

Thoreau's Biophilia:
The Influence of Hindu Scriptures on *Walden's* Portrayal of Nature and the Divine

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*To my dad, who always taught me to “beware of all enterprises that require new
clothes.”*

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Abstract

Hindu texts such as the *Bhagavad Gita* and *The Laws of Manu* provided Thoreau with an additional vehicle for conceptualizing a relationship between the divine and the natural. In *Walden*, Thoreau articulates a view of nature that differs from the norms of his day by elevating it to the status of a God. Thoreau uses Hindu, and other religious, structures and formats to express a conception of nature as worthy of reverence.

This thesis examines Thoreau's deployment of some of the structures and themes of Hindu texts in *Walden*. Thoreau has a biophilic view of nature, that is to say his approach as a writer and amateur naturalist is animated by an innate love of life. *Walden*-frequently and in a wide variety of ways- suggests that some kind of biophilic relation between the human organism and the non-human natural environment is, and should be seen as, fundamental to human existence. Thoreau's literary expression of this biophilia often combines the scripture and natural observation, suggesting that religion can be used to understand and appreciate nature, and that nature can fill a role similar to God in a religious tradition.

Additionally, this thesis examines how Hinduism's view of the role of God in nature appealed to Thoreau's absorption with the wild, topic cognate but not identical to nature itself.

Key Words: Thoreau, Hinduism, biophilia, immanence, *Bhagavad Gita*

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Short Titles

Laws: Manu, Kullūkabhāṭṭa, William Jones, Graves Champney Haughton, and Standish Grove Grady. *Institutes of Hindu Law, Or, The Ordinances of Menu: According to the Gloss of Cullūca: Comprising the Indian System of Duties, Religious and Civil*. London: Wm. H. Allen, 1869. Print.

Gīta: Wilkins, Charles, and Warren Hastings. *The Bhāgvat-gēētā: Or, Dialogues of Krēṣhṇā and Ārjōṅ; in Eighteen Lectures with Notes*. London: Printed for C. Nourse, 1785. Print.

Introduction

“We must learn to reawaken and to keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us even in our soundest sleep”

-Thoreau, *Walden*

“I pervade all things in nature, and guard them with my beams”

-*Bhagavad Gita*

During the summer of 1840, Thoreau discovered the *Laws of Manu* in Emerson’s library and observed that this text “comes to me with such a volume of sound as if it had swept unobstructed over the plains of Hindostan, and when my eye rests on yonder birches- or the sun in the water- or the shadows on the trees- it seems to signify the laws of them all” (qtd. in Richardson 108). Thoreau reacted to his initial reading of this ancient Hindu text as a man would on hearing the voice of God. It allowed him to connect his surrounding environment, like the “sun in the water” and the “shadows on the trees” with his own existence. For Thoreau, the early translations of Hindu scripture held “the laws of you and me,” and gave him a novel way to conceptualize divinity’s role in the material world (qtd. in Richardson 108).

Generally, Thoreau scholars fall into two camps. They either focus on Thoreau’s rationality, and empiricism, or on his more spiritual, religious, and mythical writing. Scholars such as Alan Hodder, Sreekrishna Sarma, and Jim Cheney emphasize Thoreau’s spirituality or “mysticism.” Sarma suggests that, while Thoreau was a “poet-naturalist who took delight in observing Nature... this was not his main purpose” (Sarma 79). Instead, he claims that Thoreau “wanted to explore the secret regions of life, to make life a laboratory where experiments with Truth could be conducted” (Sarma 79). Sarma

describes Thoreau as a philosopher looking for truth who was merely interested in nature, as opposed to nature being his primary focus.

Alan Hodder also takes this approach and explains how Thoreau could qualify as a “yogi” by suggesting that his “yoga” “is an imaginative construct... for the calculated purpose of representing to himself and his would-be readers authentic experiences of ecstasy” (Hodder 413). Hodder focuses on Thoreau’s use of Hindu texts to create a philosophy of life that he could then implement and practice. He suggests that Thoreau’s interest in nature is primarily as a good environment for establishing this practice. He also portrays Thoreau as one who is interested in finding a greater truth or “lucidity,” in a similar way as Sarma explains his purpose for being in Nature as one of a “laboratory” to seek spiritual truth (Hodder 416).

Alternatively, other scholars discuss Thoreau primarily as a scientist or naturalist. Nina Baym, for example, focuses on Thoreau’s careful, scientific, and empirical observations of nature. In her book *Thoreau’s View of Science*, Baym acknowledges Thoreau’s use of nature to find divinity, but also suggests that he “devoted the rest of his life to learning nature well enough to ‘anticipate her’” and looked to “find nature’s laws in increased detail” (Baym 17/18). Baym suggests that Thoreau was interested in an intersection between science and religion, but that science largely replaced religious thought as his primary focus.

Similarly, Robert Thorson emphasizes Thoreau’s work as a “pioneering field scientist” who, working alone with primitive instruments... nevertheless made hundreds of astute observations... about the lake and its surrounding landscape” (Thorson 9). Thorson asserts that Thoreau was interested in empirical, natural observation and that he

made powerful scientific contributions. Laura Dossow Walls also comments on Thoreau's interest in nature by questioning what "the 'transcendental' author of *Walden*" was "doing out in all weathers" (Walls 3). Thoreau's commitment to observing nature for its own sake suggests that, while he was a spiritual person, nature had its own scientific, empirical value for him.

While both scholarly approaches have value, their shared, though divergent, tendency to characterize Thoreau as ultimately falling on one side of the religion/ science divide or the other is limiting. In this thesis, I work to disable the idea that there existed, for Thoreau, a boundary between the material and the spiritual, and instead suggest that he understood the natural in terms of the religious, but also as something innately sacred. Thoreau actually does away with the boundaries between regarding nature either poetically or scientifically because he saw no metaphysical distance between the spiritual and the natural. He uses the terms of a religious discourse to elevate nature to the status of a God, invoking a biophilic sense of the sacredness of the natural world. Thoreau's adoption and adaptation of the language of the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Laws of Manu* in *Walden* reveals his creation of a hybrid sense of the natural world as imbued with spirituality.

Ultimately, *Walden* was intended as a philosophical polemic, encouraging others to live a life as full of innate love for nature as his. One of the reasons this was so effective and the text still resonates so strongly is because Thoreau was able to use the terms of a seemingly disparate discourse, religion, to create a sense of a value in nature that extends beyond the material and the economic. The biophilia expressed by Thoreau's

use of scriptural figures and themes foreshadows similar expressions in contemporary environmentalism.

The *Bhagavad Gita* was one of the texts Thoreau carried with him to Walden Pond. In his book *Gita Within Walden*, Paul Friedrich suggests that both the *Gita* and Thoreau conceptualized a “maker” that was “really real” (Friedrich 7). This idea of God being more real than the material world is reinforced by a conception of a supreme being who is paradoxically immanent and transcendent. Friedrich acknowledges that the *Gita*’s God appealed to Thoreau because it was “immanent in, and also transcends both the microcosmic and macrocosmic universes of matter and spirit, universes that are interconnected and analogous to each other in infinite ways” (Friedrich 15). Friedrich interprets these Hindu texts as suggesting that by being close to one’s surroundings without mediation, one can have a relationship with a God that exists immanently within them. These texts gave Thoreau a way to conceptualize a God that he could see, touch, and feel in the natural world, and helped him understand that a closer relationship with nature was a way to connect with the divine.

A number of scholars have suggested that Thoreau used the natural world to understand God. For instance, Sarma suggests that “there is ample evidence to prove that he took... to the woods in order to commune with God” (Sarma 80). Cheney claims that his “immersion in Nature has a spiritual dimension” and that it “joins the conversation” and “participates in the construction of knowledge” (Cheney 76). These scholars cast nature in the role of a guide in Thoreau’s search for the divine. However, his use of the natural world was less a method for understanding God than it was a redefinition of what

qualifies as “divine” or “sublime.” Thoreau didn’t conceptualize nature as a reflection of, or gateway to, divinity, he actually viewed it as an object of reverence.

