

Walden: A Literary Drawing

Tessa Townsend

Walden by Henry David Thoreau is the epitome of narrative expression in correlation with the artistic process. This research aims to juxtapose Thoreau's oeuvre with characteristics encompassing the visual arts. *Walden's* composition, form, and theme mirror the creation of physical sketches and paintings during the turn of the century. In the *Concord Saunterer: A Journal of Thoreau Studies*, Evan Neely's article, "Henry David Thoreau and American Postwar Art", supports the author's impact upon modernist art created in postwar culture. In talking about Thoreau and artists of the time, Neely states, "Thoreau felt that conditions in their respective cultures, most centrally the negative social and psychological effects of media technology require, required a revolution of self-understanding, a revolution that their respective methods of modernist art aimed to effect" (Neely 128). Therefore, the overarching ambition embedded in *Walden* extends beyond the scope of literature and into the dynamics of the self, identity, and culture through the principles of art. The exploration of the geographical features illustrated in *Walden* is essential to understanding the mind's framework. The audience is not only privileged to read the literary text but also, view how Thoreau utilized values of

visual arts. He applied principles which young artists are taught today in order to create a masterpiece extending the boundaries of literature.

Thoreau first explained the perfect composition for having an abode in the woods and the ideal location containing adequate visual features (Thoreau 81-82). Composition is what an artist selects to be on the picture plane. For example, an artist can have a radial composition where everything radiates from the middle to proportion the arrangement of the drawing. An artist must be selective while choosing a composition because if the drawing is not proportioned, the work will not achieve its objective. Second, when finding the perfect location for his cabin, Thoreau sought the concept of perspective (i.e. the viewpoint at which an artist must select a specific starting point to begin his or her drawing). An example of this concept would be at the beginning of *Walden* when Thoreau explains the beauty within the different vantage points at Walden Pond (84-86). The last characteristic Thoreau instilled into *Walden* is shading. In drawing, artists are taught to rely upon shading in order to capture light, highlight areas, and make a distinction between shadows. A perfect illustration of shading is Thoreau's experience on a "September afternoon" due to a haze where he discussed the brightness created by the radiating sun and the darkness cast by the sun's shadows (186). Thus, Thoreau did not randomly happen upon the location for his cabin, and the artistic devices he utilized

are evident in *Walden*. The author was thinking as an artist while choosing the cabin's location and while writing his masterpiece.

At the beginning of *Walden*, the reader is first introduced to the concept of composition. Thoreau states, "An afternoon sufficed to lay out the land into orchard woodlot and pasture, and to decide what fine oaks or pines should be left to stand before the door, and whence each blasted tree could be seen to the best advantage; and then I let it lie, fallow perchance, for a man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone" (Thoreau 81). An artist is required to find the right layout for the drawing as Thoreau discovered the "lay out" of the land (Thoreau 81-82). The unnecessary additions to drawings should be taken out so that the work of art can be viewed to the "best advantage" in juxtaposition to the removal of the trees by Thoreau (Thoreau 82). Artists will sometimes add too much or too little to the drawing, and it can obscure the message of the work. After the scale of the picture plane is balanced, the artist can "let it lie" as Thoreau explained (Thoreau 82). Thoreau is absolutely in the right when he says it is better to leave a proportional amount of things alone (Thoreau 82). There is a more likely chance for permanent damage if an artist or writer adjusts a drawing or literature multiple times. Certain "things" must be ignored to find proportion (Thoreau 82). Another example of composition in *Walden* is Thoreau's detailed description of the location. He described the "scale" of imagery around Walden further alluding to

principles of art (Thoreau 175). “The scenery of Walden is on a humble scale, and, though very beautiful, does not approach to grandeur, nor can it much concern one who has not long frequented it or lived by its shore” (Thoreau 175). The literary drawing and “scale” of Walden by Thoreau was simple but not grand. Thoreau said the word “scale” which further evidenced characteristics of an artist. The amazing part about this quote is how Walden was not “frequented” by many people. This is an important factor because writers and artists want originality. Thoreau selected a less visited location for his composition, and he showed that he had the mindset of an artist which is the desire to produce something never done before. Contrary to the new idea of Henry David Thoreau as an artist in the context of drawing, researchers are furthering evidence of a painterly background for the author. Thoreau has been the inspiration for paintings, and some speculate he was indeed in the mindset of a painter while writing *Walden* (1). When the facts are presented for the audience regarding composition, Thoreau was not only capable of being a writer but also contained the potential to produce drawings in his careful selection of balance, scale, and proportion. Perspective was interwoven into *Walden* from the start. In the second part of *Walden*, Thoreau’s use of perspective is ingenious. He shared, “I have thus surveyed the country on every side within a dozen miles of where I live” (Thoreau 81). The most important part of perspective is finding the point at which to begin a work of art. Thoreau discovers the right position in the following pages, and he discussed the scenery around the pond from different points (84-86). “For the first

