on which the Savior rode. It offers all its kingdoms to man as the raw material which he may mould into what is useful. Man is never weary of working it up” (28). When he analyzes language, he sees nature as a muse of sorts, the physical world inspiring the way we speak and create. However, he seems to strip nature of its autonomy to some degree, when he proposes that “the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind” (24), using human qualities to define it, and essentially reducing nature to a symbolic level. Ecocritics who support “Deep Ecology” find anthropomorphism problematic for the way in which it imposes human qualities onto nature, rather than seeing nature for what it is in itself. By attributing human qualities to nature, regardless of intention, it imposes the hierarchy of man being greater than nature, which is against the philosophy and goals of most ecocentric scholars, who seek to establish the importance and value of nature in its own right, not just in relation to humanity. At times,
Emerson reduces nature even further to an aesthetic purpose: “the world thus exists to the soul to satisfy the desire of beauty” (19). The hierarchy Emerson imposes here, degrading the natural world to a level of visual appeal is clearly defined.

However, Emerson essentially argues the opposite perspective in his poem, “Hamatreya,” published in 1846, exactly 10 years after the publication of *Nature*. The poem questions whether earth or humanity “own” the land, and contains what Emerson calls the “Earth-Song,” which is written from the perspective of the earth. “Earth laughs in flowers, to see her boastful boys/ Earth-proud, proud of the earth which is not theirs;/ Who steer the plough, but cannot steer their feet/ Clear of the grave” (13-16). In the poem, the earth is mocking humanity for its false sense of superiority. Humanity is confident in the ability to mold the earth to suit its needs. In Earth-Song, nature replies:

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They called me theirs,
Who so controlled me;
Yet every one
Wished to stay, and is gone,
How am I theirs,
If they cannot hold me,
But I hold them? (26-32)
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Whatever man may choose to do with the earth during life, he cannot control being joined with the earth in death. It is difficult to connect both of these contrasting views coming from Emerson. In the essay, the purpose of the earth is to suit humanity’s needs; in the poem, the earth gets the last “laugh” as it takes us in death.
However, this struggle is also seen within Emerson’s Nature as well, not just between two separate works. As Emerson begins Nature suggesting that the time has come for humanity to discover a new relationship with the universe, reiterating humanity’s position in the great chain of being becomes complicated due to his environmental reverence. Despite the many anthropocentric statements Emerson makes in the essay, he also considers the importance of humanity’s connection with nature. Emerson believes that “the Universal Being circulates through [him]” (10) because he communes with nature on a spiritual level. This “Universal Being” comprises all “beings” from sentient humans to mammals to plants. When he says, “The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable” (11), he is exemplifying the belief that Edward O. Wilson would later call “biophilia,” or the hypothesis that there is an innate bond between humans and the natural world.

This connection between man and nature also has scientific underpinnings as well. As Emerson’s scientific knowledge expands, he shifts through different theories in an attempt to comprehend his existence in nature. Walls argues, “Emerson’s own theory that nature is animated by man depends on the self-evidencing interplay of mind and matrix, whereby the external world is necessary for the mind’s realization, and mind or concepts are equally necessary to assemble a world of dead atoms into living meaning” (Emerson’s Life 101). While he does imply that physical nature is essentially dead without humanity to give it meaning, Emerson also acknowledges that the physical world is necessary for the mind as well. This reciprocal relationship between man and nature is a step in Emerson’s journey for comprehension. Additionally, Emerson’s second essay
entitled "Nature" (1844) expressed the evolutionary Darwinian ideas that were circulating by elevating nature from symbolic to progressive meaning (Buell, *Environmental Imagination* 188-89). So although Emerson's perspective is predominantly anthropocentric, it is important not to assume that Emerson was anti-environmental. Once evolutionary theory began to spread and science began to follow ecological considerations, Emerson made the appropriate shift. However, his study of nature would still prioritize human consciousness as it sought to achieve transcendence.

**Attempts for Transcendence**

In the beginning of his essay "The Transcendentalist" Emerson recalls the philosophy of Kant, stating, "What is popularly called Transcendentalism among us, is Idealism...As thinkers, mankind have ever divided into two sects, Materialists and Idealists; the first class founding on experience, the second on consciousness" (193). By beginning his essay in this way, Emerson is informing his audience that the ideal, the key to transcendence, is in the conscious mind. To achieve this ideal state, one must go beyond the material world of experience. Emerson is encouraging reflection and intellectual exploration, which seek to bring humanity a greater understanding of the universe. He directly asserts the connection by saying, "His thought—that is the Universe" (195). However, that is not to say that the natural, physical world is unimportant for true transcendence. As Robert Richardson states in his essay, "Emerson and Nature," Emerson's lifelong attempt "was to show how the laws and processes of nature are part of mind, and to work out the relation between mind and external nature. Emerson was, finally, a naturalist of mental more than of physical facts" (101). In "The Transcendentalist" we find one of the more complicated statements of Emerson's
philosophy of transcendentalism. While the basis of the philosophy is to uphold the soul and the mind, repressing the lower-order needs of the physical world, Emerson essentially states that because of human consciousness, humans can never achieve transcendence, and that instead, we may look to animals for further instruction. He articulates this contradiction in the following passage:

There is no pure transcendentalist...all who by strong bias of nature have leaned to the spiritual side in doctrine, have stopped short of their goal...I mean we have yet no man who has leaned entirely on his character and eaten angels' food; who, trusting to his sentiments, found life made of miracles; who working for universal aims, found himself fed, he knew not how...Only in the instinct of the lower animals, we find the suggestion of the methods of it, and something higher than our understanding...Nature is transcendental, exists primarily, necessarily, ever works and advances, yet takes no thought for the morrow...yet [Man] is balked when he tries to fling himself into this enchanted circle, where all is done without degradation. (197-98)

