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In the throes of an existential crisis

Henry David Thoreau's '*Walking*' is an outline of his philosophical thoughts and appeals to a very niche audience of 'walkers' who are able to understand the message of the essay. Thoreau was one of the founding members of the transcendentalist movement of the early 1800's and was influential in the creation of the minimalist and the naturalist movements.

'*Walking*' uses a multitude of different metaphors to fully explain Thoreau's ideas the most important of which include walking, nature and light.

Walking is the biggest metaphor in '*Walking*' and serves as a sort of vessel that can be used to jump into other ideas. Thoreau gives the audience many clues as to what walking is: giving specific requirements one must fulfill before being able to properly walk, describing the life cycle of a walk and finally explaining the characteristics held by and the similarities between all walkers. Thoreau first explains that 'Our expeditions are but tours that come round again at evening to the old hearth side from which we set out. Half the walk is but retracing our steps.' (Thoreau 1). This shows that walks are cycles, with the end of the walk being identical to the beginning. Through this quote Thoreau is illustrating the cyclical nature of philosophical thought, with new ideas always originating from previous ideas and with each idea creating more ideas still, while all tying back to life itself and the meaning of living, an idea that has existed since the dawn of humanity.

Thoreau then tells us that 'If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again--if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man--then you are ready for a walk' (Thoreau 1). This quote explains that before a walker embarks on a philosophical expedition into the wild, they must rid their mind of the distractions that are associated with life: family, money and tasks.

Next, Thoreau describes the characteristics of walkers by stating that walkers 'have felt that we almost alone hereabouts practiced this noble art' (Thoreau 2) and then describes that the gift of walking

‘comes only by the grace of God. It requires a direct dispensation from heaven to become a walker. You must be born into the family of the walkers.’(Thoreau 2). These quotes explain how walkers are few and far between and are unique in their natural curiosity and tendency to question the meaning of everything. The family of walkers that Thoreau is talking about isn’t a biological family, it is more a family in the sense that all walkers are related in their natural curiosity and willingness to think outside of the box. Thoreau also uses almost all the meanings of word dispensation in the above quote to both reinforce the scarcity of true walkers by implying the privilege of walking is given by god himself (which falls under two of the definitions of dispensation: ‘The action of giving or supplying something’ or ‘an act of divine providence’), while also showing how people must first cast away the chains of religion before truly being able to walk (which uses the dispensation definition: ‘permission to be exempted from the laws or observances of the Church.’).

Thoreau also discusses the way he believes a walker should travel and expresses his disgust with villages when he wrote that villagers are ‘way worn by the travel that goes by and over them without traveling themselves.’(Thoreau 5) and also when he states ‘Roads are made for horses for men of business.’(Thoreau 5) and in the line ‘I walk out into nature such as the old prophets and poets Menu, Moses, Homer, Chaucer, walked in.’(Thoreau 5). These quotes explain how walkers must create their own ideas and forge their own beliefs on life, while also stressing the need to avoid getting trapped as a slave to an ideology. Thoreau uses Roads as metaphors for thoughts and ideas that are formed by the masses, the mainstream way of thinking-which is also shown in his comparison of roads and rivers (Thoreau 5) which inexplicitly forms the word main stream in the audiences mind (a river is like a stream but has more water flow, making it a main stream)-with certain ideas and thoughts leading to villages, which represent philosophical and theological ideologies. When he mentions horses and men of business Thoreau

Thoreau says that he presumes there are ‘one or two of such roads in every town’(Thoreau 5) to illustrate the only positive aspect of ideology that can be observed by a walker. Ideologies can be used to enhance and expand philosophical thinking as they give new insights or ‘less traveled roads’(Thoreau 5) that might not have been apparent or available to the walker before.

Walking is the overarching metaphor of ‘*Walking*’ and it is used as the title of the essay as the essay itself is a walk, a philosophical meander that winds and twists as Thoreau travels through the wilderness of uninhibited thought.

After laying the groundwork for what walking actually is, Thoreau begins to discuss the excitement he has for the new philosophers of the United States and explains how new philosophical discoveries lead to the creation of new ideologies and belief systems.