week, whenever I looked on the pond it impressed me like a tarn high up on the side of a mountain, its bottom far above the surface of the lakes, and as the sun arose, I saw it throwing off its nightly clothing of mist, and here and there, by degrees, its soft ripples or its smooth reflecting surface was revealed, while the mists, like ghosts, were stealthily withdrawing in every direction into the woods, as at the breaking up of some nocturnal conventicle” (Thoreau 86). Thoreau was at a point above the pond, and perspective appears as he is expressing what is in his line of vision. Perspective has different vantage points. An artist can do one-point perspective or two-point perspective. Thoreau appeared to be looking at the pond with a one-point perspective because he was looking directly at the pond. Through one-point perspective, an artist is able to draw only what is directly in front, and Thoreau is writing about the view he has while looking directly at the pond (Thoreau 86). In perspective, images recede or become smaller as they fade into the distance. The passage is describing a sunrise, and as the sun peaks over the horizon, images begin to appear such as the ripples in the water and recede like the mists of the forest (Thoreau 86). If an artist were drawing this scene, the focal point would be the sun’s location which could be central, left, or right. Next, the artist would draw the images toward the foreground such as the receding mist. The mist would be drawn larger but receding into the horizon to reveal the ripples in the water. The ripple marks and the reflection of the pond would be drawn after the mist. Both would slowly become smaller as they faded into the horizon as well. The forest would be in the foreground and

background but would gradually shrink in juxtaposition with the mist. To further explain Thoreau's preference for perspective, the reader can flash forward to the description of imagery around Walden (Thoreau 175-176). This is an excellent example of colors fading into the distance through one point perspective and how gradually all blend together at the focal point.

“All our Concord waters have two colors at least, one when viewed at the distance, and another, more proper, close at hand. The first depends more on the light, and follows the sky. In clear weather, in summer, they appear blue at a little distance, especially if agitated, and at a great distance all appear alike” (Thoreau 176). Young artists are required to draw checkered tiles in a hallway fading into the distance. Both are distinct color such as black and white, and eventually, the colors meet at the main point. By that time, the two colors have combined by the gradual fade into the horizon. In Thoreau's observation, the audience can see that he factored in the distance while viewing the colors of the water (Thoreau 176). Thoreau discovered that the water was two different colors through perspective (Thoreau 176). He also found how weather can affect perspective because the different lighting and temperatures can change a one point perspective altogether (Thoreau 176). It is amazing how Thoreau had the ability to change our perspectives of *Walden* by his one-point perspective. *Walden* is not only a detailed journal of his stay at Walden Pond but also a guide to the basic principles of art. “And

because he has so distinctly surveyed his territory according to a regular plan, his exultation in an untamed wilderness closing in on his remote stronghold at Walden Pond is all the more remarkable for its revelation of the absolute freedom and wildness of his own mind” (Miller 77). Henry David Thoreau was an artist in the making. His mind was a work of art on its own, and Thoreau’s literary genius and artistic tendencies are unmistakable in *Walden* (2).

The last concept of drawing in *Walden* is shading. This is one of the most vital parts of making a drawing. Shading adds depth, dimension, and highlights. Thoreau illustrates the characteristics captured by shading beautifully in the midsection of *Walden*. “The shore is irregular enough not to be monotonous. I have in my mind’s eye the western indented with deep bays, the bolder northern, and the beautifully scalloped southern shore, where successive capes overlap each other and suggest unexplored coves between” (Thoreau 185). The first rule of shading is to note every “irregular” part of an object (Thoreau 185). By this, an artist is able to determine where to highlight and place shadows if the surface is not “monotonous” (Thoreau 185).

The indentions of the bays are similar to characteristics young artists are taught to identify. The artist must look at all of the indentions in the cloth for the still life project in order to draw the objects. For example, pupils must draw eggs on a white cloth. The artists in training are required to draw white on white by shading the appropriate areas.

Thoreau's "mind's eye" is an artist's eye due to his notice of the "irregular" shoreline, "deep" and "indented" bays, and the "scalloped southern shore" because artists are trained to notice the tiniest details on an object in order to add depth and dimension (Thoreau 185).

Thoreau's memorization of detail in *Walden* is the embodiment of artistic training. In conclusion, the entirety of the work is illuminated aesthetically, but the moral implications in each calculated description reveal an exposition of identity not yet explored in *Walden*. Thoreau was in the mindset of an artist when selecting the composition, but the Socratic undertones regarding perspective illustrate the complexities further implicated in *Walden*. So that, "The works descending from Thoreau's work inform their various materials in such a way as to require a transformation of consciousness of the audience" (Neely 128). The idea of transformation inspires a further investigation of Thoreau's exploration of boundaries literarily, artistically, and morally in *Walden*. Therefore, *Walden* is more than a story; it is a guide to the self through the world of artistic experimentation.

Notes

¹ An analysis in Richard J. Schneider's article "Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century American Landscape Painting" in *ESQ* compares Thoreau to luminists painters according to recent art historians.

² "The Artist as a Surveyor in *Walden and the Maine Woods*" by Lewis H. Miller, Jr. is an exquisite article from *ESQ* arguing Thoreau's disposition as a land surveyor.

Bibliography

Neely, Evan. "Henry David Thoreau and American American Postwar Art." *The Concord Saunterer*, 19/20, 2011, pp. 125–160. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/23395215. Accessed 16 Aug. 2021.

Thoreau, Henry David. *Henry D. Thoreau: Walden*. Ed. J. Lyndon Shanley. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971.