Thoreau implemented a number of common religious concepts and tropes, such as parables, prophets, and natural metaphors, to attempt to describe the natural world. To explain nature, Thoreau deploys certain Hindu metaphors and analogies, which are traditionally used to explain God. The fact that he used structures designed to describe the divine to look at nature suggests that he was casting nature in a similar role as an object of worship.

Like John Muir and William Gilpin, Thoreau revels in the natural world as inherently sublime¹. He turns away from traditional Puritan conceptions of wilderness as a postlapsarian wasteland filled with evil spirits and animated by Satan². Instead, Thoreau casts nature as something divine. While pilgrims like William Bradford describe the non-human natural environment as a wilderness needing to be conquered and tamed, Thoreau adopts the opposite stance and suggests that it should be valued for its intrinsic spirituality.

Along these lines, Thoreau’s conception of nature in spiritual terms places him more in line with biophilia than with any specific religion. Biophilia denominates the notion that humans can have an “innate” tendency to love all life, to such an extent that biological life processes can be viewed with reverence and as a source of moral guidance (Kellert and Wilson 20). Thoreau tends toward the biophilic in that his use of religious

¹ William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature" *William Cronon - Homepage* (N.p., n.d) Web. 16 Jan. 2017.

² William Bradford *History of Plymouth Plantation, 1620-1647* (Houghton Mifflin Company, n.d) Web 11 Mar. 2017.

language casts nature as an entity that should be worshipped or explored innately. By placing nature in the role of a God in religious language, Thoreau implies that it is worthy of its own reverence, just as biophilia suggests that nature can have its own sublime power.

In the first chapter, I will discuss Hindu ideas of immanence and how Thoreau's conception of God paralleled that of Hinduism. This idea of immanence is evident in a number of places in the *Bhagavad Gita*, for instance, when Krishna proclaims that his essence exists within nature. This is particularly important, because it suggests that nature is essential to the idea of immanence, as Krishna claims that he is within the natural world specifically. I will then work to examine how his interest in wildness evidences his wish for an unmediated relationship with nature to comprehend God and the divine.

The second chapter examines how Thoreau deploys linguistic structures of Hinduism to cast nature in a role similar to that of a Hindu God. Thoreau's adoption of storytelling techniques and the use of prophetic figures to help him explain nature illustrates that nature was playing a role beyond that of a gateway for understanding the divine. In examining these similarities, one can see Thoreau's assertion of nature's sublimity.

The third chapter features a similar analysis of Thoreau's use of Hindu metaphor to understand nature. While the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Laws of Manu* explain God in natural metaphors, Thoreau uses ideas of divinity to explain nature. I will examine how Thoreau's reversal of the vehicle and tenor in Hindu metaphor illustrates his emphasis on nature's own sublimity and divine power, and how his overall metaphoric structure provides insight about his conception of the relationship between nature and the divine.

Finally, I conclude with an examination of biophilia and Thoreau's compatibility with this faith system. In Kellert and Wilson's book *The Biophilia Hypothesis*, there are nine characteristics of a human's relationship with nature. I will use these valuations to analyze Thoreau's experience of the natural world, and discuss exactly how nature fills a divine role in his conceptions.

Thoreau represented a hybrid way of considering the relationship between the divine and the natural by using faith to understand his environment. He formulated his observations and thoughts about the material world using terms already associated with religion. This secularization of religious terms creates, in Thoreau's writing, a composite of scientific speculation coupled with a belief in a natural world that operates like a God. This thesis explores both how Thoreau's articulation of the natural world alters the scientific language typically associated with explaining the environment, and how his observations were spiritualized to place nature in the role of a God.

Thoreau read a wide variety and vast array of Hindu scriptures, but I will be focusing on two in particular. The first is the *Laws of Manu* which is an abbreviation for the original title; *Institutes of Hindu Law; or, the ordinances of Menu, according to the Gloss of Culluca, Comprising the Indian system of duties, religious and civil*. Originally translated by Sir William Jones, the text features a long list of laws essential to the Hindu faith and its practices. Thoreau was drawn to this text because it creates a "primal expression of both natural and human law" and he was interested in the idea that a religion could condone using one's own abilities to find God (Richardson 108).

The *Bhagavad Gita* is the other text I will use to analyze Thoreau's language. It is one of the oldest, most important Hindu scriptures. Originally translated into English by

Charles Wilkins in India in the 1790s³, the text focuses on a conversation between Krishna (a God) and Arjoon (a human) and concerns ideas of morality and the proper terms of worship to discover the divine. This text was interesting to Thoreau as it presented ideas about how an individual should go about discovering divine knowledge. Thoreau was interested in its practical components and the conception that a man could find God based on his own natural abilities.

This thesis examines Thoreau's articulations of the sublimity of nature through the use of, specifically Hindu, religious language and structure in *Walden*. Thoreau casts nature in a divine role, as opposed to using it to understand a more traditional "God." This move is evident through his alterations of the language structures that historically served this "God." Thoreau examines the idea of immanence of God in nature and is preoccupied with wildness now characterized as sublime rather than satanic. He also uses metaphoric structures and philosophies of Hinduism to suggest that nature is intrinsically mysterious and worthy of understanding. Ultimately, Thoreau's view of nature as sublime, as opposed to being used to explain the sublime, illustrates his tendency toward a biophilic view of the natural world.

³ Eric J. Sharpe *The Universal Gītā: Western Images of the Bhagavad Gītā: A Bicentenary Survey* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court Pub), 1985 Print.

Chapter One- Thoreau's Wilderness and God's Immanence: An Attempt to Find God in Nature

American Transcendentalists, like Thoreau and Emerson, were among the first intellectuals to show interest in Hindu thought after the earliest translations of its scriptures. The first translations of these texts were available in the early 1800s and were first circulated in Europe (Sharpe). The Romantics in Germany were among the first Westerners to consider and discuss Hindu philosophies. Subsequently, Hindu thought was taken up by the American Transcendentalists, a small group gathering in New England, consisting of Emerson, Thoreau, Margaret Fuller and others, who conversed about a variety of intellectual topics. In his book *The Universal Gita*, Sharpe notes that both groups were interested in the text as part of a tendency to "take and use whatever sources of wisdom presented themselves as parts of their own deeply-felt but unsystematic view of life" (Sharpe 23). American Transcendentalists were comfortable with appropriating certain elements of Hinduism that appealed to their own thoughts.

Some Transcendentalists were drawn to the elements of the texts that differed from traditional Christian thought. Emerson described the *Bhagavad Gita* as "a piece of required reading for all those who were in rebellion against the confines of Evangelical Christianity" (Sharpe 26). Emerson and some of his cohort were largely interested in these philosophies because they provided a supplement or alternative to the conformity of certain forms of Christianity. These individuals were not interested in entirely rejecting their Christian predilections; instead, they were open to the idea that other conceptions of the spiritual could exist.

When examining Thoreau's particular interest in diverse religions and philosophies, such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Hinduism, it is easy to assume that he rejected his Christian upbringing in his exploration of these "new" faiths. Alan Hodder suggests that by "promoting the Buddha to the same rank as Christ" and by "elevating the scriptures of the East alongside those of the West," he was perceived to be executing "a brazen assault on Christian supremacy" (Hodder 404). Some members of the intellectual community of New England may well have regarded Thoreau's willingness to explore other philosophies as an absolute rejection of Christianity. However, Thoreau actually advocated for, and internalized, a wide number of Christian teachings and practices. For example: Paul Friedrich claims that Thoreau had an "absolute respect" for the person of Jesus, and found him to be "the ultimate standard for courage and integrity" (Friedrich 7). Thoreau was perceived to acknowledge certain elements of Christianity, and continued to practice and be influenced by them in his exploration of Hinduism.

Although he still respected Christianity, Thoreau was drawn to Hinduism as a supplementary or novel way of conceptualizing God and an individual's relationship to the world around him. Adisasmito-Smith claims that, in Hinduism, Thoreau found "an alternative to what was considered scripture in New England in the 1840s" and that "the voice of the Other" could "confirm Thoreau's own inclinations" (Adisasmito-Smith 86). There were aspects of Hinduism that spoke to his own conceptions about the world that Christianity did not fully satisfy. Thoreau was interested in the Hindu texts' treatment of issues like self-reflection, individualism, and solitude, and considered the implications of these texts in his life. Ultimately, Thoreau was drawn to Hindu scriptures, like the

Bhagavad-Gita, because they explore how to seek God and the divine in the material world (Friedrich 1).

