Devin Hom

Molly Fenn

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Self- Reliance: Enlightenment or Confinement?

        What is a true life and how do you achieve it? Most transcendentalists share a common simple- sounding solution that is anything but. These people were a part of the transcendentalist movement that was formed around the 1820s, which emphasized the purity of nature and the impurity of society and its institutions. For these reasons, renowned transcendentalists such as Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson offer a solution that requires a physical and mental independence from society. Take the classic novel *Walden* as an example, where Henry David Thoreau, the founder of the transcendentalist movement, embarked on a personal venture into the woods for over two years. Thoreau was determined to put his social theory and solitary lifestyle to the test. By the end of his experiment, Thoreau believed that he had learned the true meaning of life. But is this complicated lifestyle always beneficial? Contrary to most transcendentalists beliefs, a self- reliant lifestyle is not always best because it could potentially harm the individual and others around that individual, while also preventing participation in society.

In all transcendentalist works, it is undeniable that the individual living the self- reliant lifestyle feels a strong sense of freedom and individuality. In both *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail* and *Into the Wild,* the main character decides to change his name, which symbolizes the birth of a new and original person. David Henry becomes Henry David and Christopher McCandless becomes Alex Supertramp. These transformations embody a significant theme of transcendentalism: individuality. In “Self- Reliance*”,* Ralph Waldo Emerson asserts, “envy is ignorance” and “imitation is suicide” (Emerson 20) which shows how strongly transcendentalists support the development of the individual. Similarly in *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau urges his readers to avoid the “beaten track” (Thoreau 203) and “highways of the world [with] deep … ruts of tradition and conformity” (203) meaning that they should not follow a generic, boring lifestyle. Instead, Thoreau suggests that people “step to the music which [they] hear” (204) and follow their own desires and goals while not worrying about what anybody else thinks. After departing from Walden Pond, Thoreau ultimately concluded that this sort of lifestyle enables the individual to become a purer person. But like most things in this world, this way of living comes with a price that may outweigh the possible benefits.

Despite some of its benefits, an isolated and independent lifestyle also brings certain harmful effects that can hurt the individual both mentally and physically. In an article titled “How Extreme Isolation Warps the Mind”, Michael Bond, an author of various psychological and behavioral papers, explores the array of effects that could be induced by long periods of isolation. Of the long list of effects, Bond mentions some mental developments that include a distorted sense of time, irregular sleep patterns, and even hallucinations. According to Ian Robbins, a psychologist quoted in the article, such hallucinations are produced because “the part of the brain that deals with ongoing tasks, such as sensory perception, is accustomed to dealing with a large quantity of information”. And when there is a prolonged absence of information, the brain “tries to construct a reality from the scant signals available to it”. Additionally, physical effects such as higher blood pressure, vulnerability to infection, and interference with logical and verbal reasoning are introduced when people are separated for an extended time period. Another case showing the possible effects of living in solitude is the film *Into the Wild.* The film tells the story of Christopher McCandless and his adventure inspired by transcendentalist writers like Thoreau and Emerson. In his journey, just as the transcendentalists suggested, he separated himself from his loved ones and even his newly- made acquaintances. But in doing so, he was destroying his safety net that was meant to catch him if he ever failed. Unfortunately at the end of his journey, McCandless did fall and there was nobody to catch him. While trapped in an area located in Alaska, McCandless accidentally ate a seed that later caused him to die of starvation. If he had not pushed his loved ones away, would he have suffered the same fate?

In addition to the potential harm done to the individual, isolation also harms the people around that individual. At several points in *Into the Wild*, McCandless abandons many people in pursuit of his ultimate goal of going to Alaska. In the beginning of the movie the audience is introduced to McCandless’s parents when he has already been away for a long time. His mother wakes up abruptly in the middle of the night, obviously in distress, claiming that she heard Christopher. As her husband reassures her and claims Christopher is gone, the audience is able to observe the significant mental effects brought on by the absence of a loved one. Later in the film, McCandless crosses paths with an old man named Ronald Franz who had recently lost his son in a car accident. The two build a strong friendship and Franz even offers to adopt McCandless. Still focused on his own self however, McCandless denies Franz’s proposal and continues his trek to Alaska. In a play depicting the life of Henry David Thoreau up until and during his stay in jail called *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail*, Thoreau’s choice to think and teach transcendentalist ideas also affected people around him. Specifically, one of Thoreau’s students named Ellen was effected the most when Thoreau was attempting to teach her about transcendentalism by questioning her love for her father. Obviously, Ellen was agitated that someone would challenge the importance of her father and declared, “Good day Mr. Thoreau. Thank you for making transcendentalism so clear” (Lawrence 41). Since Thoreau’s transcendentalist ideas were so different from others, people who may have otherwise befriended him, decided to distance themselves. The idea behind this type of separation is best described in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay “Self- Reliance” when Emerson states, “I must be myself. I cannot break myself any longer for you” (Emerson 31). In this bold statement, Emerson suggests that the people around him are holding him back from achieving his own goals. But the problem with this mindset is that it does not account for the well- being of the people around him. In a sense, the complete attention to oneself is comparable to a tunnel vision that drowns out other people.

When an individual develops this tunnel vision, he or she also loses sight of what it means to be a member of society. In other words, if one were to separate himself or herself from society entirely just as Thoreau did in *Walden,* he or she would be disregarding the responsibility to uphold civic virtue. Civic virtue is defined as the cultivation of habits of personal living that are claimed to be important for the success of the community. In “Civil Disobedience”, an essay by Henry David Thoreau about the role of government in society, Thoreau exclaims “Cast your whole vote, not a strip of paper merely, but you whole influence” (Thoreau 10). Here, Thoreau is attempting to persuade all of his readers to fully support their opinions instead of just simply voting for them. Obviously, staying informed and taking action is a big part of civic virtue, but Thoreau’s actions do not really reflect what he is preaching. In *Walden,* Thoreau decides to move into the forest in order to become a distinct individual. But by doing this, he is no longer contributing to society. One of Thoreau’s main lessons in *Walden* is to separate oneself from society just as he did. But if everybody were to do as he says, there would be no society or community. On top of that, Thoreau says “government is best which governs least” (1) meaning that he wants no government at all. How can Thoreau demand change in society if there is not society in the first place? Why can’t we be distinct individuals but still members of a community?

Despite the benefits of living a self- reliant life, the potential consequences outweigh those advantages. As demonstrated by Thoreau, Emerson, and McCandless, the probable harm to the individual, his or her loved ones, and society as a whole should discourage others from trying to live a completely independent life. Although we should not try to live just like Thoreau did, that doesn’t mean that we should stop trying to be individuals. Instead, think about the extent to which one can still be an individual while not harming others. After all, isn’t it best when we have others to lean on? ­

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