Questions to tourists stopped by Walden pond: Waterscapes, words and literary tourism

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to analyze the meaning of Walden Pond, a real body of water between Concord and Lincoln, Massachusetts, as it appears in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854). This pond is first and foremost a place on whose shores the writer decided to live between 1845 and 1847. Secondly, the literary representation of the lake functions as a symbol of simplicity, of observation and knowledge, and, in this sense, I seek to investigate how Thoreau's words about the Walden pond have contributed to the (trans)formation of readers' and tourists' minds. Moreover, my interest is to draw from works about literary tourism and to see how literary words construct the tourist vision, as "in literary tourism, narratives act as the primary source of information about a place, stimulating motivation to travel" (Charapan & Mikulich, 2019). Thus, my proposal aims to show that because water is characterized as mirrorlike, windowlike, and with no definite shape it is a fertile metaphor for poetic imagery. Additionally, to evince that (literary) words, place, waterscapes and tourists interrelate in the forging of (new) consciousnesses, better suited to practice reverence for our common home.

Keywords

Henry David Thoreau • Walden pond • Literature • Literary tourism • Environment

1. "Out of his daily niche, [the tourist's] potential for perception increases"

The title of this article comes from a poem by William Stanley Merwin: "Questions to tourists stopped by a pineapple field", published in *Opening the hand*, in 1983. The American poet (1927-2019) lived from the late 1970s onwards on an old pineapple plantation in Hawaii, a place that had been destroyed by commercial sugar and pineapple plantations, but which he restored to its original rainforest state. Related to this experience, the poem portrays human alienation from nature and natural environments, the death of native culture, lack of understanding of native environments and change of native cultures, elements which, according to the poet, evince not only natural loss, but historic loss as well. The poem in its content and form illuminates (and criticizes) Euro-Americans who go to Hawaii for industrial or recreational purposes without taking into consideration the history of the place and its relation to native people; ultimately, the poet's aim is that tourists and readers question themselves about the way the contemporary world reads nature and the relationships between environments and the people who inhabit them. Composed by one hundred verses, the poem is a long questioning about how much tourists know or care about the places they visit, what pictures they take, and what they invest their money in. An example:

> how do you like these pineapple fields
> have you ever seen pineapple fields before

> do you know whether pineapple is native to the islands
> do you know whether the natives ate pineapple
> do you know whether the natives grew pineapple
> do you know how the land was acquired to be turned into pineapple fields
> do you know what is done to the land to turn it into pineapple fields
> do you know how many months and how deeply they plow it
> do you know what those machines do are you impressed
> do you know what's in those containers are you interested (Merwin, 2005: 248)

According to Merwin, an advocate of sustainable communities, in which people and environment coinhabit in a balanced way, both the reader and the tourist should pay attention to the places they visit because from that attentiveness may result the conviction that places and human destiny are intimately connected. If this idea is recognized by biologists and ecologists, my argument is that literary works are also an important tool in that recognition. The incisiveness on the relationship between human and natural environments is the core of ecocriticism, the critical field which intends to understand the many ways humans interact with the nonhuman environment, and how humans affect and are affected by the nonhuman. Reading environmentally is, according to Lawrence Buell, a way of conveying how "literary accomplishment illuminate[s] the history of public taste and help[s] to shape its underlying values" (Buell, 1996: 22). In this sense, I argue that reading environmentally informed works also represents an instrument for the individual tourist to recognize that the tourism sector needs to incorporate the principles of sustainable development.

Parallel to the general ideas postulated by Merwin's poem and the theoretical framework of ecocriticism, my particular aim is to understand the way these issues are relevant to thinking about literary tourism, namely the power of words to challenge and change the human mind. Literary tourism demonstrates, Ann Lund states, that "tourism destinations, literary or not, are not merely places of consumption. The gaze is always complicated and offers a glimpse into a variety of narratives: past, present and future" (2019: 2). Thus, the ultimate goal of this reflection is to think about sustainable tourism based on the assumption that from an individual encounter with a text a more informed perspective on the (natural) world may emerge. Hopefully, reading "espouses *vigilance*" (Felski, 2008: 12), that is, tourists would be encouraged to critical reflection, resulting in a more responsible tourism.