As Paul Friedrich discusses in his book *Gita Within Walden*, Thoreau's conceptualization of God was similar to the *Gita*'s in a number of ways. Among the most important of these similarities is the idea that God is a paradoxical combination of immanent and transcendent. Friedrich claims, "The God of these poets [Thoreau and the *Gita*] is not only omnipresent and omnipotent but both immanent and transcendent. "Their God is immanent... because it is within all things and emerging through them in divine power" (Friedrich 14). God's immanent presence in the tangible, material world intrigued Thoreau and reinforced the notion that he must get more in touch with his environment to be more in touch with God.

Friedrich suggests that Thoreau's God appears to him in instances of the "uncanny" (Friedrich 14). He describes a number of natural acts, like "the loons wiliness" and "his own interplay with a rainbow" and suggests that Thoreau finds his God within them (Friedrich 14). Friedrich emphasizes Thoreau's ability to see the extraordinary in the ordinary, reinforcing his argument about his interest in finding a God who is immanently around him. However, Friedrich doesn't do justice to the fact that all of the phenomena allowing Thoreau to see the divine are natural. God's immanence in Nature is the key to Thoreau's understanding of the spiritual.

The idea of immanence is present in many of the larger religions. According to the OED, the term, with regard to religion, is defined as a being "permanently pervading and sustaining the universe" ("Immanence"). The concept of immanence is not restricted to use by only one faith and is actually present in a number of different religions. The

term itself is derived from the Latin expression for “remaining within” (Oxford English Dictionary). In this way, the term itself is secular and can be applied to a number of different faiths.

Immanence contrasts with the typical conception of a God who is transcendent. God is often perceived as extending beyond the realm of physical human access. He transcends the material world and is considered to be omnipresent and omnipotent. Hinduism’s view of God as both immanently available in the material world, and as mysterious and transcendent would seem to be a paradox. God is both near and far, and this enigma or contradiction fascinated Thoreau, because it suggests that the intersection between the spiritual and the material is not only realistic but a basic element to the working of the world.

The *Bhagavad-Gita* emphasizes the immanence of God in nature and exemplifies Thoreau’s belief that the divine can be found in the material world. The text claims that a good Hindu can “looketh on all things alike, beholdeth the supreme soul in all things, and all things in the supreme soul,” suggesting that God and the divine can be found within every living being, especially those in the natural world (*Gita* 49). Similarly, when speaking to Arjoon, Krishna suggests that he “pervade[s] all things in nature and guard[s] them with [his] beams” (*Gita* 81). This statement explicitly claims that God is inherently within everything natural. The overwhelming lesson in the text is that not only is God immanent in the world, he can especially be found in nature.

Thoreau carried this idea of God’s immanent presence in nature with him to Walden Pond. He articulated his belief in immanence when he discussed the morning as having a “serene and satisfied face, and no question on her lips” (Thoreau 217). Thoreau

describes nature as one would a divine entity and suggests that it is capable of answering questions, offering congratulation, and instilling wonder. These characteristics are reminiscent of God or the supernatural, not of a tree, a rock, or the sun alone.

Thoreau is preoccupied with the idea of wildness, reflecting an attempt to get closer to nature. He wishes to get more in touch with what he sees as his “natural instincts” in order to be able to appreciate the immanence of God in his environment. Thoreau was not the first thinker to do so. In his article “The Trouble with Wilderness,” William Cronon cites others, such as “Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, and William Gilpin” who found that “sublime landscapes were those rare places on earth where one had more chance than elsewhere to glimpse the face of God” (Cronon 5). These figures illustrate the popular notion during the 18th and 19th centuries that wilderness was a crucial element in recognizing the divine. Many environmentalists, and other more general thinkers, found that, through wilderness, they could better understand the spiritual around them.

Even before the work of environmentalists, Puritan colonists and other early Christian thinkers in the America’s were creating another conception of the wild and its spiritual power. In William Bradford’s description of the colonist’s plight, being immersed in “a hideous desolate wilderness, full of beast and wild men” sums up the Puritan impression of the non-human natural world of North America (Bradford 156). Bradford characterizes the wild as bereft of civilization and the divine and as something that needed to be civilized and controlled (Bradford 155). The Puritan characterization of wilderness as satanic is in line with the idea that wild nature has a part in a spiritual drama, the conflict between God and Satan, but the Puritan demonization of the wild is

completely antithetical to Thoreau's sense of the spiritual dimensions of wild or not domesticated nature.

In contrast to the Puritan desire to domesticate, and thereby, Christianize wild nature, Thoreau finds salvation in becoming wild like the wilderness or untamed natural world, hence the famous dictum, "in wilderness is the preservation of the world." This "wildness" is similar to, but different from wilderness in that wilderness denotes a state of pristine or not domesticated nature, but wildness, for Thoreau, names a way of being in the world, a way of being that is, for Thoreau, easiest to perceive and understand in nature but which can be practiced anywhere. Seeking wildness was Thoreau's way of both attempting to reach God immanent within nature and of getting more in touch with his own unmediated instincts and intuitions. Jim Cheney suggests that wildness was an integral element to Thoreau's comprehension of higher laws and ideals. He claims that:

Thoreau's excursions into Wildness can be seen as a background against which Thoreau's quest for a life in conformity to Higher Laws is foregrounded. To the extent that this background is prized, the value of the foreground activity is heightened. (Cheney 87)

Cheney argues that wildness is an essential element to Thoreau's conception of spirituality because there is an immediate connection between the two. He uses wildness as a "background" for his "life in conformity to Higher Laws," suggesting that this unmediated relationship with nature is a necessary context for understanding that which is "higher." Cheney suggests that he is working from a foundation of identification with the natural world to attempt to find what we would term as "spiritual." Thoreau helps

himself conceptualize and understand the supernatural based on an underpinning in the natural or the “wild.”

However, Cheney argues that the intersection Thoreau perceives between these two forces (wildness and higher laws) allows his understanding of nature to inform his conception of God. While apt, Cheney fails to account for the fact that Thoreau is also interested in wildness for its own sake. Thoreau is attempting to be “wilder” partially to understand nature itself and for nature’s own sake, and also to connect with the sacredness of that nature. His interest in the wild is not only the result of an effort to reach God, but also to understand the natural world and its sublime power.

In “Higher Laws,” Thoreau directly contrasts ideas of wildness and higher thinking by discussing how his “animalistic” instincts intersect with his inclination toward spirituality. He claims that he

...Caught a glimpse of a woodchuck stealing across [his] path and felt a strange thrill of savage delight, and was strongly tempted to seize and devour him raw; not that I was hungry then, except for that wildness which he represented.

(Thoreau 161)

This admission of an instinct that influences behavior demonstrates Thoreau’s preoccupation with having an unmediated connection with the natural world. The fact that his “thrill of delight” was “savage” suggests that, by acting upon this impulse, he would be more primitive. Similarly, the fact that he wanted to “seize and devour him raw” calls to mind an uninhibited animalism that could be characterized as “wild.”

However, Thoreau’s use of terms like the “wildness which he represented” and “not that I was hungry then” suggest that Thoreau was not actually as out of control or

“savage” as he desires to be. Henry David Thoreau wanted to have a wild or unmediated relationship with the natural environment, but was still faced with the limitations of his “civilization” or time in human society. The fact that he claimed to feel “a strange thrill of savage delight” but was still logically considering elements of his psyche, like whether or not he is hungry, suggests that he may desire to feel an internalized wildness. The fact that he desired to achieve this unmediated impression of the wild but had not yet overcome his rational humanity reinforces his mediated response to nature in viewing it through the lens of religious scriptures. He was advocating for an unmediated relationship, despite presenting his thoughts about nature in a mediated fashion.

