

English Extension 2
Major Work

“YOU’RE NOT AN
INDENTURED SERVANT” –
The Cultural Intertextuality of
Romanticism

Centre No. – 146
Student No. – 11425690

**“YOU’RE NOT AN INDENTURED SERVANT” - The Cultural Intertextuality
of Romanticism**

Thoreau’s philosophies of individualism and independence can be predominantly explored via the examination of his non-fictional text Walden and Civil Disobedience and Weir’s film, Dead Poet’s Society. Keating’s comment to his class in Dead Poet’s Society that “you’re not an indentured servant” focuses the concept of individualism over the repressive dominant ideologies of Welton Academy and its conservative values of “Honour”, “Excellence”, “Discipline” and “Tradition”. Keating’s challenge to his students to “seize the day” as they stand at the glass cabinet in the corridor presents the necessity for individualism and independence beyond conventional Establishment discourse. Other Romantic texts such as Michael Gow’s Away, Wordsworth’s and Browning’s poetry foreground the importance of spiritual well-being. Thomas Jefferson’s Declaration of American Independence has become a philosophical paradigm for twentieth century discourses on human freedom.

Thoreau defined himself as

“... a mystic, a transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher
to boot”.

Just as his heritage was mixed, his philosophy of life combined diverse strains.

Predominantly individualistic, Thoreau’s great interest was to

“observe what transpires, not in the street, but in the heart
of me!”

It is believed by some that Thoreau went to live at Walden Pond because he was a

hermit or a recluse, or because he simply hated his fellow man. However, his reasons for departing society for the natural world are sincere – to honour his brother, John Thoreau Jnr. On January 11, 1842, his brother died of lock-jaw, and it was this death that prompted Henry to go to Walden Pond. Thoreau wanted to “live deliberately”, so built a simple cabin at Walden Pond. He explains in Walden and Civil Disobedience:

“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die discover that I had not lived”.

Henry left his nearby town of Concord to reside at Walden Pond on July 4th, 1845, Independence Day. It can be speculated that this date represents Thoreau’s personal declaration of independence from society. It must also be considered that July 3rd was his brother’s birthday, and by leaving for Walden on July 4th, Thoreau would have spent his first full day at Walden Pond on the anniversary of John’s birthday. This idea is supported in Walden And Civil Disobedience:

“When I first took up my abode in the woods, that is, began to spend my nights as well as days there, which, by accident, was on Independence Day, on the fourth of July, 1845...”

Although many believe Thoreau was a recluse, he was no stranger to society while he lived at Walden Pond. He participated in frequent dinners with family and friends, and the curious neighbour on occasions visited him at his cabin. Thoreau explains

“I had three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for

friendship, three for society”.

It was while living alone at Walden Pond that Thoreau developed and tested his transcendental philosophy of individualism. This theme is recontextualised and appropriated effectively in Dead Poet’s Society. Individualism is the central theme in Weir’s film as it is responsible for allowing the characters to explore their own humility without expectation and in sheer wonderment of discovering their inner-selves and souls.

This theme is immediately portrayed in Keating’s entrance into the English classroom of Welton Academy. He walks briskly to the door, whistling exuberantly, indicating for the boys to follow him to a picture of long-dead past students in a show case. It is this scene where Keating initiates the Romantic discourse of “seize the day” and “make their lives extraordinary”. It is this effective impression on the boys that brings about the revival of the Dead Poet’s Society as the boys begin to realise that to “seize the day” they must endeavour to reach their full potential, lest they become “food for worms”.

Keating communicates to his class that

“I was not the mental giant you see before you, but the intellectual equivalent of a ninety-eight pound weakling”

He intimates this after he instructs the boys to address him as “O Captain, my Captain” (Whitman), suggesting his own individualism as he perhaps regards himself as the boys spiritual mentor, as it will be he who teaches them the true meaning of “Carpe Diem”.

However, conflict arises in Keating's individualism when he instructs the boys to "rip out the entire introduction to the preface of 'Understanding Poetry'". Mr McAllister, a didactic, autocratic colleague witnesses this unorthodox act and later attempts to persuade Keating that his teaching methods are misguided. He says

"Show me the heart of unfettered dreams, and I'll show you a happy man",

to which Keating retaliates with his own individual philosophical response (somewhat influenced by Thoreau's ideologies)

"Only in his dreams can man be truly free".

Keating has related to his class that

"We don't read and write poetry because it's cute, we read and write poetry because we are members of the human race, and the human race is filled with passion...
... medicine, law... these are noble pursuits necessary to sustain life, but beauty, love, this is what we stay alive for".