Emerson does not explicitly say that "lower animals" achieve transcendence, only that through their lives we see the "method" for success. Lower animals can never achieve true transcendence because they lack the consciousness for which transcendence occurs. Conversely, humanity cannot achieve transcendence by existing only on "sentiment," because our consciousness makes us self-aware. It is for this reason that Emerson states, "there is no pure transcendentalist."
However, it would seem then, that rather than suppressing the lower animal within us, we should seek a deeper understanding of that part of ourselves, not to become more animal-like, but to emulate those “methods” that would lead to transcendence. Despite this contradiction, Emerson does not abandon his attempts to achieve transcendence and unite with the universe; he seems to feel moments of successful unity throughout his essays, such as his famous passage in *Nature* of becoming “a transparent eye-ball” (10). Perhaps we can conclude that transcendence, or as close as we can ever come to it, can be achieved just in the striving for or the attempt; however, Emerson does not specify this. Regardless, it is clear that the natural world, including the “lower beings,” is important to humanity, either as a tool, an inspiration, or a model for unity. What the lower animals do that suggests the method for transcendence is to remove expectations outside the present moment. This should not be confused with any sort of *carpe diem* mentality on Emerson’s part; rather, we should look to his second important transcendental component, self-reliance, for the possibility of human transcendence.

The main argument of Emerson’s essay, “Self-Reliance” is essentially self-explanatory: rely only on yourself. He does not necessarily mean this solely in terms of survival, but in terms of conscious decisions: “What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think” (263). While it may seem that this idea preaches selfishness, Emerson is not arguing to never do things that are kind or generous. Instead, he proposes to only do those things if that is what you believe is right for yourself. Doing what is deemed by society as morally “right,” is wrong unless you believe it is what you should do according to the essence of your individuality: “No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only
right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it” (262). You must be able to rely on yourself to get what you need and be fulfilled. In addition, Emerson is against looking outside the self for truth or education due to the dishonest influence of society. Essentially, whatever cannot be found within the self is not worth seeking, because everything outside the self is a series of imitations. The further you go from the self, the further you go from truth.

The importance of “Self-Reliance” is to live your life for yourself by deciding what is best from moment to moment. Emerson allows for inconsistency, because the only way to be self-reliant is by reassessing and living by your own needs. Emerson does not make the connection, but by doing this, we come closest to the method for transcendence present in the lower animals from “The Transcendentalist”; these animals get what they need from moment to moment, doing only what they must, without any influence or expectations outside the present moment. The difference, according to Emerson’s beliefs, is that animals do not have a consciousness to transcend, nor do they have comparable social structures whose influence they must resist. However, by becoming self-reliant and living within every present moment honestly, looking no further into the future and nowhere outside the self for satisfaction, humanity comes closest to the possibility of transcendence. Again this highlights Emerson’s anthropocentric worldview, with a strong shift toward egocentrism due to the prioritization of the individual, but this notion inspires Thoreau’s self-reliance with the Walden experiment. In doing so, Thoreau takes Emerson’s words and puts them into action by living on his own for two years, practicing the transcendental virtue of self-reliance within nature. Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” essay is therefore connected to “The
Transcendentalist,” because the method of self-reliance as a way of life is a key component to transcendence. In addition, when Emerson writes, “You think me the child of my circumstances: I make my circumstance... You call it the power of circumstance, but it is the power of me” (196) in “The Transcendentalist,” we see a direct connection to self-reliance, and the idea that we must live our lives with personal intention and authority. This is key to transcendentalism, because transcendence is about the self and the soul, which cannot transcend if weighed down by insincere societal obligations. By highlighting the self, and prioritizing the individual, Emerson’s belief that one has control over circumstance implies a belief in control over natural events as well.

Finding Connections

However, through Emerson’s anthropomorphizing of the earth and nature, it is possible that he is hinting at a level of sovereignty within the natural world, creating a connection between humanity and nature. In his essay, “Circles,” Emerson analyzes the cyclical nature of various aspects of life, beginning with the human eye, the make up of the physical world, and moving to the interconnectedness of the universe. Throughout each of his essays, Emerson relies on circle metaphors and imagery. While in this essay he covers the cyclical nature of historical events, religion, moods, and ambition, the primary idea he puts forth focuses on the cycle of natural life, and its relevance to the human-nature connection. He begins by metaphorically discussing the way circles work in nature: “around every circle another can be drawn;...there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning” (403). As another circle can be drawn around an existing circle, he reminds his readers that the nature of life is to move forward, for every accomplishment or triumph can always be surpassed. Similarly, within civilization, “The
life of man is a self-evolving circle, which, from a new ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end” (404). Like a drop of water creating endless new ripples moving outward from the center, the life of each individual moves in the same way. The circle is “self-evolving”; the nature of the self continues to grow and move forward.

In both of these passages, we see the idea of an eternal and never-ending movement. This idea of eternity works with Emerson’s goal of finding humanity’s relation to the universe that he mentions at the beginning of *Nature*. The concept of eternity fits perfectly with Emerson’s understanding of the physical world, because “In nature every moment is new; the past is always swallowed and forgotten; the coming only is sacred” (413) due to the cyclical nature of life and death. This is obvious to Emerson, but within these cycles he begins to realize the unity of all living things:

The natural world may be conceived of as a system of concentric circles, and we now and then detect in nature slight dislocations, which apprise us that this surface on which we now stand is not fixed, but sliding. These manifold tenacious qualities, this chemistry and vegetation, these metals and animals, which seem to stand there for their own sake, are means and methods only,—are words of God, and as fugitive as other words. (409-10)

