The Ocean’s Indifference: 
Confronting Death in the Natural Landscape of Thoreau’s *Cape Cod*

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“I sat there and forgot and forgot, until what remained was the river that went by and I who watched. On the river the heat mirages danced with each other and then they danced through each other and then they joined hands and danced around each other. Eventually the watcher joined the river, and there was only one of us. I believe it was the river...Not far downstream was a dry channel where the river had run once, and part of the way to come to know a thing is through its death.”

–Norman Maclean, a River Runs Through It

“I told my comrades...that human life, under any circumstances, never ceases to have a meaning, and that this infinite meaning of life includes suffering and dying, privation and death.”

-Viktor Frankl, Man’s Search for Meaning
In the preceding two quotes, Maclean, an avid lover of nature, and Frankl, a survivor of the holocaust, portray two ways in which confrontations with death can hold meaning for humanity. Both authors acknowledge in these quotes as well, that all life and nature must eventually end in death. In one of the most striking passages of Maclean’s beloved *A River Runs Through It*, he tells his readers that he has come to better know the nature he loves in Montana “through its death” (62). Similarly, Frankl recalls a moment of particularly deep hardship in the concentration camps, where he realized that even in the hardest of circumstances, the “infinite meaning of life includes suffering and dying, privation and death” (83). In his posthumously published *Cape Cod*, Thoreau too comes to realize, like Maclean, that his understanding of nature is improved upon confronting death in the ocean. Like Frankl, Thoreau also comes to understand in *Cape Cod* that to try to recognize meaning in life and nature, without also acknowledging death, is not to be truly living, or fully awake.

Thoreau returned to Cape Cod, which is situated on the easternmost point of Massachusetts, on four separate trips from 1849-1857 during the last 13 years of his life.¹ The desolate landscape of the sea and sand truly, deeply struck Thoreau, and made him return repeatedly to continue to get a “better view than I had yet had of the ocean” (*CC*, 3). Much like how Thoreau famously wrote of why he went to live in the woods at *Walden* “to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life,” he writes of his journeys to Cape Cod that “I wished to see that sea-shore where man’s works are wrecks…where the crumbling land is the only invalid, or at best is but dry land, and that is all you can say of it” (*Walden*, 65), (*CC*, 50). Thoreau’s first trip to Cape Cod in October 1849 with Ellery Channing (one of his best friends

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and constant walking companions), actually formed the narrative outline for *Cape Cod*, although Thoreau constantly added material to the outline of that first trip from the three other trips he took to Cape Cod with excerpts about nature, and the discovery and history of Cape Cod (HI, 249).

Henry David Thoreau’s *Cape Cod*, however, is a book few readers of Thoreau have encountered in their studies. *Cape Cod* has become obscured as a notable work of Thoreau’s for a complicated array of reasons, including: its posthumous publication and varied reception by the public and scholars. This travelogue, which details Thoreau’s last journeys and his research of *Cape Cod*, is one that parallels, but also expands from works such as *Walden* and his essay, “Walking.” Surprising to many, Thoreau actually began forming the basis for *Cape Cod* before he delivered his essay “Walking” for the first time in 1851, and before *Walden*’s publication in 1854. In this way, rather than merely seeing *Cape Cod* as one of Thoreau’s last and posthumously published works, we can see that *Cape Cod* actually developed alongside his editing and revisions of *Walden*, and at the same time that he finished writing his great essay “Walking.” Laura Dassow Walls also tells us that *Cape Cod* and “Walking” “do not represent stages in a writer’s evolution; they are exact contemporaries…Nevertheless, taken together, they seem to inscribe, like pole and antipole, the antipodes of his thought” (21). As Dassow Walls notes here, although *Cape Cod* and a work such as “Walking” were created around the same time, it is also important to recognize that many scholars have found and believe that *Cape Cod* actually takes on a different tone, and tacks away from his more well-known works such as “Walking” and *Walden*.