Issues of imagination convolutes with the entire theme of individualism, and it is once again, Keating who idealises this concept impressionably:

"We must constantly look at things in a different way".

Simultaneously, portraying an archetypal example, he stands on the desk and indicated for the boys to follow his example. Keating advises his class to

“trust your beliefs are unique”,

hence the renewal of the Dead Poet’s Society allows the boys to employ all that Keating has ‘dangerously’ taught them at their meetings. He suggests that diverse perspectives of the world must be embraced to truly comprehend ‘what really is’. We must disengage ourselves from the formulaic and ideological notions of being and allow our hearts to lead.

Walden and Civil Disobedience focuses on the concept of self-knowledge. Thoreau finds this knowledge by living alone in the woods. He

“never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude”.

However Thoreau does not advocate this lifestyle for everyone:

“I would not have anyone adopt my mode of living, each should find his own way, not his neighbours or his parents”,

(perhaps as Keating endeavours for all to “seize the day”, hence Thoreau can perhaps be considered as a polemicist in relation to Keating’s diverse philanthropy). Thoreau does not encourage all people to find some way to learn more about themselves and the world and environment surrounding them, hence

“strike out and find new ground”,

which Keating expresses to his class in Dead Poet’s Society. The character in Dead Poet’s Society which is perhaps most influenced by Keating’s notions of individualism and independence is Neil Perry. Neil is most impressionable to

Keating's philosophies largely due to the clutches of his father's authoritarianism, which we are introduced to at the film's beginning, when Neil contests his father's instruction to drop some extra-curricular activities:

“Don't dispute me in public”,

is his father's response, which immediately exposes his autocratic and publicly revered characteristics. It is Neil's internal solitude and isolation that impresses him to “strike and find new ground”, and “seize the day”.

Perhaps Keating and Neil are spiritually and aesthetically connected by their sense of internal isolation – this is portrayed of Neil due to his father's autocratic demeanour and the patriarchal oppressiveness of the Perry household (which stifles Neil's aestheticism), and Keating's ostracism is evident within Welton's school community where we see him peering dejectedly out his room window, and by McAllister's exclamation that his teaching methods are unorthodox. Perhaps it is Keating's and Neil's solitude that defines their capacities for individual freedom and desire for independence. Neil learned that “nothing's impossible”, and took advantage of Keating's exclamation that

“You're not an indentured servant.

Keating advised through Thoreau that

“most men lead lives of quiet desperation”,

and pleaded to the boys not to resign themselves to that, and suggested they should be “living deep” and sucking out all the “marrow of life”. Neil's “quiet desperation” and internal self-conflict is embodied in his suicide. He experienced the parameters of

'truly living' – he "seized the day", perhaps reflected in his selfless death. A concept expressed in Walden And Civil Disobedience is implicit in Neil's death; that 'each man should save himself and all would be saved'. This is the essential nexus between Thoreau's Walden and Civil Disobedience and Dead Poet's Society.

Walden and Civil Disobedience is Thoreau's response to a multitude of questions presented to him as a result of living two years, two months and two days in his small cabin at Walden Pond. A little more than a year into Thoreau's excursion to Walden Pond, he needed to get his shoe repaired. As he was leaving Concord, the town constable, Sam Staples, asked Thoreau to pay his poll tax – he was intentionally several years behind paying his tax, and flatly refused to pay it when asked, as he objected to the use to the revenues of this poll tax. The revenues were used to help finance the United State's war with Mexico, and supported the enforcement of slavery laws.

Since Thoreau refused to pay his tax or have it paid for him, Staples was required to take him to gaol. During that evening while Thoreau was in gaol, it was heard that someone paid his tax (believed to be his Aunt Maria). Thoreau was outraged by this knowledge and wanted to remain in gaol, arguing that since it wasn't he himself who paid the tax he still deserved to be in gaol. That evening in gaol prompted Thoreau to write one of the most famous and political essays ever. It is in "Civil Disobedience" that Thoreau asks all of us to question our actions and the actions of our state. He writes:

"Unjust laws exist; shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavour to amend them, and obey them until we have

succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once?...”

This situation delineates Thoreau’s desire for individuality and promotion of independence within his society – he is espousing the ideology of civil disobedience when confronted by and impinging dominant culture (authorities in Concord). This act is demonstrative of Thoreau’s thoughts on civil disobedience, and is also more economically connected to “striking out and finding new ground”, or “trusting your beliefs are unique. Jefferson’s Declaration of the USA clearly indicates their sentiments:

“We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with inherent and inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organising it’s power in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness”.