Thoreau also directly contrasts these ideas of wildness by comparing them to his obsession with finding a “higher” way to live and think. He claims that despite the fact that the “wildest scenes had become unaccountably familiar” he “found in [him]self... an instinct toward a higher, or as it is named, spiritual life” (Thoreau 161). This admission of a corresponding inclination toward the spiritual and the wild suggests a necessary intersection between the two in formulating Thoreau’s worldview. Thoreau uses wildness and the “wildest scenes” as a background for his infatuation with discovering a higher plane of existence. His use of the word “instinct” in addressing his interest in a “spiritual life” provides an interesting contrast with the “savage” urge he describes in wanting to eat the woodchuck. By implying a similar sense of instinctual action in both the mode of the wild and that of the spiritual, Thoreau suggests that both of these types of thought are ingrained within him, and, by extension, within humanity as a whole.

Thoreau was motivated by the immanence of God in the natural world articulated by the Hindu texts. He went out directly into nature in an attempt to find the divine

through unmediated interactions with his environment, such as with a woodchuck he felt a desire to eat. Thoreau's excursion to Walden Pond is characterized by his attempts to seek a closer interaction with his environment, in order to use it as a gateway to see the divine. However, the Hindu suggestion of the use of the natural to see the spiritual also allows Thoreau to see the value in nature as worthy of its own reverence. In more closely examining the natural world, Thoreau is also demonstrating his interest in, and reverence of, nature itself.

Chapter Two- Adoption and Adaptation of Hindu Structure: Stories and Prophets

Thoreau went to Walden Pond partially as an experiment in some of the Hindu philosophies he had been reading and learning. In *Walden*, he claims, “the present was my next experiment” and that his excursion was meant to allow him to “learn to reawaken and keep [himself] awake, not by mechanical aids, but an infinite expectation of the dawn” (Thoreau 62, 65). He was interested in living without any mediation to get closer to God immanently residing within nature. In order to properly experiment with practices that would allow him to be closer to nature, Thoreau also paid close attention to the actual text of certain Hindu scriptures.

Thoreau took an active approach to implementing Hinduism’s model of finding God within the material world. He articulates his specific use of Hindu practices by saying:

In the morning, I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagvat-Geeta, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial; and I doubt if that philosophy is not to be referred to a previous state of existence, so remote is its sublimity from our conceptions. (Thoreau 227/ 28)

Thoreau claims that the Hindu texts he read are not only relevant, but also superior to the texts that he has encountered in his modern day. He finds them to be so far superior, in fact, that they make the thinking and intellectualism of “our modern world” “seem puny and trivial.” Thoreau has also included practices associated with Hinduism into his routines. By claiming, “in the morning, I bathe my intellect,” he suggests that this faith

had become ingrained in his actual routine. His writing in *Walden* reflects a commitment both to the philosophies and to the practices of the Hindu texts.

Thoreau also demonstrates his interest in these ideas by citing a variety of different Hindu texts. He often references specific lessons, such as those by the “Hindoo philosopher” who states that soul “from the circumstances in which it is placed, mistakes its own character, until the truth is revealed to it by some holy teacher, and then it knows itself to be Brahme” (Thoreau 70). He directly references these sources, illustrating their relevance to his daily life and practices.

Beyond his admiration for, and implementation of, Hindu practices in his life; Thoreau was also interested in using some of their linguistic tools, like metaphor and storytelling, in his writing. He was so deeply engaged with these texts that he adopted elements of them to explain his own ideas. Sarma suggests that Thoreau had a “native passion for the scriptures of various nations” (Sarma 78). He was interested in how religious texts could provide a format for expressing “real life” and claimed that he was “acquainted with those [scriptures] of the Hindoos, the Chinese and the Persian” (Sarma 78). Thoreau draws on a wide variety of scriptural elements and rhetorical strategies, such as parable-like storytelling and prophetic figures, to explain elements of nature, in contrast to the scriptures, which use them to explain God.

Many religious texts use some form of storytelling to convey a moral lesson. One of the most well known forms is the parable, which is associated with Christianity. According to the OED online, a parable can be defined as “a simple story used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson” (“Parable”). The parables associated with Christianity have a very distinct form and are characterized by the description of a short

story that represents a more abstract lesson. For example: in the parable of the wheat and the seeds in Matthew, Jesus describes how weeds and wheat are grown together and then separated during the harvest, just as humans all live together and are separated on judgment day (King James Bible, Matthew 13). A Christian parable describes a specific scene that represents a lesson for mankind.

On the other hand, the *Bhagavad Gita* features a structure of storytelling characterized by smaller, hypothetical anecdotes to illustrate various lessons. While they are not traditionally “parabolic,” they do still use a story to signify one larger, more abstract teaching. Krishna often articulates his more conceptual or abstract lessons by talking about one exemplary “man” whose behavior leads to consequences. For example: he claims:

The man whose passions enter his heart as waters run into the unswelling passive ocean, obtaineth happiness; not he who lusteth in his lusts. The man who having abandoned all lusts of the flesh, walketh without inordinate desires, unassuming, and free from pride, obtaineth happiness. (*Gita* 34)

In this passage, Krishna articulates his lessons about the nature of desire by talking specifically about one man. The text assists a reader in understanding how that concept can apply to him/ herself by connecting it with a concrete individual. When a person reads “the man who having abandoned all lusts of the flesh... obtaineth happiness,” it provides a more specific path to follow because a story is more relatable than an explanation of an abstract concept. These hypothetical stories place an idea in context and practice to be better understood by a reader.

Thoreau's method of telling stories is similar to that used in other religious texts, but its content differs in that its subject matter is nature instead of God. He uses stories about specific occurrences in nature to explain his environment as a whole. Thoreau adopts a similar structure to the one used by religious texts to discuss God to preach about nature. For example: he describes a scene he is observing, saying:

Hawks are circling about my clearing; the tantivity of wild pigeons, flying by two and threes athwart my view, or perching restless on the white pine boughs behind my house, gives a voice to the air; a fish hawk dimples the surface of a glassy pond and brings up a fish. (Thoreau 85)

Thoreau's specific descriptions of his environment, and how the actions of each animal affect the scene as a whole, illustrate his interest in understanding nature innately. He includes details like "the tantivity of wild pigeons" and "a fish hawk" who "dimples the glassy surface of the pond" to make larger observations like "a voice [in] the air." He uses specific descriptions and micro stories about aspects of his environment to understand the overall operation of the natural environment. Because the "fish hawk" "brings up a fish," the "glassy surface of the pond" is "dimple[d]." Thoreau makes specific observations, told as little stories, to demonstrate his urge to understand his environment.

This structure is similar to the method used in other religious texts, like the *Bhagavad Gita*. In the prior example, the *Gita* describes how the specific actions of one person have specific results; the same way the specific actions of one animal have specific results in Thoreau's description. In the *Gita*, the man who has "abandoned all lusts of the flesh" and "walketh without inordinate desires... obtaineth happiness." The

observance of specific actions and their consequences is similar to Thoreau's description of how one animal's behavior affects the overall environment. Additionally, this story also examines how one's specific conduct fits into the general moral schema of the faith community, similarly to how one animal fits into Thoreau's entire environmental scene.

Thoreau also uses abstract examples beyond the physical world to explain his environment. He explains natural occurrences with abstractions to elevate nature to the level of the conceptual. Thoreau uses supernatural concepts of mortality to explain the hoot of an owl, in stating:

I was also serenaded by an owl. Near at hand you could fancy it was the most melancholy sound in Nature, as if she meant by this to stereotype and make permanent in her choir the dying moans of a human being- some poor weak relic of mortality who has left hope behind, and howls like an animal, yet with human sobs, on entering the dark valley. (Thoreau 93)

He uses descriptions like the "dying moans of a human being" and a "poor weak relic of mortality" to explain something as seemingly concrete as an owl's hoot (Thoreau 93).