Many scholars of Thoreau have even resisted what they see as a change in narrative tone and thematic direction in *Cape Cod*, causing some to discount this travelogue as a significant
work entirely, and others to say that this travelogue reflects a less cohesive part of Thoreau’s philosophy. In 2004, Sharon Talley summarizes in her essay, “Thoreau’s Taste for the wild in Cape Cod,” much of the negative Cape Cod debate from the last 85 years, writing, “As [the late 20th century scholar] Emory Maiden points out, ‘the relatively few comments made about Cape Cod since its publication have been almost unanimous in declaring it of small literary worth’” (85). Talley continues, listing a number of critiques that have been levied against Cape Cod by varied sources: “Edward Hinckley, who finds the book bare and hollow; Henry Seidel Canby, who dismisses it as an off-hand narrative lacking transcendental depths; Joseph Wood Krutch, who calls Cape Cod a superficial guide book, which suffers from too much journalistic humor; and Walter Harding, who characterizes Cape Cod as being Thoreau's "sunniest" but least profound book” (85).2 This early to late American modernist debate has not treated Cape Cod or its themes as enacting significant work in the scope of the transcendentalists or even Thoreau’s own philosophy. Also, this modernist criticism about Thoreau and one of his last works has led to an abundance of scholarly essays which have merely tried to place Cape Cod within the trajectory and understanding of Thoreau’s most renowned works such as Walden, and “Walking.”

When Cape Cod was first published in 1865 after Thoreau’s death, however, it did receive positive reviews. Joseph Moldenhauer, the editor of the 1988 Princeton edition of Cape Cod, notes that “the Boston Advertiser found Cape Cod a ‘thoroughly fresh, original, and interesting book,’ displaying ‘intelligent sympathy…with the seaside and the ocean’” (HI, 291). In Henry Salt’s 1890 biography titled, The Life of Henry David Thoreau, he also positively

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2 To get a better idea of the timeline of the critics Talley lists here: Emory Maiden was writing in the 1970’s, Hinckley wrote his essay on Thoreau in 1931, Seidel Canby wrote his biography of Thoreau in 1939, Krutch wrote his biography of Thoreau in 1948, and Harding wrote his own biography in 1966.
portrays *Cape Cod*, observing, “It has been remarked that *Cape Cod* is in one sense the most human of Thoreau’s books, and has more tenderness of tone than *Walden*, as if the sea had exercised a mellowing influence on his genius” (173). More recently, as well—since about 2000—*Cape Cod* has received fresh literary interest and affirmation. In 2009, Patrick James Brown found added significance in the work, exploring the idea that: “Specifically, throughout *Cape Cod* Thoreau registers an awareness of and explicitly nods toward economic and social questions related to shipwrecks and coastal poverty…*Cape Cod* occasions an inward-searching, practical meditation on the heart of social man under acquisitive capitalism” (3-4). Sharon Talley also announces in her contemporary essay that she wants to offer a different view to all those “unable to reconcile *Cape Cod* with the philosophy of *Walden*” (268). Talley proposes as her main thesis the opinion that “rather than negating the writer’s transcendental perspective, *Cape Cod* instead tests, reconfirms, and extends the convictions presented in *Walden* about the life cycle, the relationship between nature and humanity, and the spiritual benefits of a life lived close to nature” (86). The recent, increasing interest and positive reviews from scholarly essays on *Cape Cod* demonstrate that this text of Thoreau’s can indeed prove valuable to studies of Thoreau, and more significantly, that the material in *Cape Cod* which diverges from his previous works, can even enhance our understanding of how Thoreau encountered the natural world.

Specifically in my own research into Thoreau’s *Cape Cod*, I have found two other scholars who have also studied Thoreau’s relationship to nature in *Cape Cod* as Talley has done in her essay. Whereas Talley reaffirms Thoreau’s relationship to nature as positive in *Cape Cod*, and as reconfirming beliefs voiced in *Walden*, two other scholars in the 1970’s and 1980’s find rather that Thoreau’s relationship and understanding of nature has changed to a bleaker perspective in *Cape Cod*. These opposing opinions to Talley’s contemporary essay are
represented by James McIntosh’s *Thoreau as Romantic Naturalist: His Shifting Stance toward Nature* (1974), and perhaps more extremely by Richard Bridgman’s *Dark Thoreau* (1982). These three approaches and views will offer a broader understanding of the more recent scholarship which has specifically studied Thoreau’s relationship to nature in *Cape Cod*. The insights provided by McIntosh and Talley on *Cape Cod* especially, while voicing opposing views, make assertions that will be relevant to my own argument.