Life is cyclical and fleeting, and nothing, not animal, vegetable, mineral, or man is exempt from its ephemeral nature. In order for life to be cyclical, ours must end to begin the process again. In “Hamatreya,” Emerson expresses that death is inescapable. In that way, we are the same as plants and animals because despite our “higher” position, we are not exempt from the inevitability of death. He acknowledges both our “superiority” and
inferiority in nature: “I am God in nature; I am a weed by the wall” (406). Emerson realizes that he has the power to make change and have control in a godlike way over other creatures, but at the same time he is just as insignificant and powerless as a weed in comparison to the cyclical nature of life. Even the words and the meanings we apply to them are transient, and will repeat and regenerate over time. Finally, as readers of Emerson’s essay, we can see one last connection in “Circles,” that brings together the major notions in “The Transcendentalist” and “Self-Reliance.” As in his discussion of the “lower animals” in “The Transcendentalist” which he alludes to in “Self-Reliance,” in “Circles” he states, “The one thing which we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety, to lose our sempiternal memory, and to do something without knowing how or why; in short, to draw a new circle” (414). This reinforces the idea of self-reliance, and living in the moment to “forget ourselves,” not as individuals, but to exist without questioning. In addition, the focus on the cycles of life in “Circles” brings us back to “Hamatreya,” in which he recognizes that we will never escape union with the earth, and that there is an inevitable rotation of the earth feeding us, and us feeding the earth. In response to the encompassing way this pulls together Emerson’s ideas, Albert Von Frank asserts, “One could almost wish that [Essays: First Series] had ended with the sublime ‘Circles,’ which more than touches on all the topics earlier named, and with an effect as of inscribing a circle around them” (117). Here, Emerson has connected the self with nature and the eternal, and by understanding the flux and dynamic attributes of each element, we can see the path for transcendence.

As a prolific transcendental writer, Emerson wrote extensively on nature and humanity’s place in the universe. Despite the contradictions we see both within and
between his works, it is possible to develop an understanding of Emerson's beliefs when tying them together. Starting with *Nature*, we see Emerson questioning how nature works with humanity, shifting between nature as inferior, and nature as a vehicle for transcendence, but always emphasizing nature as a *means* for human needs: “Nature, of course, was simply a means for Emerson to get to his favorite topic: the human spirit” (McMurry 131). In “Hamatreya,” there is no superior in the relationship, and a union with the earth, both figurative and literal, is inevitable. In “The Transcendentalist,” he says that only animals have the method for transcendence, and in “Self-Reliance” we see how humans can come closest to it. “Circles” brings the connection between nature and consciousness, full-circle. Everything is cyclical, everything is connected, and so it does not matter that he has a human-centered viewpoint of nature in his life and writing. In the end, we are one. By focusing on our perspective and our needs as humans, it is possible to support an environmental approach, as we are also part of the environment and therefore, can use human prioritization as justification for environmentalism. The more connections we realize between the natural world and ourselves, both physically and emotionally, the more we can see the value in environmentalism. Perhaps we can understand Emerson’s contradictions as his seeking to emphasize the questions, not the answers. By encouraging his readers to question, or at least consider the complexity of their relationship with nature, and thus their role in the universe, he perpetuates the cycle of human progress by helping bring awareness to the connectedness of nature, individuality, and the soul. He is drawing the next circle and challenging us to step outside.
Chapter III: “Contact! Contact!”: Thoreau’s Spiritual Dilemma in Nature

As a transcendental philosopher, Thoreau was deeply interested in human consciousness. However, he distinguished himself from Emerson in seeking to understand the “consciousness” of nature itself. A keen observer of nature, Thoreau spent much of his time among the flora and fauna of the nineteenth century New England landscape. He was interested in both the biological and botanic science at work in his surroundings, as well as a spiritual connection to the natural world. His emotional and intellectual responses to nature, as well as his transcendental beliefs, led to Thoreau’s Walden experiment. He wanted to “live deliberately,” which essentially is Thoreau’s interpretation of Emerson’s transcendental concept of Self-Reliance. Throughout Thoreau’s texts, he presents nature as a living entity full of spirit. He recognizes the interconnectedness of all living things, both in relation to and apart from humankind. By doing so, he creates the most drastic difference between himself and his mentor, as he gives nature autonomy by depicting its value as something completely separate from humanity. He emphasizes his communion with nature, rejecting the unnecessary tendency humanity feels to dominate nature. For Thoreau, nature does not exist to serve mankind. Instead, nature and humanity are equal forces in the world. This perspective allows Thoreau to develop an understanding of the earth as well as humans’ relationship with the environment. Works such as Walden and The Maine Woods would become foundational for later conservationists and environmentalists’ studies.

However, despite Thoreau’s love for nature, it is important to note that he was not himself an environmental activist, as we understand the term today. His writings, while propounding various ideals of environmental ethics, were just that: philosophies. When it
came to the environment, Thoreau was a man of observation and reflection, not action. Nevertheless, his work became an integral part of the environmental movement after his time, though that should not take away from the value of his work as a nature writer. His focus on the environment and observations of nature throughout his writing created a trend that valued nature in literature. Most importantly, the major concepts he discusses in works such as *Walden* and *The Maine Woods* regarding the relationship humans have with nature confront the same questions and issues that would become integral to environmentalism: ethical choices that would seem to support either environmental protection or sustaining the human race, but not both.

**Living Deliberately**

Thoreau’s primary goal in his Walden experiment is an attempt to live deliberately. This goal echoes Emerson’s “The Transcendentalist,” in which the ideal path to transcendence requires a moment-by-moment attempt to simply do what you need to do according to your own guidelines for living. Though, as previously stated, it is the “lower animals” who come closest to achieving this, Thoreau creates his own interpretation of self-reliance. The chapter, “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For” articulates that this must be done through “simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!” (65). Thoreau rejects the clutter that “fritters” life away because it is a distraction. He states, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived” (65). He believes that we must focus on living in the moment, every moment, rather than allowing ourselves to be distracted by nonessentials. “The nation itself,” he says, is “an unwieldy and overgrown establishment, cluttered with
furniture and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense,” the only cure for which is “simplicity of life and elevation of purpose” (66). By living deliberately and relying primarily on his own faculties for survival, Thoreau is able to avoid these distractions and traps, and focus on the elevated purpose of comprehending “the essential facts of life.”