The fact that Thoreau uses a more abstract concept, like the idea of human mortality, to explain something natural suggests the depth to which he was moved by a simple occurrence like an owl's hoot. In using the term, "stereotype," Thoreau both explains the natural in terms of humanity, and emphasizes its complexity. In suggesting that the hoot of an owl is a "stereotype" of the "dying moans of a human being," he illustrates its intricacy and the necessity of using more abstract concepts to understand it. Thoreau explains this single occurrence in the natural world with complex human behaviors, like "sob[bing]" and "le[aving] hope behind."

Thoreau's use of stories that are focused on the natural world, and rely upon the abstract to explain the natural, illustrates his sense that nature itself is worthy of explanation. While a religious text would articulate an entire story only revealing a deeper truth about God or his will, Thoreau tells stories or describes scenes that reveal truth about nature. By spending time creating a commentary about nature, Thoreau suggests that it is actually worthy of reverence in the same way a God would be in a traditional religious text. Thoreau places nature on the level of God by using stories or anecdotes to discuss nature the same way religious texts use them to discuss God.

The Hindu scriptures and Thoreau also both use the device of prophetic figures who bring messages from the divine. In both the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Laws of Manu*, the authors use figures that represent God's will and explain his thoughts to humans. The *Bhagavad Gita* is structured around a conversation in which a God (Krishna) is giving a prophet (Arjoon) information. He explains that he is telling Arjoon his will and asks him to "Hear again, O valiant youth, my supreme words, which I will speak unto thee" (*Gita* 61). Krishna's intention is to relay his divine message to a mortal so that he can understand and spread the word of God's intent. He similarly articulates "I will make thee acquainted with the chief of my divine distinctions as the extent of my nature is infinite" (*Gita* 62). Krishna uses Arjoon as a vehicle to deliver information to those on Earth.

Similarly, in the *Laws of Manu*, Manu was given instruction from God that He wished him to convey to humans. The text mentions how "Menu sat reclined, with his attention fixed on one object, the Supreme God; when the divine sages approached him" (*Laws* 1). Manu was approached by God, or representatives of God, that gave him divine

information. Manu is the only mortal to “knowest the true sense, the first principle, and the prescribed ceremonies of this universal, supernatural Vedas” (*Laws* 1). He was able to pass along this information to provide humans with knowledge of God’s will.

However, Thoreau transforms ordinary individuals into prophets who convey messages about divinity and significance of the natural world. Thoreau discusses a Canadian woodsman who has a special relationship with nature to articulate the idea of wildness and its relationship to spirituality. Thoreau describes the man, saying:

In him the animal man chiefly was developed. In physical endurance and contentment he was cousin to the pine and the rock. I asked him once if he was not sometimes tired at night, after working all day; and he answered, with a sincere and serious look, ‘Gorrappit, I never was tired in my life.’ (Thoreau 110)

Thoreau has respect for this man because he is close to nature and can be compared with elements of the material world like “the pine” or “the rock.” He admires how close the man is to his work, such that he “never was tired in [his] life.” The man is more in touch with the material world as he is an “animal man.” However, Thoreau also finds that the man may be in touch with higher faculties enabled by nature. He claims that the man:

He could defend many institutions better than any philosopher, because, in describing them as they concerned him, he gave the true reason for their prevalence, and speculation had not suggested him any other... yet his thinking was so primitive and immersed in animal life, that, though more promising than a merely learned man’s, it rarely ripened to anything which can be reported. He suggested that there might be men of genius in the lowest grades of life. (Thoreau 111-2)

Thoreau is interested in this figure because he has an individual relationship with the natural world and with his own innate wildness. He is able to give “the true reason for their prevalence,” while also being able to “defend many institutions better than a philosopher.” The man provides a lesson in his ability to think in “primitive” terms and be completely absorbed in his own existence. This man qualifies as the type of person who is “awake” and that Thoreau aspires to become (Thoreau 65). In Thoreau’s account of the woodsman, the point of the story is to show how living close to non-human nature can help a person attain spirituality. By getting closer to nature, a person can achieve a better sense of the divine, even by just understanding nature itself⁴.

Thoreau features another prophet giving insight into the natural world. Thoreau describes him as:

One old man, who has been a close observer of Nature, and seems as thoroughly wise in regard to all her operations as if she had been put upon the stocks when he was a boy, and he had helped to lay her keel... I was surprised to hear him express wonder at any of Nature’s operations, for I thought that there were no secrets between them (Thoreau 232).

Thoreau’s use of this man as knowing all of Nature’s “secrets” suggests that he sees the natural world as something that is innately mysterious and needs to be understood. The man is “thoroughly wise in regard to all [Nature’s] observations” in such a way that he

⁴ However, Thoreau also specifies that because he was so “immersed in animal life,” his thoughts “rarely ripened to anything which can be reported.” He claims that, although the man’s more primitive elements hold value, they need to be coupled with some other sort of thinking beyond the animal to flourish to their full potential. Thoreau illustrates that, although working directly with nature can give greater access to “genius,” it is necessary to cultivate and ruminate on these thoughts in a way that isn’t solely primitive.

can provide this understanding. The fact that Thoreau uses prophets to help him describe elements of the natural world illustrates that nature is something that is difficult to fully comprehend or articulate.

This idea of a mysterious nature parallels Friedrich's description of the Hindu God. Friedrich suggests that the Hindu (and Thoreau-ian) God is "suffused with mystery" (Friedrich 11). He claims that, "All the elements of experience- from the most trivial to the eternal questions raised by dawn over Walden or the thousand suns of Krishna's brilliance- have yet beyond them a mysterious truth" (Friedrich 11). The assertion that a Hindu God is a mysterious God is in line with Thoreau's conception that nature has secrets. The "dawn over Walden" presents the same sense of the mystery of the divine as "the thousand suns of Krishna's brilliance" in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Thoreau's articulation of nature's mystery invites a direct comparison between Thoreau's nature and the Hindu God.

The idea and figures of the prophetic help Thoreau to provide understanding for a human's relationship with the natural world. His application of the prophetic to nature suggests that the mysteries of nature are worthy of the same type of interpretation as God. He suggests that the natural world is powerful and mysterious enough to necessitate these tools for comprehension like God or the divine in the Hindu texts.

Chapter Three- Adoption and Adaptation of Hindu Structure: Natural Metaphor

As is often common in religious texts, both the *Laws of Manu* and the *Bhagavad Gita* use natural metaphors to explain God. Religions frequently rely on natural metaphors to explain God, as nature is universally familiar. They facilitate understanding by comparing that which is familiar (nature) with that which is unfamiliar (the divine). While Hindu texts are not unique in their use of these metaphors, Thoreau specifically adapts some of their terms and comparisons, demonstrating their particular influence on his views.

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna often equates himself (a God) with nature. He claims, “I am moisture in the water, light in the sun and moon” and “sweet-smelling savor in the earth” (*Gita* 52). Water, earth, and the sun and moon are familiar, comfortable concepts for a human audience, so they facilitate understanding of his divinity. Krishna suggests that he is the integral element in these most basic aspects of the material world, providing insight into the function of God. Because water is characterized by moisture and the sun and moon are characterized by light, the reader can understand that Krishna is an integral part of the universe in the same way.

Similarly, the *Laws of Manu* frequently uses metaphors derived from nature to describe the character of a Brahman (holy man) and the roles he should play in the earthly world. An “unlearned Brahman” is “an elephant made of wood” or “an antelope made of leather” (*Laws* 37). Manu suggests that learning is as essential to the legitimacy of a Brahman as the skin is to an elephant by equating the learning of a holy man to the material of a familiar worldly object. A concept that may have been formerly challenging

to understand (the importance of education for a holy man) is clarified with a metaphorical comparison to the familiar natural world.

Thoreau was heavily reliant on metaphor both to make sense of the world around him, and to compare ideas of nature with ideas of divinity. Robert Tindol suggests that Thoreau used metaphor to “achieve a cosmos of his own seeing” (Tindol 71). This “cosmos” was a view of the world in which Thoreau worked to envision God and the universe immanent in his surroundings. He wanted to convey his vision that his environment was sublime and transcendent. Metaphor helped Thoreau come to terms with what he saw in the world and figure out how it fit into a “vision of that whole through the interconnectedness of details” (Tindol 71). For example: he claims that “time” is “but a stream I go a-fishing in” (Thoreau 71). He uses something concrete, like a stream, to understand a whole concept, like time. He saw nature as a way of understanding the spiritual and the abstract.