As Thoreau got older, his attentions turned more towards the observing and recording of the natural history in Concord. He kept thorough journals of natural history and the citizens of Concord regarded him as the town naturalist and would ask him various questions regarding nature. Thoreau is considered by many scholars as the father of American conservation and preservation movements. “Walking” is Thoreau’s essay heralding his ideas of conservation and preservation. In this essay he claims

“To preserve wild animals implies generally the creation of a forest for them to dwell in or resort to”,

and,

“...in wildness is the preservation of the world”.

William Wordsworth poem “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour”, is about the ways in which observing natural beauty can deepen human pleasures and spiritual awareness, is a comparison between a peaceful rural scene and the noise and pace of the city – hence Thoreau’s residence at Walden Pond, and the importance of sharing the joy of nature with others – in this case with the speaker’s sister, and in comparison to Walden and Civil Disobedience, Thoreau is sharing his experience in living and learning about nature in the woods, with the responders to his text. “Tintern Abbey” suggests that nature

“...can so inform
the mind that is within us, so impress
with quietness and beauty, and so feed
with lofty thoughts...”

that the “dreary intercourse of daily life” will not have any lasting impact on a person’s state of mind. The speaker takes on the tone of a wise teacher (perhaps indicative of Keating) when he advises his companion that when she matures she will remember his “exhortations” and they will comfort her in troubled times.

The suggestion that nature can “inform” and “impress” is perhaps what makes the Dead Poet’s Society meetings so impressionable and effective, as there is an obvious relationship with the boys and the environment. They congregate in a cave, caressed by the night air while they engage in reading poetry and telling stories and nature’s imperturbably darkness. The cave is a primitive and ancestral symbol of man’s connection with nature and communal past – a tribal connectedness (compared to the disconnectedness the boys feel in the claustrophobic world of the school establishment). The viewer would remember a similar contrast between these two worlds in the depiction of the ducks in flight, and their careful juxtaposition to the chaotic flight of stairs of the boys ascending and descending. An analogy can be drawn between the cave and Walden Pond, in that they both represent a spiritual retreat beyond the confines and strictures of society. The use of light in Thoreau’s descriptions of the pond, as with the filmic use of light in the cave sequences become metaphors for transcendence.

“The light which puts out or eyes is darkness to us. Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star”.

The Romantic symbolism of light is omnipresent throughout both texts adds both a dimension of interiority and the presence of the empirical world.

“The inner light is like the inner awareness the Thoreau [and Weir] is attempting to reveal to the reader... This world of nature is but a means of inspiration for us to know ourselves”.¹

¹ <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/walden/section13.html>

Spiritual contrast is one of the pivotal images in Neil's familial relationships. It is however, Neil's dramatic portrayal of Puck that intensifies the spiritual dichotomies of Weir's appropriation. Tom's portrayal as Puck in Gow's Away is directly analogous to Neil's, as they are both concerned with healing, renewal, restoration, replenishment. Neil's performance in the schools play, despite his fathers repressive objections is a seminal moment in his spiritual development. The fact that he dies soon after (as with most Shakespearean tragic figures), does not deny the processes of individual liberation and atonement.

“If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended,
That you have but slumbered here
While these visions did appear.
And this weak and idle theme,
No more yielding but a dream,
Gentles, do not reprehend.
If you pardon, we will mend.
And, as I am an honest Puck,
If we have unearned luck
Now to scrape the serpents tongue,
We will make amends ‘ere long;
Else the Puck a liar call.
So, goodnight unto you all.
Give me your hands, if we be friends,
And Robin shall restore amends”.

Embodied in Neil's death is the notion that he has found his own freedoms beyond "indenture" and "servitude". The conceptual signification of "make amends" traces the transformity of power of love in the context of nature. Lear too achieves a kind of personal equilibrium as a result of his experiences in nature (storm scene) and his new found intimacy with Cordelia. Gwen also reconstitutes herself in the context of nature:

"Let's walk. Come on, down to the water. The water's so warm",

and spiritual intimacy:

"She approaches him and offers him the hat. He takes it. She digs her hands into the crown of the hat and lifts out a handful of shells. She lets them run through her fingers. She lifts them out again. Roy leans towards them and buries his face in the shells in Corals hands. She lets them go again and picks them up. He kisses the shells and her hands".