The importance of being mentally present in each moment makes *Walden* “strenuous reading,” according to Lawrence Buell, because “every moment, or so one often feels, is made to seem the ultimate moment; every object is the transfiguration of itself; nothing, however small, is small” (*Environmental Imagination* 305). To attain this simplicity, Thoreau recommends limiting the “things” in your life, such as personal affairs, and even meals: “Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary, eat but one…and reduce other things in proportion” (65-66). Even eating is a distraction that takes away from the true meaning of living, if it is not limited to the necessary amount for survival. Although it may seem contrary, the purpose of “Economy” and Thoreau’s attention to detailing every material possession he requires is to illustrate this exact point. When we read carefully, we see that Thoreau is not distracted by his possessions; rather, he is being instructive for his readers. He focuses on the material requirements necessary for survival, emphasizing how little he really needs. Even the minimal amount he needs to build a shelter and obtain food still requires a lot of effort.

Thoreau’s idea of “simplifying” does not just apply to things, but also needs. Outside of “the necessaries of life for man…Food, Shelter, Clothing, and Fuel” (11), everything else requires excessive labor. By articulating every last detail of what his experiment requires, Thoreau is showing the benefits of that lifestyle in two ways. The
first is that it can be done, and the second is that once it is done, success is the freedom to spend your days living life as you wish. To further his point about simplification, Thoreau asks us, “Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life? We are determined to be starved before we are hungry” (66). We spend so much time preventing and worrying about future possibilities, we lose sight of the present, and in doing so, life itself. Life does not occur in the future; life is occurring now. Therefore, Thoreau’s frustration derives from the human obsession over nonessentials, doing more than is necessary for survival at the expense of actually living, in the present tense.

Prioritizing the Mind and Spirit through Nature

Despite the opening chapter’s fixation with manufactured goods, Thoreau’s goal is to dissociate himself from any need for such low materialism. As Richard J. Schneider has noted, “the goal of Thoreau’s [Walden] pilgrimage—and presumably the reader’s—is spiritual progress, to explore beyond the restricted boundaries of our materialistic lives to find new truths and thus to become a new person” (97). Thoreau is repelled by the way most men allow themselves to be deceived by illusions of life, preoccupied and distracted by trivialities. Although he chose to live at Walden to observe and reflect on nature, he cannot help but comment on society and the flaws he sees, such as the obsession with material culture, perhaps because living at Walden Pond allows him to see such stark contrasts.

According to Thoreau, the materialistic people of Concord’s society do not understand that they are preventing themselves from truly living. He urges a reevaluation of priorities, continually giving examples supporting the need to “simplify” life and not waste time over insignificant details. That is not to say, however, that we should only be
concerned with food and shelter (an idea Thoreau will later develop in the chapter “Higher Laws,” when he asserts that the baser needs of the body should be sacrificed for those of the mind). Instead, there is another significant need that must be fulfilled: satisfying the human intellect. Thoreau compares his mind as a tool for discovery to the way other animals use different parts of their body. He affirms, “My instinct tells me that my head is an organ for burrowing, as some creatures use their snout and fore-paws, and with it I would mine and burrow my way through these hills. I think that the richest vein is somewhere hereabouts; so by the diving rod and thin rising vapors I judge; and here I will begin to mine” (70). For this reason he chooses the location of Walden Pond for his experiment, to live, explore, and reflect on the merit of his own mind. He seeks to explore and “mine” nature for its richest bounty, which will not necessarily yield physical fruits, but intellectual treasures. Unlike most men he knows who are blind to these possibilities due to their preoccupation with trivial trends and affairs, Thoreau sees that nature provides both the ways and the means for living intentionally. The method for the correct way to live life in the environment can be emulated from the environment itself: “Let us spend one day as deliberately as Nature, and not be thrown off the track by every nutshell and mosquito’s wing that falls on the rails” (69). By emulating nature, Thoreau is able to see nature beyond his physical setting, and in fact comes to realize nature as a spiritual counterpart.

Thoreau’s concepts of nature are related to his spiritual reverence a result of Thoreau’s own personal connection with nature. During the chapter “Solitude” in Walden, Thoreau reflects on the solitary component of his Walden experiment, and we find that Thoreau is not lonely in his solitude. He “loves to be alone,” declaring that he
“never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude” (94-95), something he truly relishes as he looks at the other empty chairs within his Walden cabin. Solitude is also an important practice for Thoreau, who generally finds reason to critique society more than his surroundings. As Jane Bennett discusses in her article “On Being a Native: Thoreau’s Hermeneutics of Self,” Thoreau thinks that overexposure to other people leads to conformity and a society that lacks diversity; however, “the antidote includes not only solitude but a sustained relationship with Nature, the realm of being that eludes and exceeds human reason” (564). In essence, creating an individual relationship with nature not only benefits the environment and the individual, but society as well. To look at it literally, Thoreau does interact with many people during his two-year stay at Walden Pond. He does not hide his interactions with townspeople any more than with the woodsmen, farmers, or hiking travelers he encounters in the woods. But beyond that, he is so fulfilled by the possibilities of solitude that he discovers a new autonomy within himself, stating, “I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself” (90). This again emphasizes Thoreau’s ecocentrism, as he continually prioritizes nature and his relationship with it. Distancing himself from society, even partially, is a requirement Thoreau has to meet in order to have the opportunity to become part of “nature herself.”

What he discovers during his moments of solitude is a budding acceptance into a new society, the “beneficent society in Nature,” which Thoreau felt calling him: “Every little pine needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and befriended me. I was so distinctly made aware of the presence of something kindred to me, even in scenes which we are accustomed to call wild and dreary” (92). Thoreau is now in the middle of two separate societies, but his proximity to the town is a constant reminder of human
civilization, reminding us that Thoreau may be in nature, but he is not in the wilderness. The distinction is important when understanding the different experiences Thoreau relates to us in texts such as *Walden* as opposed to *The Maine Woods*. His position at Walden Pond, then, at times allows Thoreau to directly experience the solitude of nature with an infusion of human society.

