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Human Nature in the Natural World

In *On The Origin Of Inequality* and *Walden*, both Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Henry David Thoreau, respectively, evoke an admiration for the simple, stable natural world, which in turn leads them to critically analyze their contemporary societies. While Rousseau derives his image of what he believes society should look like from the state of nature, Thoreau shapes his perspective on the basis of self-reform and decides to live his own philosophy for himself. Through their idyllic, utopian perspectives of the world, both Rousseau and Thoreau offer a glimpse of what society could be like without the burdens of real inequality, commodity, and oppressive institutions. While the likeness of the world they portray may seem distant, it is a far better option than the world they criticize— one that is enslaved by its own convention.

In an argument that hinges on all the things that are wrong with society, Rousseau calls for change on a mass-scale. His critique aims to find reform in political and economic systems; he wishes for a change of mentality in all of humankind. While Thoreau holds similar opinions and frustrations, his focus lies on the individual; to him, incremental and personal change is what matters. In a way, his argument is more accessible in terms of practicality because he speaks to the individual in a voice that is meant to reach all of society. On first reading, Thoreau's *Walden* can seem extreme, and his writing ostentatious, but a more refined interpretation discovers the

simplicity of his message. Thoreau sees and acknowledges the issues that Rousseau has sprawled across the table, and he chooses to start with one.

Both Rousseau and Thoreau identify their discontent with modern society with issues of inequality, property, and materialism. In *A Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau articulates that human progress, from its fixation on the self to the broader scope of community, was sparked by mutual dependence; man began to rely on man, and in turn, began to compare himself to his counterparts. Rousseau marks this as the beginning of man's subconscious need for superiority—the contempt that perpetuates and sustains inequality. While he acknowledges that natural inequality between men exists, Rousseau makes it clear that those differences are minimal and not meaningful until the corruption of comparison comes about. According to Rousseau, this shows itself in man's dwindling capacity to show true compassion because the feelings of empathy that he does show are only an outward display of the pity he feels for himself. The more man focuses on differentiating himself from others, the less he is able to show compassion, which is ultimately found in identification. The notion of comparison plagues every corner of the human psyche, and in turn, morphs into the beast we call inequality. The serious, real inequality that Rousseau talks about was built upon the foundation of property, an idea that launched society into an ongoing war with itself.

Rousseau argues that the simple, free man remained so until the idea of property came about. Suddenly, land wasn't land anymore; it was a commodity. The world was divided, lines were drawn between people, and nothing was ever the same. In this society, Rousseau sees people suffocated by their own self-interest and greed, trying to step over each other in the hopes of attaining social status that is virtually unattainable. He sees humankind caught up in the

shackles of social stratification, a kind of enslavement that does not exist in nature. In the new order, institutionalized freedom is a weak semblance of natural liberty. Rousseau's philosophy directly parallels Thoreau's, in that they both recognize human development is irreversible and articulate the inequality that property brings about. Thoreau directly observes this systemic confinement as he notes, "I see young men, my townsmen, whose misfortune it is to have inherited farms, houses, barns, cattle, and farming tools; for these are more easily acquired than got rid of" (Thoreau 3). He sees property fundamentally as a burden, and for most, a determinant of fate. People born into land will pass it on for generations, perpetuating a cycle that both Rousseau and Thoreau acknowledge as unlikely to change.

As they work through society's shortcomings, Rousseau and Thoreau make the clear distinction between the natural and the artificial, citing materialism as one of humanity's most serious flaws. In describing man's mechanistic tendencies, Rousseau notes, "Then we see, too, that dissolute men abandon themselves to the excesses that bring on fevers and death, because the intellect depraves the senses and the will continues to speak when nature is silent" (Rousseau 87). The human proclivity to act on desire rather than necessity is our ultimate downfall. When we refuse to sit and revel in nature's silence, our own judgement reveals weaknesses that are rooted in self-indulgence. While Rousseau directly speaks about the materialism of man, Thoreau channels his concerns into his own life and abandons his possessions to live simply and intentionally. Thoreau's experiment makes the modern man feel uncomfortable because of the mere fact that it makes us question our own way of living. This focus on individualism in Thoreau's work gives us the opportunity to find the issues we often ignore in society within ourselves, and in turn, things do not seem as daunting as they actually may be.

In addition to being a piece about bettering oneself for the sake of society, Thoreau's *Walden* speaks to something essential about human nature within the natural world. He expresses his reasoning for leaving Walden Pond saying, "Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and I could not spare any more time for that one" (Thoreau 302). To Thoreau, human beings are in constant flux; we are meant to change, to wander, to drift from one life to the next in the same body. He reminds us that there is more than the monotonous cycles of convention—that there is real life behind our eyes. Both Rousseau and Thoreau imply that man has a tendency to get stuck in his own experience, whether it be because of a lack of direct compassion or an institutionalized detachment from his counterparts. The basis for this lifelong confinement in one's own experience, and the inability to truly touch other people, is precisely rooted in the societal issues addressed by Rousseau and Thoreau. The hope for us lies in the idea from Thoreau: if we stop treating life as a means of killing time, we may be able to salvage some meaning of true existence.

Throughout both texts, Rousseau and Thoreau depend on nature to exemplify their beliefs about the world and about being human. Rousseau links his ideas on property to the natural world, as he expresses, "You are lost if you forget that the fruits of the earth belong to everyone and that the earth itself belongs to no one!" (Rousseau 109). Rousseau's passionate and memorable line evokes strong feelings against our common perception of the world. In truth, we can cut up land, draw imaginary lines, and divide ourselves by differences, but solid bottom remains everywhere. Time leaves generational change in its wake, but the land, the sea, and the stars stay put; although trodden, destroyed, and altered, there is a persistent stability to nature

that the human condition will never allow us to fully understand, but that Rousseau and Thoreau allow us to appreciate.

The thought of reimagining society may seem remote and unapproachable, but what close examination of Rousseau and Thoreau reveals is that it begins with the individual. Their commitment to the questioning of contemporary principles exemplifies the very ideals they discuss. Self-reflection, and improvement, is the only real way of attaining the good that has been lost in the folds of modern civilization. In the abandonment of the things that burden us, we may have a chance at living according to ourselves, in true freedom and in true time.