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### Trail Guide Thoreau: An Adventure of Reinvention

“Not till we are lost...” are we free to re-establish our bearings and find where we should be (1962). Henry David Thoreau talks about the concept of being lost quite a bit in his book Walden. Is he suggesting we should get ourselves lost in the woods? While he does place value on that experience, his real meaning is that we need to lose our self-identity. This is a daunting and somewhat confusing task; luckily Thoreau takes this journey with us.

Thoreau is a loquacious trail guide, chatting as he expertly leads us on unexplored paths, letting us stumble over the twigs and stones but also holding our hands as we cross the strong creeks. Not only does he let us stumble over the twigs, but he puts them in our path for a good laugh. However, his twigs are plays on words that trip us up. With his more difficult ideas, though, he is much more considerate and often guides by experience. In his conclusion he tells us to “Be rather the...Lewis and Clarke...of your own streams and oceans...” (2039). As any considerate trail guide would do, he shows us to do exactly what he asks of us, and does not abandon us in his woods.

Not only does Thoreau call for us to explore our own worlds, but he calls us to reject our societies, with their notions and ideals about how we should be. Thoreau lets us know it is okay to stand apart from the crowd and learn to be ourselves, not just embody the identity that has been handed to us. He helps us realize that if someone does not “keep pace with his companions” it may just be that “hears a different drummer” (2041). Thoreau encourages us to hear our own drummer and even more than that, he wants us to dance to our own beat in the middle of the street and not tone ourselves down just for the comfort of others. He wants

us to 'lose the world' and in doing so we will be able to fully find and know ourselves. How can one know their own thoughts when there is constantly somebody else in their ear? Thoreau wants us to find our own little quiet corner in the world and through that start to discover who we truly are as individual people.

Why does Thoreau call us to stand apart from society? He realizes that men have become Men and are no longer striving to be individuals, but instead, working as parts of a whole to further, even more, the power of society. In doing so, a certain goodness and earnestness has been lost and a sort of mob mentality towards all things, has become the norm. He wants us to escape those that will "pursue...with their dirty institutions" and slip through the fingers as they try to "constrain [you]...to belong to their desperate odd-fellow society" (1962). Thoreau, is not against all societies however. Throughout Walden he expresses how he has made his own type of society among the animals surrounding him. The difference being, that they belong to nature and are pure and honest creatures, whereas, our societies have become cliques and rules and boxes we have to fit in or be cast out. While many look at Thoreau as a loner, he really is an activist for man, just a protestor of the Men we have become.

There is an underlying reason that Thoreau is so passionate about making sure we learn to become ourselves and trust our own instincts instead of relying on our established societies to point the way. He realizes that we are a new country, and that America has to establish its own identity among the world. He wants America to follow in our hopefully new, individualized and strong, footsteps:

Some are dinning in our ears that we Americans...are intellectual dwarfs compared with the ancients, or even the Elizabethan men. But what is that to the purpose? A living dog is better than a dead lion. (2041)

While we may be young and not as established, that does not diminish our thoughts and desires and the direction of our country. As dogs, we have life in us and can continue to grow and change and learn and continue to become better, whereas the dead lion no longer has anything to give. Therefore, lets let the dead lie and we will go about our own journey, no longer in competition with the lion, but realizing we are the only progressing one, we will lead our lives purposefully, as individuals, and as a great new country.

There are many unique aspects to Thoreau's writing. A very important one is humor. He paints very comical pictures of what he observes in the world, especially when he looks at us. In one instance he compares us to prairie dogs, sitting on our haunches, mouths open looking slow minded, and only stirring to run to a neighbor and gossip. While some may take this style as cruel and use it to further perpetrate his antisocial reputation, it is really a way for us to see how ridiculous we can sometimes be. He puts a mirror up to our behavior and, in quite humorous language, points out our flaws. Along with this technique, Thoreau has a pattern of changing language. He builds a sentence and, interrupting your flow of reading, he will throw in a little twig and trip you up. One example of this is seen in the conclusion. Thoreau starts "the surface of the earth is soft and impressible..." (2040). He sets you up to expect that word to be 'impressionable', meaning easily influenced but

instead alters it to ‘impressible’, which paints a firmer picture of a usually hard surface being altered by something even stronger; the impressible earth Thoreau describes seem to be much stronger than us very impressionable people. Is he doing this just to laugh at us stumbling? Maybe Thoreau’s sense of humor is dark enough to enjoy our discomfort, but there is a method to his madness. In changing words he is making sure we are paying attention to every single thing he says. As soon as he thinks we may be getting too comfortable in our reading, he throws a stone in our way and sees if we are agile and aware enough to regain our footing.

Thoreau’s form is very unusual and keeps us on our toes. His form calls for change by shifting our perceptions and constantly redirecting our attention. His content, similarly, keeps us aware of everything he wants from us, which is quite a lot. He calls for the hardest thing possible, change. He wants us to forget all that we “know” and then, as a blank canvas, we can start to build our own character from scratch. From there, our strong individuality will leak into our societies and then into our country. America was created in the idea that every single person matters, but that can only be true if we realize, that as our own individual selves, we do indeed matter. We are not just gears in a machine. We are not dead lions.