As such, my intention is to illustrate how Henry David Thoreau's writings on Walden Pond, a lake to which he dedicates a chapter in *Walden*, published in 1854, may contribute to the growing consciousness that literature is an important element in the tourism system: "literature not only stimulates the desire to explore the imaginary locations but also generates new textual and visual artefacts of recent experiences, adding an extra metalevel to the literary landscape." (Charapan & Mikulich, 2019: 15). Moreover, focusing on waterscapes, I am also taking into consideration the way literary texts help to shape the readers' and tourists' minds, forging (a new) consciousness about the importance of taking care of our common home. At a time when water is the center of human endeavor because of its significance as an increasingly precious resource to the survival of life on Earth, it is important that waterscapes be analyzed not only according to scientific terms but in their cultural, spiritual, and mythic dimensions (Devine & Grewe-Volpp, 2008: 3).

In this sense, I contend that Thoreau's naturalist writings about water and waterscapes function as an invitation to the contemporary reader to follow new paths of attention and apprenticeship in relation to nature, and namely to nature-based tourism, based on the conviction that "literature changes our understanding of ourselves and the world as well as its often visceral impact on our psyche" (Felski, 2008: 16). In this context, I suggest that through the agency of words, leisure and travel can be understood as moments that encourage reflection and change, and in which the tourist may be changed, as Paul Shepard in *Man in the landscape* attests:

> Like the sportsman, the tourist moves in a sphere which has no immediate connection to the conduct of his daily business. He observes the pattern of stream life in which lives the fish, and the whole watershed may assume some significance. The beauty of his activity is its complete immediate uselessness and its ultimate value for the survival of a culture and civilization". (2002: 156)

Shepard insists: "Out of his daily niche, [the tourist's] potential for perception increases. [...] His possibilities know no bounds, for he is on a pilgrimage or he is wayfaring, the best thing for his soul (2002: 156). Shepard's assertion is in accord with Thoreau's purpose as a nature writer: for him, whatever takes place in mental or verbal space is as important as what occurs in physical space: "to

get men to see their universe symbolically, to read beyond its lessons of matter-of-fact, was one of the most liberating things Thoreau had to offer" (Paul, 1976: 15). In turn, Sherman Paul's claim is attuned to Anniken Greve's vision of the possibilities tourism represents to human fulfillment: "as tourists, ambling and idling, we might open ourselves to the environment and ourselves (our sheer being) in virtue of the very *lack* of purposes and missions. As tourists, we are normally not here to *accomplish* anything, beyond simply *being here*, in the richest possible way." (Greve, 2019: 86). As a result of what has been stated, I agree with Bill McKibben: in the twenty-first century, it is "most crucial to read *Walden* as a practical environmentalist's volume, and to search for Thoreau's heirs [...], those trying to change our relation to the planet" (Thoreau, [1854] 2004: viii). In the radical consumer society in which we live, to read what he has to say about the Walden waterscape will help twenty-first century tourists to raise essential questions about the way they want to live. Moreover, Thoreau, as naturalist and interpreter of nature, is relevant in the sense that, catching the traveler's and the reader's attention, he opens up a space away both from routine pathways and petrified perceptions and mainstream consumerism.

2. Walden Pond: "Lying between the earth and the heavens, it partakes of the color of both"

A well-known American author, Thoreau wrote everlasting literary nonfiction works, namely *A week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, and *Walden*, texts in which he portrays his love for nature. He records his affection for the world by walking and observing the environs of Concord, Massachusetts. As Robert Richardson, critic and biographer, affirms: "In the entire range of American literature there is no stronger tie between a writer and a place than the tie between Henry David Thoreau and Concord". He explains:

> [Thoreau] grew up in Concord, returned there after college and, except for a brief period, he lived there all his life. Concord was his world, the pivot of his emotional, intellectual, and physical life. His attachment to Concord gave his writing a sense of place unsurpassed in American writing. Even Thoreau's characteristic form, the excursion, derives in part from the powerful centripetal pull of Concord on Thoreau, on his need to return home after every outing. (Richardson, 2000: 12)

Thoreau's methodology consisted of cross-pollinizing his readings and his affection for nature with scientific modes of measuring, calculating, and surveying, a combination that Laura Dassow Walls, acknowledging Alexander von Humboldt's influence on Thoreau, refers to as 'empirical holism' (Dassow, 1995, quoted by Rossi, 2000: 29). In a time in which Thoreau's writings are seen as portraying important bounds between human beings and place, it is my aim to present his words on Walden Pond's waterscape as an example of his way of living attentively and of emphasizing human need, through the contact with nature, to purify both the eye and the soul.