In the introduction to his *Thoreau as Romantic Naturalist*, McIntosh provides a summary of what he understands to be Thoreau’s general stance toward nature across all his texts. McIntosh postulates that throughout his “study the cutting edge of the argument is the idea that romantic self-consciousness necessarily separates the romantic observer from nature, however he may regret the separation” (20). McIntosh continues stating his argument about Thoreau’s poetic distancing from nature across the trajectory of his works, saying: “[In all the works I treat, though differences are obvious, Thoreau wants to be involved in nature; yet he feels that he is apart from it…And he fashions in the course of each work…a more thoughtful attitude that is a synthesis of his wish for involvement and his sense of separation]” (10). McIntosh also suggests specifically that in the first chapter of *Cape Cod* called “The Shipwreck,” Thoreau comes to conclude that his relationship toward nature is one that is distant—an “alien nature” from humans (234). In *Cape Cod*, McIntosh consequently believes that Thoreau identifies himself as distanced from nature and undergoes a certain loss of faith in nature in this text. Furthermore, McIntosh states that Thoreau “has accepted the idea that nature is indifferent and dangerous, no longer a kindly brother…From this perspective nature is…simply there for the wanderer to perceive” (234). In his chapter specifically dedicated to an examination of *Cape Cod*, McIntosh asserts that what
Thoreau has learned from the profound and indifferent ocean is his own physical, spiritual, and unavoidable distance from nature.3

Talley, however, opposes such scholars as McIntosh who conclude that Thoreau has a type of loss of faith in nature in Cape Cod. She recognizes instead that by “examin[ing] Thoreau’s symbolic use of food and drink imagery in Cape Cod [she can] support the view that rather than negating the writer’s transcendental perspective, the book instead tests, reconfirms, and extends that convictions presented in Walden about the life cycle, the relationship between nature and humanity, and the spiritual benefits of a life lived close to nature” (85-86). In this way, Talley does not see a maturation of Thoreau’s philosophy in Cape Cod, so much as she sees him simply returning to ideas he voiced about nature and his relationship to nature in Walden. Additionally, Talley discovers that “Thoreau conveys the ocean’s unsentimental and total dominion while simultaneously illustrating the inexplicable and infinite pattern of gains and losses that nature weaves and into which living creatures must accommodate themselves to forestall physical mortality” (90). In this way, Talley directly opposes McIntosh’s thesis of Thoreau’s alienation from nature and declares with finality, “One of the main lessons of Cape Cod is the possibility of establishing a true harmony with nature amidst what appears to be hopeless alienation” (91).

3 Richard Bridgman is the third critic I mentioned above who wrote a book on Thoreau and nature in 1982, and who analyzes Thoreau through a psychoanalytical critical lens. Thus, due to Bridgman’s specific critical technique, he does not fit very well into a discussion with McIntosh’s and Talley’s ideas. However, Bridgman’s ideas can be used as a way to further ground our understanding of the types of viewpoints which examine Thoreau’s stance towards nature in Cape Cod. In his Dark Thoreau, Bridgman sees Thoreau’s works and his ideas on nature as inherently characterized by “a good number of opaque and sometimes bizarre moments that can be attributed to these conditions of psychological strain” and in sum, “They conform to certain psychological patterns, visible from the start but rarely consciously addressed by Thoreau, for his most crippling feature was that he dared not be a deeply reflective man” (x, xiv). Lastly, Bridgman also writes on something I hope to disprove in my own analysis of Cape Cod. Bridgman states in the last part of his part of his chapter on Cape Cod that Thoreau: “knew that nature was sometimes foul and slimy, and sometimes cold, granitic, and murderous; and that sometimes it was himself. But he rarely faced these truths directly” (286). I disagree with Bridgman here, for I believe that Thoreau often—if not always—faced these truths directly, though the contrary nature of these truths would probably strike Bridgman as “sterile contradictions” alone (xiv).
McIntosh and Talley thus conclude their arguments with starkly different perspectives on what Thoreau’s relationship toward nature consists of at the end of *Cape Cod*: for one finds him alienated from nature, and the other finds him in harmony with nature. While I tend to agree with many ideas voiced by both McIntosh and Talley, in my own assertions here and later, I will diverge from these critics’ central tenets. In relation to McIntosh, I oppose his final claim that Thoreau is separated from nature at the end of *Cape Cod*, recognizing man’s distance from “alien nature” (234). Also, I do not conclude, as Talley does, that Thoreau discovers the same nature in the ocean which he had encountered in *Walden*. Furthermore, Talley’s main conviction that the food imagery and Thoreau’s dietary habits in the text illustrate that *Cape Cod* “tests, reconfirms, and extends the convictions presented in *Walden*” becomes too simplistic in my own understanding of Thoreau’s evolving relationship with nature in *Cape Cod* (86). Rather, in my own argument, I attempt to demonstrate that through his specific interaction with the landscape of *Cape Cod*, and more explicitly, through his interaction with death in the ocean, Thoreau’s relationship with nature is altered from what it was at *Walden*, but then also further strengthened.