Thoreau relied on metaphor both to understand, and to articulate his views on the natural world. This metaphor use is similar to the structural set-up of metaphor in Hindu texts, but it differs in content. Thoreau deploys this same stylistic concept of the metaphor in the same manner, to describe the unfamiliar using a basis of the familiar. However, he frequently reverses the vehicle and the tenor of the metaphorical structure so that divinity becomes the familiar, explaining the unfamiliar (nature). By reversing the metaphors, Thoreau suggests that nature is actually the more mysterious or ineffable concept and can only be fully understood by equating it to divinity. He makes the familiar element of the metaphor (nature) the unfamiliar, and the unfamiliar (the divine) familiar.

Thoreau compares nature to divinity to help explain his observations about his environment. He explains a lake as “earth’s eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature” (Thoreau 142). In comparing the lake to something godlike and supernatural, he suggests that it supersedes the bounds of material understanding and explanation. Similarly, he suggests that the earth as a whole is “not a mere fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum like the leaves of a book, to be studied by geologists and antiquaries chiefly, but living poetry” (Thoreau 236). This use of the supernatural or something beyond humanity, like poetry, to explain a material and physical earth suggests that nature exists beyond the realm of concrete explanation⁵. Nature requires a comparison to something more abstract in order to be fully understood.

Hindu texts use metaphors regarding the sun and the moon in such a way that the natural “vehicle” explains or illustrates something about the “tenor,” characteristics, of God. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Arjoon suggests that “thy eyes” (the eyes of Krishna) are “the sun and moon” and that “as a single sun illuminateth the whole world, even so doth the spirit enlighten every body” (*Gita* 66, 76). The sun’s brilliance is used to explain God’s power. By equating the eyes of a God to the sun and the moon, a reader can understand that they have the power to light up the universe in the same way. Thoreau directly reverses this figural structure as he uses a vision of God to explain the sun and moon, while the *Bhagavad Gita* uses the sun to explain the nature of God.

⁵ Thoreau also views the idea of poetry as something that is more complex and alive than a simple text. He assumes that poetry supersedes the realm of purely human creation. By calling poetry “living” and the opposite of a “fragment of dead history,” he assumes that it is constantly evolving, instead of being simply words on a page (Thoreau 236). This perception of poetry facilitates the comparison of leaves to something more abstract.

As compared to Hindu texts, Thoreau deploys very familiar metaphors of the sun and moon, but he uses a conception of divinity to explain these objects instead of using them to explain the divine. Thoreau refers to the sun as almost godlike in claiming that it “looks on our cultivated fields and on the prairies and forests without distinction” (Thoreau 125). Similarly, he describes how the sun “kindled his fires up to the splendor of the moon” and suggests that these celestial bodies have the autonomy to “look in” (Thoreau 48, 52). By casting the sun and moon as omnipotent and transcendent with supernatural characteristics like the ability to look over people and the land, he is using a vision of God to explain them. The sun and the moon become the subject of the metaphor that is being explained by a godlike visual.

Thoreau’s ‘reversal’ of the metaphoric vehicle and tenor “glorifies common and base objects,” as Mattheisen points out, to “allow the comparison of the small things with great” (Mattheisen 113, 171). By seeing the everyday environment around him animate with some kind of supernatural or spiritual energy, Thoreau, in effect, “possess[es] the universe at home” (Mattheisen 171). He understands the supernatural or divine power of the universe through a comparison with his material world. Thoreau’s reversal of the thrust of the nature/ God metaphor is reminiscent of the previously detailed paradox between the immanent and the transcendent, in that it problematizes the relationship between physical nature and the divine. Because he views nature and the divine, the tangible and the intangible, as interwoven, Thoreau reinforces the paradox that divinity exists both immanently and transcendently. Even further, he implies that this paradox is necessary to understand both the tangible (nature) and the intangible (the divine) as he uses each to explain the other through metaphor.

As well as featuring metaphors where Thoreau reverses the vehicle and tenor to focus on nature, he also uses metaphors that use nature to explain the abstract, in a similar way to the Hindu texts. One such example is in Hindu and Thoreauvian metaphors involving seeds, soil, and plants, a less grandiose comparison than those involving the sun and the moon. In the *Bhagavad Gita* Krishna is described as “the eternal seed of all nature” (*Gita* 52) and the *Laws of Manu* suggests that the “soil” must be fertile for the seed of “divine instruction” to flourish (*Laws* 32). From the comparison, the reader gleans the idea that the self (i.e. soil) must be prepared for the germination and development of divine insight. By equating Krishna with something natural, like a seed, an abstraction is rendered concrete and comprehensible on a humble scale. Both of these texts use the concept of the seed and its growth to illustrate divine intelligence and the presence of the divine. In both instances, the natural element (the seed), the common and familiar thing, brings the more unfamiliar element, the divine, down to an earthly and human scale.

Further proof of the influence of Hinduism on Thoreau’s metaphoric structure is in his use of this same seed comparison to describe humanity. Thoreau uses the metaphor of the seed to explain how labor influences people. The seed represents qualities like “sincerity, truth, simplicity, faith, innocence” and their potential to “grow in this soil” (Thoreau 123). By equating abstract characteristics to a seed that he wishes would “sustain [him],” he is comparing the growth of human characteristics to the growth of this natural object (Thoreau 123). This correspondence illustrates Thoreau’s use of nature to discuss people, in a similar way as Hinduism uses such metaphors to discuss people.

Both natural metaphors explaining the natural, and natural metaphors explaining the spiritual are part of Thoreau's metaphoric system. Tindol suggests that Thoreau is doing what we all should do in "devis[ing] or otherwise acquir[ing] a metaphoric system for living in the natural world" (Tindol 73). He claims that Thoreau has created a method for understanding his surroundings in figuring out how divinity resides within his environment, and that this method uses metaphor to correlate the two. Both types of metaphor usage are necessary for Thoreau in allowing him to incorporate conceptions of the divine into his personal interactions with the natural world. Especially by using the divine to understand the natural, he places his environment within his own comprehension of divinity.

Thoreau's reversal of the natural metaphors used in Hindu texts suggests that he was looking for an "existential" connection between the natural and the divine, as well as a "lexical" one (Tindol 78). He is using a lexical system of comparison with metaphor to make sense of an existential connection he is experiencing between his own ideas of divinity and his observations of nature. Thoreau's linguistic, metaphoric structure illustrates his view of divinity as inherent within nature, because he requires one to view the other. By employing structures used to describe God, he is articulating his view of nature as worthy of that level of explanation. He furthers this view by using the divine to articulate his views of nature, revealing a language-based method for discussing how he sees the relationship between the two. The concept and structures associated with the divine are necessary to explain nature as it is an object worthy of its own reverence for Thoreau.

Many Thoreau scholars, such as Jim Cheney and Sreekrishna Sarma suggest that, for Thoreau, nature functions as a channel to access divinity. Transcendentalists, like Emerson, profess a “metaphysical dependence on nature” and suggest that the “relationship with the divine is not an object of distant or detached worship” (Friedman 36). They suggest that nature is a way to “lose oneself, to be relieved, rejuvenated, resurrected” (Friedman 40). Transcendentalists found the “central function of the encounter with nature [to be] spiritual” (Friedman 44). Transcendentalists, like their English and German Romantic forebears, conceived of contact with nature as contact with the divine.

However, Thoreau’s reversal of the metaphors suggests that he may be taking this connection further than do his Transcendentalist contemporaries. By using the divine to explain nature, Thoreau indicates that the divine is what is familiar to him and what is necessary to use to explain that which is more mysterious (nature). In doing so, Thoreau suggests that he was seeing nature, not as a way to access the divine, but as a way to look at the nature of nature, or to look at nature as an object worthy of its own reverence. The *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* suggests, “nature occupied a space in Thoreau’s imagination that his Christian neighbors reserved for God” (Taylor 1635). Nature was closer to actually filling the role of God for Thoreau than it was a pathway for access to the divine.