In “Sounds,” he recalls the way the sounds of the city would often permeate his activity in the woods, whether in the form of the railroad whistle, church bells, or the distant voices of others. As he hears these reminders of society, despite his momentary solitude, Thoreau realizes a connection regarding the relationship of human society and nature. Here he describes what he calls “the voice of the wood”:

> All sound heard at the greatest possible distance produces one and the same effect, a vibration of the universal lyre, just as the intervening atmosphere makes a distinct ridge of earth interesting to our eyes by the azure tint it imparts to it. There came to me in this case a melody which the air had strained, and which had conversed with every leaf and needle of the wood, that portion of the sound which the elements had taken up and modulated and echoed from vale to vale. (87)

The “voice of the wood” is an amalgamation of sounds, and whether the origin is natural or manmade, they fuse together as they travel over the earth to reach his ears, the universal quality of which is life itself. He recalls moments when he is unable to distinguish a distant sound as that of a cow’s bell or youthful minstrels he had previously heard in the woods. However, he realizes it does not matter because both “were at length one articulation of Nature” (87). From Thoreau’s vantage point, he recognizes the
connection between all living things, and through their sounds nature fuses them into one life force. This fusion informs his beliefs about nature and humanity’s relation to it, specifically enforcing the view that he and nature are integrally entwined. Though Thoreau does seek spiritual transcendence, he does not see nature as merely a means for this to occur, but a valuable partner in its own right. Buell argues that this view of nature is significant because “Thoreau’s evocation of a nonhuman entity as a major presence, superior to any human being in the text, the narrator included, is an extraordinary event in the premodern American literary canon” (Environmental Imagination 209). In addition, Buell states, “the sense of personal intimacy with nature continued to grow, notwithstanding his increasingly scientific approach to nature study” (209).

Understanding himself as a part of nature would help to fuel his scientific explorations. It is in this aspect that Thoreau differs most greatly from Emerson, who saw nature as a tool for transcendence only.

**Thoreau and Science**

Thoreau sought to develop a scientific understanding of nature, which would help him to comprehend the biological connection that allowed him to view nature as an equal, rather than inferior force. Laura Dassow Walls writes about Thoreau’s exposure to nineteenth century science, as well as the discoveries and scientific mindset of the time in her book Seeing New Worlds: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth Century Natural Science. She establishes the cultural climate surrounding natural science as the beginnings of the shift toward science as we are familiar with it today, i.e., scientific theory and thinking that is in direct opposition to poetry and the humanities. Thoreau, however, sought to mend the growing rift by using science to enhance his own poetic
faculties. Referring to Thoreau’s *Walden*, Walls explains, “Writing is also a form of technology, another way for man and nature to bespeak one another” (162). She also discusses the importance of Humboldt, whose scientific belief system “arrived in Thoreau’s hands at the very moment Thoreau both needed him and was prepared to apprehend him” (121). Throughout his lifetime, Thoreau would continually be influenced by the major scientific minds of the time, including Darwin’s theories of evolution, which would allow him to question our supposedly “innate” position at the top of a hierarchy. Humboldt was specifically essential to Thoreau’s scientific needs because in his science, “Humboldt dissolves the dualism between mind and nature. He imagines each actively creating the other, in a process that parallels the way in which the reciprocal interaction of parts, elements, and forces generates the organism, the living whole, or life itself” (Walls, *Seeing New Worlds* 83). Walls further indicates that in Thoreau’s quest to understand life and nature, “Science proved itself a strong ally, engaging the same cosmic questions that most concerned [him], and providing answers with poetic reach and empirical power” (44). This scientific support grounded Thoreau’s ecocentrism, a distinguishing trait of his writing.

When Thoreau spends time in the woods of Walden and Maine, his reflection and observation of nature has a botanic and ecological interest. Over the years, he would increasingly collect and detail plant samples, observations of forest life, and documentations of the seasons. Thoreau felt that to appreciate nature, one “should be a botanist” (Walls, *Seeing New Worlds* 125). He is not simply romanticizing nature, but concerned with the unique traits and characteristics of individual plant and animal species, as well as their interactions in an ecosystem. Through his observations he is able
to understand the interconnectedness of all life, including himself, an insight that facilitates the development of his biocentrism.

**“Intelligence with the Earth”**

Spending time with and reflecting on nature allows Thoreau to realize that apart from human consciousness, there is no insurmountable difference between himself and his surroundings. Thoreau asks, “Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?” (96). We are made up of the same elements as nature itself. As a result, even the defining trait of our species, human consciousness, is called into question as Thoreau begins to see nature as an autonomous being. Thoreau’s language when discussing nature evolves well beyond utilizing a feminine pronoun, elevating nature from natural setting to that resembling a sentient being. When Thoreau questions his ability to have intelligence with the earth, he movingly imagines nature as an emotional force, capable of sentiment and response to humans:

>The indescribable innocence and beneficence of Nature,—of sun and wind and rain, of summer and winter,—such health, such cheer, they afford forever! and such sympathy have they ever with our race, and the winds would sigh humanely, and the clouds rain tears, and the woods shed their leaves and put on mourning in midsummer, if any man should ever for a just cause grieve. (96)

It is no wonder that Thoreau seeks intelligence with the earth, since he depicts the earth capable of humanlike intelligence. Thoreau not only moralizes nature as an innocent being, but one that is capable of sympathy. To sigh “humanely” takes on the double
meaning of exhibiting the characteristic of compassion as well the ability to do so in a human-like way.

But by utilizing language emblematic of mankind, Thoreau creates an Ecocritical conflict through his anthropomorphizing. From one perspective, Thoreau’s actions can be seen as “complimenting” nature by elevating it to a level of sentience similar to that of humans. As previously stated, this viewpoint was somewhat unique to Thoreau among the transcendentalists, especially the intensity with which he discusses nature, and the apparent intimacy he feels exists in his relationship with the environment. However, Thoreau is also personifying nature, which in some ways takes away from his assertion of nature as its own entity by attributing human characteristics to it. Yet his intention is clearly reverential rather than demeaning. As Buell has noted, Thoreau sees Walden Pond itself as something of a soul-mate, and “repeatedly [Thoreau] imagines Walden as a living thing” (Environmental Imagination 208). James McIntosh similarly explains, “as [Thoreau] regards [nature] as a living organism, even as a friend or sister or mother, his relation with it is more intimate and difficult. Nature cannot simply be construed as a spectacle for our enlightenment and enjoyment, as Emerson construes her” (184). So perhaps instead of viewing Thoreau’s personification as anthropomorphism, we can instead understand it as his own expression of Edward Wilson’s biophilia. Thoreau clearly acknowledges the connections between himself and other living things in a way that exceeds biology and instead comes closer to the compassion he attributes to nature’s capabilities. Throughout the text, he is consistently more critical and demeaning when it comes to his fellow human beings than to any aspect of the environment. Buell continues,

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3 See previous chapter for Deep Ecology’s criticism of anthropomorphism.
“Thoreau frequently uses ‘neighbors’ sarcastically when referring to humans; but when referring to plants and animals, never” (Environmental Imagination 210). Perhaps the “innocence” of nature is what propels Thoreau to continually seek out and create sacred spaces in nature, such as his Walden dwelling.