The benedictory processes of nature are complete. Harmony and individual freedom have been achieved once Gwen has cast off her material discourse. Roy also has been transformed by the shells – the intimacy of human hands grasping nature. Thoreau, as with Gwen achieved spiritual nexus through the libations of water. Thoreau's immersion in the water of Walden Pond was a daily ritual:

"A lake is the landscape's most beautiful and expressive feature. It is the earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature... Standing on the smooth

sandy beach at the east end of the pond... a slight haze makes the opposite shore line indistinct”.

The effect of nature here on Thoreau is to create an altered state of consciousness, which allows him to access his soul, “the depth of his own nature”. The “indistinct” shore line is indicative of his imaginative reverie. This image of uninhibited freedom and sense of individual well-being his central to his Transcendentalist ideology – and ideology that is just as relevant now as it was in the nineteenth century. Thoreau’s Romantic legacy, manifested throughout Walden and Civil Disobedience has been continually recontextualised and appropriated as twentieth century discourse. Why? Because

“the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats. A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind. There is no play in them, for this come after work. But it is a characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things”.

And “desperation” originates from spiritual “servitude”, “indenture” and dysfunction. Thoreau enjoins us to

“... live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a

corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish it's meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it on thy next excursion”.

This excerpt conceptualises the central tenets of American Transcendentalism which are now also the ideological bases of Western *and* Eastern post-modern, spiritual ideology – especially in the Green and Conservation Movements. It is interesting to note to word “publish” in the above except because it suggests the power and challenges the dominant materialist ideology, represented in the ever-present railroad bordering the edge of Walden Pond.

A philosophical consequence of Thoreau's text is implicit in Descartes' notion of

“I think, therefore I am”,

which indicates that individual human thought is sacrosanct and beyond the material signifiers of the consumer world. The repetition of the personal pronoun “I” is indicative of the individual nature of the processes of identity. The simple indicative mood of “I am” foregrounds a simple ontology which is fundamental to all the texts assessed in this critical response.

Dead poets do indeed have something to tell us from the past. The cyclical nature of human history has now returned us to where material excess predominates, as it did in the Renaissance where Browning's Bishops and Dukes' excesses destroyed their spiritual and cultural value system. We remember the lack of intimacy between

'lovers'. Porphyria's 'lover' strangles that which he could not possess – shared aesthetic and spiritual values were absent, as in the beginning of many of the early sequences in Gow's Away. The renewed interest in the appropriation and recontextualisation of Romantic texts represents a post-modern need for individual direction involved in the "pursuit of happiness". Thoreau's text Walden and Civil Disobedience itself stems from the destructive materialism of the Industrial Revolution. This can be considered responsible for the now desired freedoms and pursuit of achieving individualism and independence. Nature is the medium through which these themes are explored and expressed to discover one's inner-self.

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- William Wordsworth and An Imaginary Life, by Emma Driver
- Weir's film Dead Poet's Society
- Walden and Civil Disobedience – Henry David Thoreau
- “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798 – Wordsworth
- Hamilton Encyclopaedia – Rene Descartes

REFLECTION STATEMENT

My English Extension Two Major Work, "You're Not an Indentured Servant" – The Cultural Intertextuality of Romanticism, is a celebration of Thoreau's philosophies of independence and individualism. It's focal point is Weir's modern, Romantic film Dead Poet's Society and its representations of Thoreau's values. Nature and solitude are the medium through which notions of individualism and independence are discovered and expressed. References are made to Walt Whitman, Thomas Jefferson, Robert Browning and William Wordsworth to accompany the examination of Thoreau's text Walden and Civil Disobedience in the attempt to fully conceptualise the necessity of embracing these ideologies for aesthetic appreciation and spiritual well-being.

The intended audience for my Major Work targets those who can be influenced or poignantly moved by such philosophical endeavours to achieve individualism and independence. Those with an aesthetic appreciation for nature and whom are more concerned with spiritualism over material worth and possessions, are those with more capability to comprehend and realise the concepts of the final product.

My Major Work was composed to examine the idealism of

"a mystic, a transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher to boot".

This examination offers different representations of an ethereal existence - how it is Romantically manipulated through Thoreau's notions of independence and individualism, and how these concepts and the role of nature or internal solitude are implicit in endeavouring to "live deep" and "suck out all the marrow of life".

A Preliminary HSC text, Weir's film Dead Poet's Society is the central tenet of exploring Thoreau's ideologies. Weir's recontextualisation of the themes of individualism and independence and their development throughout the film, become apparent through the revival of the Dead Poet's Society, consisting of the boys in Keating's class; Keating himself a former member of the original Dead Poet's clan. It is his initial portrayal of these themes that coerce his class to explore their own humility without expectation and in wonderment of discovering their inner-selves.