This extension of the role of nature for Thoreau in comparison to the other Transcendentalists is evident in the way he discusses the natural world as a whole. He casts nature in a role that is beyond that of a gateway, and more like that of a divine creator or God. He discusses how Nature (with a capital N) is able to “stretch forth baby

fingers on every side” and to “continually transcend and translate itself” (Thoreau 235, 232). Thoreau talks about Nature as “a congratulation” and describes a scene in which “I awoke with the impression that some question had been put to me, which I had been endeavoring in vain to answer in my sleep..._But there was dawning Nature, in whom all creatures live, looking in at my broad windows with a serene and satisfied face, and no question on her lips. I awoke to an answered question, to Nature and daylight” (Thoreau 165, 217). Having the ability to transcend humanity to answer questions, be a host for the world, and exist in a capacity separate from the material world, Nature, for Thoreau, is inherently divine or godlike.

Ultimately, Thoreau’s reversal of nature and the divine in the metaphoric structure illustrates his belief in nature’s sublimity. The fact that Thoreau was focused on understanding nature on its own, suggests that nature was not working as a gateway to the divine, but was instead worthy of the same treatment as a religious God. Both by using natural metaphors to explain nature and by using divine concepts to explain nature, Thoreau elevates the natural world to the level of God and illustrates his interest in understanding it innately. Thoreau places nature as the subject in natural metaphors traditionally used by religious texts to describe God, illustrating his view that it necessitates the same level of explanation and discussion. In this way, Thoreau casts nature as an entity worthy of its own reverence.

Chapter Four- Thoreau's Biophilia: Religious Feelings with Scientific Results

God's immanence in the material world, as articulated by the Hindu texts, provided Thoreau with a sense of nature as linked to the divine. His attempt to experience a life more in touch with the natural world stemmed from a Hindu motivation to make a life that allows the "universe" to "constantly and obediently answer... our conceptions" (Thoreau 70). He is attempting to use purely that which he observes and experiences to allow the natural world to explain itself by using itself. Thoreau, in his own words, was "anxious to improve the nick of time, and notch it on my stick too; to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and future" (Thoreau 11). He is interested in exploring how supernatural elements exist within a natural context and his observations and experiences in nature are the key to this awareness. His own motivations for living at Walden Pond stem from a Hindu premise that nature allows access to the divine. He extends this formulation to consider that nature could actually be divine, or have that degree of spiritual power.

A number of scholars have noted that Thoreau's view of nature often strays from the spiritual to the scientific. He was very preoccupied with observation and the physical principles governing the material world. Nina Baym, for example, suggests that Thoreau evolved away from his earlier notion that scientific observation always led to "transcendental ends" (Baym 5). She claims that he began to look at scientific observation as its own goal and as having meaning for the "scientist himself" (Baym 35). Thoreau ended up becoming, as scholar Robert Thorson put it, a "pioneering field scientist, who, working alone with primitive instruments and... a 'pathetic' research program, nevertheless made hundreds of astute observations and prescient instructions about the lake and its surrounding landscape" (Thorson 9). Thoreau seemed to become

more and more involved in scientific observation to the point that understanding the science of nature was a goal in itself.

However, Thoreau was not only interested in understanding nature for scientific purposes, he views it as an end in itself, possessing its own spiritual value. His observations enabled him to see nature as something that “had a temporal as well as a spatial existence, and accepted a non-human scale for this existence” (Baym 26). In using the phrase, “non-human scale,” Baym acknowledges the spiritual elements characterizing Thoreau’s conception of nature. Thoreau discovered that nature and his natural observations actually superseded the bounds of his, or any human understanding, in a way that seemed to him similar to the supernatural or the divine. He revered nature as something almost holy instead of reducing it to being merely reflective of the divine, because, with increased scientific observation, he came to realize that nature was beyond the realm of human comprehension.

Scholars thinking of Thoreau as a naturalist tend to emphasize the scientific aspect of his natural observations. This approach does not fully do justice to Thoreau’s interest in a scientific view of nature that also requires faith. Baym suggests that there was a “dichotomy in Thoreau’s work between subjective interpretation and objective reporting,” but there is not so much a dichotomy as a complementary relationship (Baym 2). This seemingly “objective” reporting was subjective for him because nature had come to fill the role of a divine entity. This scientific tilt, while visible, was not necessarily wholly “scientific” because it was always an interrogation into the sublime for Thoreau. Perhaps the most apt way to characterize his treatment of nature is to view it as

paradoxically both scientific and spiritual, his approach, like the categories, did not conform to such boundaries.

Thoreau uses the structure of religious texts, especially Hindu texts, to illustrate the omnipresent component of faith and the spiritual in his conception of nature. This, almost reverent, consideration of the natural world dovetails very closely with the definition of “biophilia” proposed by Stephen Kellert and Edward Wilson in their book, *The Biophilia Hypothesis*. The text defines biophilia as “the innate tendency to focus on life and life-like processes” (Kellert and Wilson 20). Biophilia is essentially a “human dependence on nature” that extends beyond physical need and often also fulfills “the human craving” for “spiritual meaning and satisfaction” (Kellert and Wilson 20). The text suggests that biophilics often turn to nature to fulfill their spiritual needs and that these people are dependent on nature to feel complete.

In order to truly characterize Thoreau as a biophilic by Kellert and Wilson’s estimation, one must consider the “nine valuations” they assume people use to relate to the natural world (Kellert and Wilson 58). Thoreau fits firmly into certain of these categories and differs with regard to others. The first category that applies to Thoreau is the “naturalist tendency,” which “involves an intense curiosity and urge for exploration of the natural world” (Kellert and Wilson 45). This idea of naturalism is reminiscent of Thoreau’s interest in becoming deeply involved in nature, to the extent that he claims he was “as much affected by the hum of a mosquito... as [he] could be of any trumpet that ever sang of fame” (Thoreau 64). This elevation of and fascination with the simplest actions in nature parallels the naturalist tendency of wishing to explore and understand the natural world.

Thoreau also falls in line with Keller and Wilson's "aesthetic response" which suggests that humans need nature to fulfill a need for beauty, and that being in nature is a truly "aesthetic experience" (Kellert and Wilson 49). Thoreau holds a deep appreciation for the beauty of nature as he claims "the snow lying deep on the earth dotted with young pines and the very slope of the hill on which my house is placed... transmit to the soul the wonderful and varied spectacle of this universe" (Thoreau 217). Thoreau frequently exclaims his wonder and appreciation for the beauty of nature and the way it pleases his mind and body, suggesting that a portion of his response is aesthetic.

The "symbolic" response is also characteristic of Thoreau as it entails "the development of human language" with reference to the "use of nature as a means of facilitating communication" (Kellert and Wilson 51). Thoreau's use of metaphor certainly qualifies him as using nature as a means to express his thoughts, and it enables him to understand other elements of the world through the lens of the natural. By developing a metaphoric system for describing both nature and the divine with natural metaphors, Thoreau is "facilitating communication" with his knowledge of the natural world.

Similarly, Thoreau also qualifies under the "humanistic" category as he has "feelings of deep emotional attachment to individual elements of the natural environment" (Kellert and Wilson 52). Kellert and Wilson suggest that a biophilic's relationship with nature would more closely resemble that of two people than a person to an inanimate object. Thoreau qualifies under this category as he often discusses nature as he would a friend, and claims that Nature visited him in the morning "with serene and

satisfied face, and no question on her lips” (Thoreau 217). His discussion of nature tends toward affectionate and familiar, signaling a sense of emotional attachment.

Most importantly, Thoreau fulfills the moralistic requirement of the biophilic characteristics. This valuation suggests that a biophilic has “strong feelings of affinity, ethical responsibility, and even reverence for the natural world” (Kellert and Wilson 53). The use of the term “reverence” is very reminiscent of the discussion in this essay regarding Thoreau’s tendency to elevate the natural to the level of the spiritual. The author’s use of this term invokes the language of a religious conversation in the same way Thoreau’s discussion of nature uses these terms. Kellert and Wilson allow the argument that the natural world is one that can be viewed as something holy or Godlike, by describing it as “reverent.” The invocation of a religious term in a discussion of nature both reflects Thoreau’s elevation of the natural to the level of the sublime, and also suggests that this view of the natural world has the potential to be innate in humans.