Additionally, I wish to further explore what both McIntosh and Talley mention in passing, but do not delve into in their essays on *Cape Cod*. Specifically, I want to examine more intensely the morbid, dark, and often death-filled landscape of *Cape Cod* as a way to comprehend Thoreau’s re-visioned stance on nature. For, McIntosh himself notes in his chapter on “The Shipwreck” that Thoreau “understood less well and articulated less often, the wish to ‘front the true source of evil’” (47). McIntosh continues his own personal ruminations on Thoreau’s obsession with the darker side of nature, saying: “His covert responsiveness to images of doom in both the human and natural worlds struck me forcibly when I first read him. This seemed, and still seems, a comparatively unrecognized Thoreau” (47). This “comparatively
unrecognized Thoreau” McIntosh mentions, however, is exactly the Thoreau I believe that the travelogue of *Cape Cod* reveals to us more clearly. In my own analysis, I will also continue further exploring the idea which Talley states about the reality of death, and how she believes: “Thoreau thus holds out the possibility that even on the Cape, physical death is merely a part of the eternal cycle, an aperitif to the immortal feast beyond, the promise of which ultimately one must accept on faith as a result of one’s experiences, however fleeting and ambiguous, of divinity on earth” (97). In confronting death, Thoreau does not become despondent and distant from nature, but rather, Thoreau apprehends on the Cape that if he is to ever understand nature and human life in their entireties, he must also accept death as a part of life.

Thoreau’s new understanding of nature in *Cape Cod*, in fact, is one that appears as profound as and possibly even more intimate than his understanding in *Walden*, and comes strictly from dealing with a nature so harsh, yet sublime—but also full of death. For, through the indifferent quality of the nature he encounters in the ocean, Thoreau becomes newly acquainted with and immersed in nature. Additionally, I want to argue that through the death in nature which Thoreau explores so profoundly in *Cape Cod*, Thoreau discovers a new level of the sublime in nature. In this seascape also, Thoreau learns of the particular power and immutability the ocean has over the land. Lastly, by interacting with a nature so fraught with death and uncertainty in *Cape Cod*, Thoreau seems to realize another dimension necessary to his doctrine of “awakening” and connecting with nature. In *Cape Cod*, Thoreau is compelled by encountering death in the sea to reevaluate and redefine his own perceptions of the reality around him, and thus, Thoreau becomes more fully awake himself and develops an even more intimate relationship with nature on Cape Cod.
Before being fully able to conceive of the profound work that *Cape Cod* enacts by interacting so directly with death in nature, however, we must first understand the complicated history of the production and the publication of this travelogue, as well as the historical context of Thoreau’s life around the time of writing and visiting Cape Cod. For, there is no way to encounter truly and fully this highly complicated work, without also comprehending the long editorial and historical context which surrounds it. As mentioned above, *Cape Cod* was written as the product of the four trips Thoreau took to Cape Cod from 1849-1857 and the extensive research Thoreau conducted on his own about Cape Cod and the first discoveries of America. Like almost all of Thoreau’s works, Thoreau compiled *Cape Cod* as a text from the ideas he wrote down in his various journal entries and the comprehensive research he did. This particular technique of Thoreau’s lends to the digressive structure of his chapters in *Cape Cod*, and the feeling of less cohesion many scholars have noted. The first time Thoreau publicly introduced some of the material he had gleaned from his trips to Cape Cod was when he delivered two lectures “before the Concord Lyceum…[on] January 23 and 30, 1850” (HI, 253). Throughout 1850 and 1851, Thoreau continued to research Cape Cod and deliver lectures to the public on this subject (HI, 257).

In 1852, “learn[ing] that a new literary journal of high quality, *Putnam’s Monthly*, was being organized, he submitted part of the manuscript [of *Cape Cod*] to one of its editors” (HI, 258). However, misunderstandings and miscommunications about payment, potentially heretical statements of Thoreau’s, the manuscript size, etc., unfortunately would mark the better part of Thoreau’s and *Putnam’s* relationship (HI, 259-261). Nevertheless, by 1855, the first two installments, “The Shipwreck” and “Stage-Coach Views” of Thoreau’s *Cape Cod*, were to be