Thoreau first explains how philosophical movements are created in the line ‘When I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest wood, the thickest and most dismal swamp’(Thoreau 13), which is shortly followed by ‘The wild wood covers the virgin mould, -and the same soil is good for men and for trees. A man’s health requires as many acres of meadow to his prospect as his farm does loads of muck.’(Thoreau 13). In the first quote Thoreau tells us that his ideal birthplace for new ideas is deep in the wildest corners of his imagination, with the wilderness representing free, unique and original philosophical thought. The second quote continues to play with this metaphor of wilderness and pure philosophical thought, explaining how untouched philosophical thought covers even more philosophical ideas, with the wild untamed wood representing new philosophical discoveries and the virgin mould representing the beginnings of new and undeveloped thought. This quote also brings in a new metaphor with muck and man’s farm. The muck is fertilizer which is used on the farm to help grow new crops. This is one of the first times in ‘*Walking*’ that Thoreau introduces the idea of man growing life which is metaphorical for the creation and growth of new ideas. Thoreau suggests that with a decrease in mainstream ideologies there will be an increase in wild, original and unique philosophical thought, with civilization representing the widespread ideological beliefs of the masses, while wilderness is quite literally wild and unexplored philosophical ideas and beliefs that are on the cusp of being discovered. The prospect of wilderness being unexplored philosophical ideas and thoughts is further developed into the line ‘A town is saved, not more by the righteous men in it, than by the woods and swamps that surround it.’(Thoreau 13). This quote expands on a previously discussed idea that ideologies can be used by walkers to explore new and unique wilderness, only now Thoreau gives the reader a glimpse of the result of walking, with entire ideologies being saved through the expansion of ideological ideas.

Then Thoreau explains how philosophical movements are birthed, writing that ‘A township where one primitive forest waves above and while another rots below – such a town is fitted not only to raise corn and potatoes, but poets and philosophers for the coming ages.’(Thoreau 13). Thoreau is telling the audience through this quote that new movements are created when a foundation of old and oversaturated philosophical ideas, represented by the rotting forest, is built upon by new and original thought. Thoreau also insinuates that through the creation of philosophical movements ideologies eventually come to be, with all the ideas discovered at the dawn of a philosophical movement slowly becoming stale and rotten, at which point a new philosophical movement can occur and the cycle can continue.

Thoreau then uses the aforementioned metaphors of soil, wilderness and civilization to express his anticipation for the rise of a new, American philosophical movement in the line ‘It is said to be the task of the American, “to work the virgin soil,” and that “Agriculture here already assumes proportions unknown everywhere else.” ’(Thoreau 14). With this line Thoreau explains that American philosophy is on the verge of an explosion of ideas, with agriculture meaning the cultivation of new ideas and the virgin soil representing the how easily American philosophy can grow wild ideas and previously unmused philosophical musings.

Thoreau gives us the birth, death and rebirth of philosophical thought by expressing the contrast between stale and rehashed ideas that have lost significance over time while continuously being glorified by academia, and new untouched philosophy that is unique and original by directly comparing them to the endless war between civilization and nature.

Towards the latter third of ‘*Walking*’, Thoreau begins to use light and darkness as a metaphor for the idler versus the walker while also introducing his idea of genius to the audience. This metaphor is one of the major focuses in the last third of the essay and is first mentioned in the quote ‘Genius is a light which makes the darkness visible, like the lightning’s flash , which perchance shatters the temple of knowledge itself- and not a taper lighted at the hearthstone of the race which pales before the light of common day.’(Thoreau 14). Genius is said to uncover darkness as it uncovers ignorance or non-walkers. The light given off by genius is compared to lightning and is described as possibly shattering the ‘temple of knowledge’ as the light is a single idea that is so groundbreaking it changes everyone’s understanding of the world, the temple of knowledge that may be shattered is symbolic of both the way people thought before this idea was formed but also can be the destruction of a whole aspect of academia that now has to redefine itself.

Thoreau further explores the concept of genius in the line ‘I saw the setting sun lighting up the opposite side of a stately pine wood. Its golden rays straggled into the aisles of the wood as into some noble hall. I was impressed as if some ancient and altogether admirable and shining family had seated there in that part of the land...’, ‘...to whom the Sun was servant; who had not gone into society in the village; who had not been called on.’(Thoreau 21). This quote describes the sun, which is in this case a metaphor for genius, as it illuminates the world. The family described is the family of walkers who managed to free themselves from ideology and achieve unbiased and natural philosophical thought. This family is comprised of the most influential walkers of them all, the philosophers and writers who rose above the rest and created new and totally unique ways of thinking while simultaneously exposing those who feign walking while not ever having used their legs.

Thoreau first explains what a walker is, letting his audience of walkers know they are being addressed and briefly introducing them to some of the central ideas of '*Walking*'. He then goes on to discuss his ideas in finer detail with his audience, outlining how ideas themselves are only useful as static ideas for a finite time while also explaining how philosophy is constantly reinvented and expanded upon. Thoreau then concludes his philosophical 'walk' by discussing ignorance and awareness and the reliance that each has on the other, concluding his idea by reiterating the importance of exploring wild and untouched philosophical thought.

Works Cited: Thoreau, Henry D. "Walking."