While Thoreau fits many of the categories of biophilia set down by Kellert and Wilson, the term is both accurate and inaccurate when examining his treatment of nature in his writing. On the one hand, the attributes associated with biophilia do fit him very closely and seem to explain how he came to revere nature as one would revere God. On the other hand, the term is reductive in that it suggests that one is, perhaps, naturally or innately biophilic, when it would seem that Thoreau’s biophilia was chosen, developed, and influenced by his study of scripture. To the extent that Thoreau would have accepted such a term, he would have seen it as describing an approach to life that can and should be adopted by individuals and society, like his anti-slavery convictions, a set of feelings that are both indwelling but also developable, practicable. Simply characterizing Thoreau

as “biophilic” ignores the importance of his study of scripture to his feelings for, and about, nature. The fact that he deploys scriptural language so intimately in formulating conceptions of nature suggests that they assist and complement his biophilia, and that his biophilia may not be innate, but constructed.

Thoreau represents his own intersection between “higher laws” and “wildness” as he regards nature as a spiritual entity, but his response to it is formulated through a separate discourse. He is biophilic in the sense that he elevates nature to a level of spiritual dependency, but this knowledge came from a faith in, and fascination with religious scripture. While many argue that Thoreau was experiencing a transition from spiritual to scientific, he was actually creating a hybrid faith that treated nature with reverence by the influence of religious precedent. Thoreau’s use of religious language to cast nature in the role of a “God” follows the structure of religious faith set before him, while also giving the structure a more secular subject.

The hybrid of faith and science that Thoreau represents is best summed up with his capitalization of the word “Nature.” Throughout *Walden*, Thoreau capitalizes “Nature,” giving it the same treatment as “God” in the Christian tradition, or “Krishna” in the Hindu. For instance: he claims describes a scene in which he is fishing and his “thoughts had wandered to vast and cosmogonical themes in other spheres” and he would “feel this faint jerk, which came to interrupt [his] dreams and link [him] to Nature again” (Thoreau 134). This small nod of respect is representative of the structures of faith he was conditioned to believe in and follow in his study of scripture. This small formal alteration to the way people usually treat nature in text reveals his observation of a certain number of religious linguistic tools. He follows the precedent set by traditional texts. However, it

is used to treat a “non-God” object, representing Thoreau’s casting of Nature as something sublime, spiritual, and worthy of human reverence or worship.

Conclusion

When Thoreau deploys religious language to describe the natural world, he effectively dismantles the dualism between science and religion. Thoreau suggests that the natural world unites these two seemingly dichotomous discourses by using language associated with religion to discuss a topic generally deemed “scientific.” This intersection between scientific and religious language reinforces *Walden*’s purpose as a philosophical polemic, informing its readers how they should live. Much as a preacher would address a congregation, Thoreau uses *Walden* to demonstrate the lessons that he thinks lead both to a more unmediated relationship with nature, and a more spiritual life.

Despite the fact that Thoreau emphasizes an unmediated relationship with nature, his portrayal and articulation of the nature he perceives is mediated. He uses the lens of religious discourse to comprehend and explain the natural world. It is because of this mediated response to his unmediated observations of nature that his view is applicable and comprehensible. By uniting and reconciling different discourses to discuss a human’s relationship with nature, Thoreau allows a reader to view the environment through the lens of a different kind of human practice.

Walden itself is effective and continues to be pervasive in such a wide array of conversations, from scientific discourse, to political protest, to the environmental movement, partially because it creates a hybrid between a faith conversation and the secular subject of nature. *Walden* uses the familiar language of religion to express the natural world, suggesting that nature should have the same value as a God or subject of worship. By using the terms of a religious conversation meant to convert and inform

followers, Thoreau suggests to the reader that his ethics regarding the natural world should be implemented universally.

The use of the term biophilia is especially important in discussing Thoreau's intended application of *Walden's* lessons. His appreciation of nature was rare in that it was not anthropocentric; he loved nature for nature's sake. While he occasionally used humanity to understand his environment, his purpose was to explain nature as it existed independently of man. He didn't confine it to fit a human conception of the material world; he instead used the human world to understand the natural. Thoreau elevated nature in such a way that he visibly assigned it a value system that he wished to universalize. When Thoreau describes a rock, a pond, or a pine tree, he designates a spiritual, moral value to it that extends beyond the realm of scientific discourse.

In Kellert and Wilson's text, they describe a man named Vishniac who, on looking through a microscope and observing organisms in a "scoop of pond water," proclaimed, "Here comes a little animal who is full of curiosity. He wants to learn and see more, and is forever peering around his tiny landscape" (Kellert and Wilson 15). He claims, "Some people think microscopic animals are all pretty much alike- but oh, no! They have individualities that make them different from one another, just like human beings" (Kellert and Wilson 15). Vishniac's enthusiastic declaration of the multifaceted and vital nature of that which he sees is similar to Thoreau's poetic statements about the majesty and beauty of nature. Both of these men have tapped into a view of a natural world that is inherently valuable, not simply for its purposes to man.

The ability to see a value in nature that extends "beyond our everyday perceptions" is what enables Thoreau both to apply religious structures designed to

discuss God to nature, and to create a text that invokes a faith-based method of viewing the natural world (Kellert and Wilson 16). Thoreau demonstrates the innate value of the natural world that can't be limited to merely physical or scientific observation, in adapting structures associated with the sublime or the holy. Thoreau places the natural world at the level of religious reverence, to advocate for its influence over people. He illustrates nature's innate power and sacredness to the human being.

Walden is a powerful text when considering its applications to the modern environmental movement, and, by extension, to an individual's relationship with an increasingly urbanized environment. Despite the fact that he focuses on nature's innate value, he also emphasizes the importance of being in touch with an unmediated nature for the benefit of people and societies. One of Thoreau's motivations for writing this text was the building of a railroad through the middle of his hometown (Concord) in the 1840s. This sudden urbanization sent Thoreau into a tailspin as he attempted to reconcile the industrial with the natural. His reaction to this event was to go further into his environment to preserve an unmediated relationship with the natural world. By writing *Walden*, Thoreau explains this reaction to the turbulence of incoming industrialization in such a way that he allows others to follow in these footsteps. Thoreau not only articulates his response to the threatening of his environment, he also sets a precedent for how he believes others should react to this phenomenon.

A modern reader of *Walden* can't help but be drawn in by the suggestion that nature is the key to finding not only that which can be considered spiritual or divine, but also that which can be considered "true." For those motivated by the possibility of understanding the material world, as Thoreau was, *Walden* is a powerful blueprint for the

ways nature can be understood and recognized in our humanity. Especially in modern environmental contexts, the value Thoreau places in the natural world, as a source of divinity, as an escape from industry, and as an entity ingrained in humanity, can be extended to suggest a course of action. Thoreau seems to be asking a reader to listen to the power of the natural world that can be found internally. During the first chapter of *Walden*, Thoreau calls to his readers to “learn to reawaken and to keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn” (Thoreau 65). He suggests that there is something about the natural world that enables a person to get more in touch with his/ her own humanity. Not only does this “awakening” have spiritual or religious connotations, it also implies that the natural world, or “expectation of the dawn” is necessary to living this kind of life. He specifically presents a contrast to the “mechanical aids” on which people have become reliant and claims that relationship with nature is a more effective tool for governing ourselves.

Thoreau’s assertion that nature is both ingrained in humanity, and can serve as a source of moral or spiritual guidance, stands alone as a polemic for its preservation. By emphasizing the power of the environment both as part of the human system, and as a spiritual presence, Thoreau implies an argument for its maintenance. The reverence that he suggests it deserves by equating it to a religious God suggests that human attention to the environment is critical to our existence as spiritual beings. By listening to the teachings of the text, one realizes that not only can nature unite different genres of thought and discourse, but also that by tapping into the nature that is inherently within us, we are likely to find something sublime.

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