In "Ponds", the ninth chapter of the seventeen sections of *Walden*, and thus structurally central to the work, Thoreau portrays different ponds in the area of Concord, namely White Pond, Sandy Pond and Goose Pond, which, together with Concord River, are his "water privileges" (Thoreau, [1854] 2004: 186). However, it is Walden Pond that interests him most, a natural body of water which Thoreau visits every day in his solitary excursions during a fourteen-month period from 1845 to 1847. According to his description, he used to spend "the hours of midnight fishing from a boat by moonlight, serenaded by owls and foxes, and hearing from time to time, the creaking note of some unknown bird close at hand. These experiences were very memorable and valuable [...],—anchored in forty feet of water" (Thoreau, [1854] 2004: 165). During those moments of leisure and pleasure, his "thoughts [...] wandered to vast and cosmogonal themes in other spheres" (Thoreau, [1854] 2004: 166). His passion for nature led him to build himself a cabin and live near the shores of Walden Pond, a point for observing natural phenomena but also a place from where to articulate deeper universal truths based on what he observed and thought. He makes his point when he refers: "I have spent many an hour, when I was younger, floating over its surface as the zephyr willed [...]. Many a forenoon have I stolen away, preferring to spend thus the most valued part of the day; for I was rich, if not in money, in sunny hours and summer days" (Thoreau, [1854] 2004: 181).

Thoreau observes and describes Walden Pond based on objective information: "a clear and deep green well, half a mile long and a mile and three quarters in circumference, and [containing] about sixty-one and a half acres: a perennial spring in the midst of pine and oak woods, without any visible inlet or outlet except by the clouds and evaporation" (Thoreau, [1854] 2004: 166); "the sixth of March, 1846, the thermometer having been up to 65° or 70° some of the time" (Thoreau, [1854] 2004: 173); "There have been caught in Walden, pickerel [...], perch and pouts, [...] shiners, chivins or roach, [...]

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a very few breams, and a couple of eels" (Thoreau, [1854] 2004: 174); "frogs and tortoises [...] ducks and geese" (Thoreau, [1854] 2004: 175). Asking his readers to pay attention, he portrays the waters of Walden as possessing two colors at least, one when viewed at a distance, and another, closer at hand: "Walden is as blue at one time and green at another, even from the same point of view. Lying between the earth and the heavens, it partakes of the color of both" (Thoreau, [1854] 2004: 167). If Walden Pond reveals itself a place for communion with the natural world, it also stands for an image of stability as "nations come and go without defiling it" (Thoreau, [1854] 2004: 178), and a mirror "which no stone can crack" (Thoreau, [1854] 2004: 178), reflecting the thoughts and considerations Thoreau brings to it. Accordingly, the narrator sees the waterscape of Walden Pond as more than a mere elemental sign in the landscape: "A lake is the landscape's most beautiful and expressive feature. It is earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature" (Thoreau, [1854] 2004: 176).

However, whenever Thoreau writes about the purity of water, he aims at calling attention to human goodness: "the cars never pause to look at it; yet I fancy that the engineers and firemen and brakemen, and those passengers who have a season ticket to see it often, are better men for the sight" (Thoreau, [1854] 2004: 183). And also: "Many men have been likened to it, but few deserve that honor" (Thoreau, [1854] 2004: 182). In another passage he highlights the spiritual meaning of the lake:

> [Men] who never *saw* it, who never bathed in it, who never loved it, who never protected it, who never spoke a good word for it nor thanked God that he had made it. [...] him who thought only of its money value; whose presence perchance cursed all the shore; who exhausted the land around it and would fain have exhausted the waters within it. (Thoreau, [1854] 2004: 185)

These statements illustrate the ultimate meaning of Thoreau's words on writing about his beloved landscape; paraphrasing Anniken Greve, both landscapes and waterscapes are an exercise both in perception and reflection, making us see our dependence on the fragile equilibrium of nature (2019: 91). Moreover, Thoreau's observation of natural facts such as the transformation of water into ice and then, in spring, the melting of the pond, the ice-thaw-flux, is an important metaphor to show what was vital to him: "to pass from a lower to a higher form of life, from fixidity to fluidity [...], from the innocence of youth to the wisdom of maturity, from larval sensuality to aerial purity" (Paul, 1976: 35).