The innocence Thoreau attributes to nature implies a direct contrast between the environment and society. If nature is an innocent and beneficent force, then what are we? In part, Thoreau’s “insistence on ‘universal innocence’ is necessary” for his assertion of our place in the universe (Walls, Seeing New Worlds 163). Yet “innocence” is a rather subjective term. Thoreau himself indicates in Walden that he “was witness to events of a less peaceful character,” namely the “war between two races of ants,” which he describes in mock-epic format, including all the carnage and violent details of missing limbs and strewn bodies (155). He watches the brutality with vehement interest, describing his reaction, “I was myself excited somewhat even as if they had been men. The more you think of it, the less the difference” (156). Thoreau makes continued reference to humanity and its relationship to nature throughout Walden, but since he is only a mile or so outside Concord, he does not get to experience the full extent of the relationship and its extremes. Walden woods are a middle ground between true wilderness and society. These woods are a small preserved area of nature that exists in conjunction with the town and its people.

**Spiritual Conflict**

In contrast, Thoreau’s travels through Maine give him a different perspective in which he himself realizes a major difference between Walden and the woods of Maine, noting as he climbs Katahdin, “Perhaps I most fully realized that this was primeval,
untamed, and forever untamable *Nature*, or whatever else men call it" (*The Maine Woods* 93). This true primordial wilderness gives him the opportunity to reflect on that dynamic as well as the environmental concern of industry. However, his reflections in the woods of Maine are not greater than those in Walden, and according to William Stowe, Thoreau’s interactions with the land differ “only in content, not in kind or intensity” (493). In Thoreau’s, *The Maine Woods*, there are many passages that indicate Thoreau does not approve of the uses of the wilderness by hunters and lumberers. For example, after one particularly unpleasant incident, the needless killing of a moose, he writes, “This afternoon’s experience suggested to me how base or coarse are the motives which commonly carry men into the wilderness. The explorers and lumberers generally are all hirelings, paid so much a day for their labor, and as such they have no more love for wild nature than wood-sawyers have for forests” (161-162). Thoreau describes the killing as a “murder,” as he sees no reason for the moose to be killed. The moose is not needed for food, nor is it killed for its hide, which deeply disturbs Thoreau, who reflects, “one moose killed was as good, if not as bad, as a dozen. The afternoon’s tragedy, and my share in it, as it affected the innocence, destroyed the pleasure of my adventure” (160). The strong language he uses to describe the scene as a “tragedy” that stripped the excursion of its “innocence” causes Thoreau to pull away and rethink his own philosophy of the relationship between humans and nature. He does not agree with killing just for the sake of killing without any use for the moose, comparing the act to going into your neighbor’s yard and shooting his horse. He does not criticize using nature for survival or need, such as the humble shelter he builds for himself in *Walden*, but he is disappointed that no one seems to enjoy or observe nature. Of the logger who cuts down trees, he says,
"He admires the log, the carcass or corpse, more than the tree" (314). Specifically, he is upset that industry has caused men to go into the woods and destroy it for money, and he questions if anyone travels into the woods for pleasure anymore. The moose-killing incident is the catalyst for these thoughts, and moves Thoreau so strongly that he cannot escape a feeling of guilt for his association with the event, noting that night, "Nature looked sternly upon me on account of the murder of the moose" (163). His emotional response to the moose killing force Thoreau to reconsider his entire relationship with nature.

Although Thoreau is clearly fascinated by the logging and lumber industry booming in Maine, detailing each encounter and thought unfailingly throughout *The Maine Woods*, his writing also exudes a feeling of frustration with society’s prioritization of material goods, and its impact on the environment. While he can admire the difficulty a pioneer must face living directly off the land, he questions the respectability of "the helpless multitudes in the towns who depend on gratifying the extremely artificial wants of society" (334). His commentary regarding man’s impact on nature, specifically the destruction of nature due to industry, ranges from damming streams for steamers, to the actions of loggers and hunters, to the consequences of lumber and saw mills. Seeing a ring of dead trees, Thoreau responds, "This is the effect of the dam at the outlet. Thus the natural sandy or rocky shore, with its green fringe, was concealed and destroyed" (311). Damming streams seems to be a major problem throughout the text, with devastating impact on the environment due to the overflow. Various industries create dams for transport, but do not remove them when they are done with the area, "thus turning the forces of nature against herself, that they might float their spoils out of the
country...think how much land they have flowed, without asking Nature’s leave!” (312). Thoreau has clearly considered this, and he asks his reader to consider it as well in order to highlight the easily forgotten consequences industry has on the environment.

The man-made impact of industry becomes inescapable for Thoreau, even when he is in unsettled territory. In response to a companion firing his gun in the chapter “The Allegash and East Branch,” Thoreau writes, “this sudden, loud, crashing noise in the still aisles of the forest, affected me like an insult to nature, or ill manners at any rate, as if you were to fire a gun in a hall or temple” (263). This response shows the reader that Thoreau has certain expectations when in the woods, both for what he wants to experience, as well as certain decorum for how a person should act. The sound of a gunshot distresses him as though nature itself may be offended, and after nature’s “disapproval” of the moose incident, in Thoreau’s eyes this is a legitimate concern.