Wordsworth's poetry and Gow's drama Away, utilised from the HSC Advanced English course, and Browning from HSC Extension English further embellish the delineation of Thoreau's individualistic and independent philosophies. Wordsworth embodies the significance of nature in achieving a sense of self, suggesting that nature "informs" and impresses", Away connects Tom and Neil together in their poignant portrayal of Puck, where as Browning demonstrates the destruction of the spiritual and cultural value system of the Renaissance. Rene Descartes is also made reference to, with his philosophy "I think therefore I am", to present the idea that inner individuality or independence can coerce the mind to perhaps doubt anything; we could doubt that the sky is blue, we could doubt that we even exist.

My Major Work "You're Not and Indentured Servant" – The Cultural Intertextuality of Romanticism is a critical response to Thoreau's text Walden and Civil Disobedience and Weir's film Dead Poet's Society, incorporating the Romantic value (of individualism, independence and nature) through reference to the other Romantic texts as discussed above. Thoreau's text is made up of two main literary styles – descriptive and philosophical ideas. Within the descriptions, Thoreau uses two literary techniques – metaphor ("The sun is but a morning star), and onomatopoeia (the *woo*'s

and *chip chip chip*'s of the birds throughout Walden And Civil Disobedience). Both techniques make us feel closer to the world that Thoreau attempts to create for us (of individualism and independence) by placing us firmly in his sensations. His text deals with light and dark, mind and body, ideas of nature (expressed through the achievement of individualism and independence), and the meaning of progress (until one reaches absolution). The over-riding philosophical tenets of Thoreau's Walden And Civil Disobedience (and supported by the other related Romantic texts discussed throughout my Major Work) are essentially know yourself, live deeply and simply, and seek truth.

My Major Work chronicles Henry David Thoreau's life and suggests reasons for his decision for wishing to "live deliberately", hence residing at Walden Pond. "You're Not an Indentured Servant" – The Cultural Intertextuality of Romanticism presents his philosophies of individualism and independence (with regards to nature as the expression-medium), and evidences how these ideologies are evident throughout literary history (Browning and the Renaissance) and how they have shaped the understanding and appropriation of aesthetic value and spiritual well-being of oneself. However, Thoreau repeats his plea that his audience does not follow in his footsteps, that "each should find his own way". Walden and Civil Disobedience is simply a spiritual and cultural inspiration, intending to show people what is possible, to inspire them to find their own paths and "mode of living", "live deliberately", not be resigned to "indenture", and to walk to a different "drummer" – hence liberating oneself by the notions of individualism and independence. Throughout Thoreau's text, he requires self-knowledge, and the path that he took in Walden and Civil Disobedience (and the avenues required of the characters in the other Romantic texts discussed) is just one way to reach that end.

I achieved realisation of the concepts explored in the final product of “You’re Not and Indentured Servant” – The Cultural Intertextuality of Romanticism in much the same manner as Thoreau reached his peak potential for discovery and learning at Walden Pond. From the last chapters of Walden and Civil Disobedience, it becomes evident to the responder

“We need wilderness. We need to have fields and forests around villages. We need to see nature so full of life that there can be sacrifice and death. The trees put forth leaves and nature goes on. After two years, Thoreau’s sojourn in the woods ended on September 6, 1847. What does this teach us? Explore your own world, the streams where you live, your own intellect, and mind the seas and inlets of the moral mind”.¹

Thoreau writes:

“It is easier to sail many thousand miles through cold and storm and cannibals, in government ship, with five hundred men and boys to assist one, than it is to explore the private sea, the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean of one’s being alone”.

If you want to travel, explore yourself, your own humility and spiritual being.

Thoreau left the woods because he learned all he could there – his feet had worn a path from the door to the pond-side. Realising the concepts of my Major Work occurs in a very similar way, in that Thoreau’s philosophies of individualism and

¹ <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/walden/section13.html>

independence were explored until there was so more apparent impact on the human psyche or inner-being. As Thoreau writes:

“If you build castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them”.

Thoreau also asks

“Why should man be in such desperate haste to succeed, and in such desperate enterprises? If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let his step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away”.

This is simply suggesting to be where you are, don't be resigned to living a life of “quiet desperation”, *live* your life:

“It looks poorest when you're richest”.

Individuality and independence mean more than love, money or fame, and are the central concepts imbued in Walden and Civil Disobedience, Weir's Dead Poet's Society and other Romantic texts explored in my English Extension Two Major Work, “You're Not an Indentured Servant” – The Cultural Intertextuality of Romanticism.