Most importantly, Thoreau's observations occupy a special place in the American imagination not only because Thoreau lived there, but because he wrote convincingly about it. And because of that, his influence continues, and his works are used today to raise consciousness about the fragility of natural ecosystems, and to foster sensitivity towards natural landscapes in general. Also, Thoreau´s life and work serve as an example of a life lived "deliberately", one that would "front only the essential facts of life" (Thoreau, [1854] 2004: 85), but, additionally, it has contributed to the preservation of large parts of the Walden Pond area from excessive human use and, therefore, he is considered to have contributed to the public interest in nature preservation. Consequently, Thoreau's role is highly relevant when one considers his connection to nature, to the preservation and to caring for place. In addition, his work has foreground the nature writing literary tradition, a genre which is related to travel writing and, thus, to literary tourism. The detailed observations on the natural environment of Walden Pond lead us to better understand the link between language and tourism, as exposed by Anniken Greve: "What uses of language might help promote environmentally responsible tourism?" (2019:83). Greve reminds us that some writers are strongly connected with places and that their writing conveys that relationship persuasively, for the places portrayed also translate emotions about those places. The result is that the literary tourist will deepen his attention and care for the places he reads about. Greve sees it as "a reopening of our original openness. [...] a possibility [that is] more available to us in foreign places than at home, and more so if we are *tourists* in this foreign place than if we visit the place for work or with a mission" (2019: 86).

Thus, as examined above, Thoreau's passages about the waters of Walden Pond serve not only to redirect the reader's attention – and the tourist's eye – to the natural environment but to contribute to the deepening of his/her thought as the water imagery is also "a fertile breeding ground for metaphor" (Papa, Jr., 2000: 72). As I have highlighted, the waterscape is a place for Thoreau-the-scientist to get to know the natural world better, but also in the waters of the pond he sees himself, the artist trying to make sense of and understand the world. Thus, the waterscapes near which Thoreau lives "do much not only to reinforce the consciousness [he] brings to his [...] observations of nature, but to shape such consciousness as well" (Papa, Jr., 2000: 78). Hopefully, his words on the Walden waterscape will impact the tourist's concern about water resources, making

him/her wonder about water-related problems such as potable water, pollution, and justice, thus showing that literature and tourism are not only leisure and, thus, not completely separated from science and politics, that is, separate from human life.

3. "Tourism is, after all, a semiotic system that writes significance onto the landscape"

Currently, and through the strenuous efforts of many people, Walden Pond remains an attractive place, open to the public: "If you get there early in the morning and before the crowd arrives, it is still possible to experience it as Thoreau did" (Richardson, 2000: 22). For instance, a visit to the "Walden Pond State Reservation" tells us that in April 2022, besides several activities related to the Visitor Center, on Sunday, tourists and visitors may look for signs of spring; the program informing that one should "Use [our] senses, look for signs, and listen to sounds of spring as Walden awakens on this easy one-mile guided stroll in the woods with a Park Interpreter". But one can also "Discover how Thoreau's influence has grown to inspire generations of conservationists to protect our natural resources" and children are invited to discover "through stories, songs, and activities how different types of Walden birds lay their eggs in different places", or to "Explore Walden's ephemeral spring pools".[1] By signaling this information I intend to state that Thoreau's influence is real and that his writings are an important element to take into consideration when tens of thousands continue to make annually what Lawrence Buell terms "The Thoreauvian Pilgrimage" to Walden Pond (1996: 311). The journalist Sophie Yeo has recently confirmed that: "In the 1920s, Walden Pond started to become a popular recreational site for swimmers and tourists, who were drawn to its literary and philosophical significance, as well as to its natural beauty and crystalline waters (plus its proximity to Boston)". However, she claims, due to the great number of visitors and tourists the waters are now much more polluted, and according to scientists, it looks like climate change "is starting to have an unwelcome and unexplained hand in the growing murkiness of the pond, introducing a new kind of plankton to the water. Also, they fear that warmer weather will mean more day trippers from Boston in the future".[2] On the other hand, Daniel Bono, as a member of a tourist group visiting Walden Pond, states: "our roles as tourists has given us the opportunity to, in the wake of questioning authenticity, escape the everyday mode of being, and situate ourselves in a performative framework that uses *communitas* to talk about a space that has cultural significance. This cultural renewal at Walden Pond showed us that our conversations led us to authenticity, at the very place that Thoreau found it as well" (Bono, 2008: 74).