Thoreau is not against industry per se, but he clearly does not appreciate the way it intrudes into nature. He chooses to spend time hiking and traveling in the woods to appreciate the wildlife itself, unlike Emerson who finds progress and industry just as thrilling as, if not more thrilling than nature. Despite Thoreau’s attempt to focus on nature and all that it has to offer, he finds, “Wild as it was, it was hard for me to get rid of the associations of the settlements. Any steady and monotonous sound, to which I did not distinctly attend, passed for a sound of human industry” (277). It is almost as if the disruption of “vermin gnawing at the base of [nature’s] noblest trees” (312), referring to lumberers, is mirrored in Thoreau’s own mind as an interference with his wilderness vacation.
His three trips to the woods of Maine over the years, in addition to his stay at Walden, which took place in between the trips, allowed Thoreau to reflect and develop his stance toward nature. It is possible to see an evolution in his realizations as they occur throughout his works, as Joseph J. Moldenhauer describes: “The Maine wilderness is not the inexhaustible resource that Thoreau implied it to be in the last paragraph of ‘Ktaadn’; the timber-hunter foreshadows the logger, a hireling, braggart, and vandal who desecrates the temple of the wilderness and tramples its most delicate growth even as he fells its grandest pines” (132). Just as with Emerson, we can find contradictions regarding his perspective throughout the texts. It is clear that Thoreau was troubled by the complexity of the relationship between the use of nature for the transcendence of the human consciousness and human impact on the environment.

**The Bean Field Quandary**

The contradictions regarding the environment in Thoreau’s texts highlight the complexities involved with environmental ethics. In both *Walden* and *The Maine Woods*, Thoreau conveys his personal philosophy on how the environment should be used, and what kind of relationship humans should have with nature. In *Walden*, the chapter “Higher Laws” has often been cited as one of the more transcendental sections for its consideration of spiritual and philosophical questions in relation to physical experience. One noteworthy statement regarding environmental ethics from this chapter brings up the issue of vegetarianism. Thoreau states, “every man who has ever been earnest to preserve his higher or poetic faculties in the best condition has been particularly inclined to abstain from animal food” (146). Forgoing animal meat has a direct connection to Thoreau’s idea of a poet, which is why he is so critical toward the Indian and lumberer in *The Maine*
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*Woods* for senselessly killing a moose. When he proposes in “Higher Laws” that sustaining yourself without consuming animal meat is preferable, he also acknowledges that this is only an ideal, and is not always practical for everyone. Instead, this is what Thoreau hopes is in store for humanity, confessing to his readership, “Whatever my own practice may be, I have no doubt that it is part of the destiny of the human race, in its gradual improvement, to leave off eating animals, as surely as the savage tribes have left off eating each other when they came in contact with the more civilized” (147). In *The Maine Woods*, Thoreau articulates an additional “higher law” that further asserts a preoccupation with respecting life: “There is a higher law affecting our relation to pines as well as to men….for everything may serve a lower as well as a higher use. Every creature is better alive than dead, men and moose and pine-trees, and he who understands it aright will rather preserve life than destroy it” (164). Both “men and moose” have more value in life than in death, and “he who understands” this would be the poet. Thoreau indicates that the poet is the only true friend to the forest, for which “all the pines shudder and heave a sigh when that man steps on the forest floor” (164). The poet here serves as the individual who truly recognizes the value of nature, and rather than exploiting its physical resources, appreciates the worth of the environment and shares this knowledge through his writing.

While some may argue that there is nothing wrong with eating meat, that it *is* biologically natural for humans as an omnivorous species to do so, Thoreau sees that one day we will *improve* beyond that need. As Phillip Cafaro states in his essay “Thoreau’s Environmental Ethics in Walden,” Thoreau questions the implication of human acts such as hunting and fishing because “such activities are literally miserable—they cause terror,
pain and suffering—and we can see this if we look” (24). This is why the moose-killing incident is so deplorable and unforgivable for Thoreau, because it was not even necessary and he does feel miserable afterwards just for his part as a spectator. Had he and his companions been starving or in great need of food, the passage may not have even been included in *The Maine Woods*.

As such, if “Higher Laws” is read alone, it would seem that living a vegetarian or predominantly vegetarian life would satisfy Thoreau. However, by looking throughout the text of *Walden*, we find that Thoreau also has a problem with agriculture, which he admits in the chapter “The Bean Fields.” While he does not object to farming as vehemently as he does to eating meat, his tranquility in his bean fields is disturbed by an unsettling realization. As he weeds his garden, he questions the justice of his actions: “But what right had I to oust johnswort and the rest, and break up their ancient herb garden?” (107). He seems to feel that his bean field causes some disturbance in the natural order. Surely, if nature wanted beans to grow there, they would already be doing so, and similarly, if nature wants the weeds to grow where he is trying to plant beans, who is he to stop it?

In her article “Championing this Nature ‘So Rife with Life’: Ecological Consciousness in *Walden*” Debra A. Segura analyzes Thoreau’s dilemma, stating, “Consciously or not, [Thoreau] implies that the monoculture he seeks to impose on the land constitutes a blight upon the richer natural ‘polyculture’ of the cinquefoil, blackberries, johnswort, piper, etcetera—that he is, in effect stripping the land of its botanical wealth” (110). As Segura points out, Thoreau seems to be questioning the hierarchy humanity has placed on plants, beans being a “good” plant, while weeds are
“bad.” Thoreau observes travelers passing through the woods assessing his field and comparing it with others. However, he then poses the question, “who estimates the value of the crop which Nature yields in the still wilder fields unimproved by man?” (109). The travelers make him wonder if humans really have the right to make certain plants superior to others. His own interference with nature’s design allows him to realize at the end of the chapter that any “failure” on his part to harvest a full crop is not a failure at all. He asks himself, “shall I not rejoice also at the abundance of the weeds whose seeds are the granary of the birds?” (115). Essentially, weeds have a “right” to kill his crops, as they are entitled to life and existence as much as the next plant. Despite feeling an ethical quandary, Thoreau continues to tend his fields and provide a food source for himself. However, when placed in conjunction with the ethics of “Higher Laws,” we see a true dilemma unfolding. Thoreau seems to understand the burden placed on humanity due to the very nature of our evolution; our developed consciousness, while an asset in many ways, can also cause us to question our own existence because of our emotional connection with the world around us, again echoing Wilson’s concept of biophilia.