In this context, we can better understand Robert Sattelmeyer's words on the reasons why people choose to go to Walden Pond: that happens not only because "Walden is a literary shrine but also a cultural site that provides a focal point for a series of environmental concerns and beliefs that continue to be central to [American] collective social life" (2000: 235), but despite the pressures of swimmers, picknickers, and pilgrims, because "thanks both to reforestation and the power of Walden's rhetoric, today's Walden Pond resembles the Walden Pond of the book more than the actual Walden Pond of 1845 did" (Sattelmeyer, 2000: 242-3). These thoughts mirror Barbara Schaff's statement about the meaning of literary trails; according to Schaff, "the sites may be imaginary, but they are real places as well and they can be signified by tourists by performative articulations of all sorts of imagined connections between text, place, and author. Tourism is, after all, a semiotic system that writes significance onto the landscape" (Schaff, 2011: 179-180). In other words, following the steps of an author comprises an active involvement, "enabling tourists to articulate different cultural values and desires" (Schaff, 2011: 180).

In conclusion, I would like to convene Merwin's questions to tourists once more—"do you know," "are you impressed," "are you interested,"— for these interrogations epitomize what we, as tourists, should ask ourselves; in addition, we should accept the moments of pause these questions offer as opportunities which ideally help us to halt the destruction of the natural world, "the great thinning" of our natural world (2015: 105), as Michael McCarthy puts it. The leisure time offered by touristic activities, and the intellectual space offered by literary reading about the places to visit, act as an open door to a more sustainable Tourism, as claimed by The One Planet Sustainable Tourism Programme.[3]

1 See **https://www.mass.gov/locations/walden-pond-state-reservation**

2 See **https://psmag.com/environment/can-walden-pond-be-saved**

3 See **https://www.unwto.org/sustainable-development/one-planet**

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It is interesting that James Guthrie affirms that Thoreau's great contribution "was to see the landscape that no longer existed, or rather, the landscape that always exists, but which the limited temporal perception of humankind normally prevents it from seeing." Ultimately, Guthrie maintains, Thoreau "achieved an insight into the rhythms and currents of deep time" (2001: 233). Influenced by his writings, both readers and tourists can become companions on his search for springs that never fail. The texts resulting from his excursions along river and lake shores show that it is utterly important to care about place, as Paul Shepard reminds us: "Travel is broadening because of the nature not of travel, but of the traveler. He is apt to be a boob, but he may be the hope of mankind" (2002: 156). As a literature scholar interested in ecological thinking and in the way this critical perspective articulates with literary tourism, I have to agree with Lawrence Buell that, if rhetoric considerations are important, we should also consider ethics for it will lead us to developing a mature environmental concern (1996: 267). In this sense, we should pay attention to what Thoreau has to say to tourists stopped by Walden Ponds:

> White Pond and Walden are great crystals on the surface of the earth, Lakes of Light. [...]. They are too pure to have a market value; they contain no muck. How much more beautiful than our lives, how much more transparent than our characters, are they! We never learned meanness of them. [...] Nature has no human inhabitant who appreciates her. The birds with their plumage and their notes are in harmony with the flowers, but what youth or maiden conspires with the wild luxuriant beauty of Nature? ([1854] 2004: 188)

Thoreau's questions throughout *Walden*, and challengingly summarized by Bill McKibben: "How much is enough?" (2004: xi), and "How can I hear my own heart?" (2004: xvi) are attuned to Greve's: "How can tourism be conceptualized as an environmentally responsible activity?", "Is there a positive role for tourism to play in developing environmental awareness?" (2019: 83). It seems easy enough to account for the potential downsides of tourism on both the local and the global environment. Yet, the United Nations Environmental Programme aside from the environmental impacts of tourism, demonstrates how tourism can contribute to environmental conservation: "Tourism has the potential to increase public appreciation of the environment and to spread awareness of environmental problems when it brings people into closer contact with nature and the environment", and also: "Tourism can significantly contribute to environmental protection, conservation and restoration of biological diversity and sustainable use of natural resources".[4] In this regard, Thoreau's words about the healing power of water both to our bodies and souls and the practice of a sustainable tourism walk hand in hand, helping to sensitize the reader's and tourist's gaze to the importance of water and waterscapes, searching for a more symbiotic sensibility towards our increasingly endangered common home.

4 See **https://www.gdrc.org/uem/eco-tour/envi/four.html**

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