The development of the human consciousness over time, through the progress of civilization, has allowed for a better understanding of the world around us, as well as an increased awareness of the fragility of life in the biosphere. For naturalists such as Thoreau, this consciousness complicates environmental ethics. With the understanding of the world comes a level of responsibility experienced only by the human race. For those of us who, like Thoreau, embrace biophilia, common human practices such as eating meat begin to feel questionable. In addition, Thoreau’s moments of reflection in his bean fields, and the disturbance he momentarily feels, show that he does not find complete
satisfaction in agriculture as a solution, and this is what is most telling. The dilemma that faces humanity stems from these two environmental ethical connections. The problem is that humanity has evolved with the means to conquer and exploit nature. However, this ability is daunting because we have also evolved with the ability to think critically and realize that we are not necessarily "entitled" to dominate nature, as well as realizing we can deplete the resources we need to live. We have, finally, also evolved emotionally, allowing us to feel biophilia, as well as empathy for other creatures, giving us a sense of guilt and responsibility for nature. In "Hunting the Human Animal: The Art of Ethical Perception in 'Higher Laws'," Nancy Mayer analyzes the ethics presented in "Higher Laws," arguing that though humans, as mammals, are comparable to other animals, "our ability to feel shame and guilt also indicates that we are unlike them in the luxury we have of choosing our food, not merely from refinements of appetite but from ethical motives, including compassion" (35). This creates a dilemma as to how we should proceed, because we are also a species in the biosphere, and we have a right, like all other life forms, to survive. This means allowing ourselves to have a suitable habitat and food source. The difficulty is that our own morality allows us to understand the destructive nature of life, and so like Thoreau, we see no complete solution. Turned off from hunting and fishing, questioning the ethics of farming, what choices are left for us in terms of our own survival as a species? While chapters such as "Higher Laws" and "The Bean Fields" may seem to create contradiction, this is what is most important. Just as Emerson's contradictions are important because they force the reader to reconsider his or her own viewpoint, so too are Thoreau’s, as they further encourage us to consider humanity’s role on this planet, though they may not offer one clear resolution.
IV: Conclusion

The ethical predicament evident in Emerson and Thoreau’s texts are relevant to current Ecocritical concerns because both of their anthropocentric and ecocentric perspectives have environmental value. As Emerson’s essays force us to directly consider our position in the universe, we realize we must prioritize the progress of our civilization *within* environmentalism. As Harold Fromm conveys in his essay “From Transcendence to Obsolescence,” he has no intention of giving up his modern way of life, including air conditioning or indoor plumbing, to go live in the woods. Yet he still emphasizes the current environmental crisis, a problem in which “man’s nurturing environment threatens to stop nurturing and to start killing” (34). While nature has always been “dangerous” to some degree, it has also always supported humans with the ability to sustain life, something that environmentalists currently worry is at risk due to global warming and increasing scarcity of resources. What is critical about Fromm’s position is that it breaks down the common misconception anti-environmentalists have in which the entire goal of the movement is against technology. In Fromm’s own words, “What I am trying to do is present a picture of man’s current relation to Nature” (34). Though clearly written in a different time from our own, Emerson and Thoreau’s writings emphasize the same goal. The personal attention each writer pays to his relationship with nature, though each does so in different ways, is an important strategy for future environmental causes.

Though Thoreau is not an *activist* per se, he asserts his views on nature and its importance through aesthetic and personal dialogues as a means to support his views. As Buell analyzes, “Thoreau enlisted old-style pathetic fallacy rhetoric in the service of a sacred environmentalist cause that both echoed the ruralist nostalgia widespread in
England and New England and radicalized it by demanding that it be taken seriously as a criterion for regulating social action" (*Environmental Imagination* 211) regarding the environment. Despite what recent environmentalists may say about the effectiveness of such an approach, Thoreau’s personal writings did, in fact, instigate change by inspiring future environmental activists such as John Muir. Additionally, Thoreau’s *Walden* would become such a treasured work both in literature and nature studies that it led to the future preservation of the site (Buell, *Environmental Imagination* 213). His other books, such as *Cape Cod* and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, were also inspirational simply for their focus on the environment and their ecocentric perspective, but many environmentalists specifically preferred *The Maine Woods*. This text differed from *Walden* due to the close contact with industry in the text, and thus environmental destruction, which forced Thoreau to confront those issues, finding them problematic.

Just as Thoreau (like Fromm) looks at his current society’s relationship with nature, we are forced to compare and analyze our own relationship when reading his texts. Regarding Thoreau’s *Walden*, Nathan Anderson writes, “To read is always to put both ourselves and the author to the test, to discover whether we cannot find ourselves compelled by the very same insights recorded by the author” (48). Thoreau has proven that awareness can inspire action, as in the case of John Muir and future environmentalists, who, because of their reverence for nature, “in time [led] to a fiercely protective feeling for nature, which later generations have rightly seized on as a basis for a more enlightened environmental ethic and polity” (Buell, *Environmental Imagination* 137). Thoreau’s hesitation over killing animals, weeding gardens, damaging streams, and chopping trees, even if only temporary, forces the readers to consider Thoreau’s
hesitation, and perhaps consider our own position in relation to these environmental ethics as well. Emerson’s focus on his personal relationship with, and understanding of nature encourages the reader to question those same relationships for themselves. In the end, Emerson and Thoreau’s perspectives, though different, are two sides of the same coin. Both acknowledge the importance of nature, even if they do not agree on how it is important. In the works of writers such as Thoreau and Emerson, the acknowledgement of nature as something of value in its own right, not simply a tool for humanity, leads to awareness and reflection, which can then evolve to environmental action and protection.
Works Cited