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4 Most of the information I will reference for this segment of my argument comes from the comprehensive research that is presented in the Historical Introduction from the 1988 Princeton edition of *Cape Cod*
part of Putnam’s June magazine, followed by the publication of “The Plains of Nauset” chapter in July and “The Beach” chapter in August 1855 (HI, 266). The August installment of Cape Cod, however, was to be the last. Reasons behind this decision on the part of Putnam’s remain uncertain, but Moldenhauer surmises that this termination may either have been because of disagreements over payment, controversy and public anger over the material itself, or the excessive length of the manuscript (HI, 267-275). Additionally, a letter of Thoreau’s was found from around this time which indicates that while in the process of serially publishing Cape Cod, the editor George Curtis of Putnam’s appears to have found certain statements of Thoreau’s heretical and had his “sensibilities…abraded by Thoreau’s apparent ‘heresies’ of wording or tone on religious matters” (HI, 263). Moldenhauer also reveals that there is strong evidence to suggest that the most likely reason for Cape Cod’s termination lies in that Putnam’s did not agree with the content nor feel comfortable publishing the next chapter, “The Wellfleet Oysterman.” Moldenhauer concludes that the editors of Putnam’s decided: “that an abrupt break was the least troublesome of the several alternatives facing [them]. To print the chapter unaltered would offend readers…to ask the author’s approval for revisions of sentiment and expression would be time-consuming, distasteful, and perhaps bootless; to make such changes without Thoreau’s consent would generate even more heat and noise from Concord” (HI, 276).

Despite this termination of the serialization of Cape Cod, though, Thoreau’s interest in Cape Cod was not curtailed, and he continued adding to his manuscript and returning to the Cape. As Moldenhauer elaborates on this, while “Thoreau made no other effort to publish Cape Cod during his lifetime…[he] continued to enlarge the Cape Cod narrative with information about natural history…Thoreau gave at least intermittent attention to his Cape Cod manuscript between the summer of 1857 and his death in 1862” (HI, 278-279, 283). However, in these last
years, Thoreau truly seems to have turned his attention to works he knew could be published. Thoreau appears to have worked tirelessly on finishing his other travelogue, *The Maine Woods*, and turning his lectures “Life without Principle,” “Walking,” “Autumnal Tints,” and “Wild Apples” into essays (HI, 284). Moldenhauer states that at this point in his life, “Thoreau wanted to earn good money from these essays to defray the costs of his illness and to add to his family’s security” (HI, 285).

Upon Thoreau’s death by tuberculosis in May 1862, it seems that his younger sister, Sophia Thoreau, with the help of Thoreau’s companion Ellery Channing, took on the burden of trying to edit and publish Thoreau’s remaining essays and manuscripts (HI, 285). It is known that it was the responsibility of Sophia “to negotiate with [publisher Ticknor and Fields], to copy certain manuscript pages which would be illegible to the printer, and to correct proof sent from Boston” (HI, 285-286). The supposed, combined work of Sophia and Channing hence led to the 1864 publication of the chapters, “The Wellfleet Oysterman” and “The Highland Light” in the October and December issues of the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine, and the first published edition of *Cape Cod* by Ticknor and Fields in March 1865 (HI, 287-289). Moldenhauer also writes that this first edition of *Cape Cod* in 1865 was likely put together by using “Putnam’s pages for the first four chapters, and an ‘old’ fair copy for the remaining chapters, both parts marked with additions and revisions, and both supplemented by autograph pages and notations on slips” (HI, 287). Thus, Thoreau’s *Cape Cod* was finally published in 1865, only to meet with more mixed and contradictory reviews for the next 150 years.

To further complement the study of this text’s complicated history of production and its controversial reception, a continued investigation into some of the context of Thoreau’s life around the time he visited and wrote *Cape Cod*, will be relevant and necessary for a complete
literary study of *Cape Cod*. For, by further researching the relevant history of Thoreau’s life around this time, it becomes clearer why he was to focus so explicitly on the theme of death in nature in *Cape Cod*. In my studies of Thoreau’s biography, it seems there are many Thoreau scholars who believe that Thoreau’s first and most devastating experience with death occurred in 1842, when his brother John Thoreau died of tetanus poisoning. Thoreau was profoundly affected by his brother’s death, developing “sympathetic lockjaw” himself a few days thereafter (Richardson, 113). As Robert Richardson also conveys in his biography of Thoreau, “He could try to talk down his grief, but one cannot deny it permanently, and in some ways it kept coming back all his life” (115). The death of Thoreau’s brother, it seems, was to haunt him for the rest of his life, and while living at Walden during 1845-1847, Thoreau completed the first draft of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Richardson and many other historians believe this book serves as a testament to and honoring of his brother’s life and their friendship (154-155). Adding further to Thoreau’s pain during this same period of time, Waldo, Emerson’s five year old son, died of scarlet fever only days after John passed away (Richardson, 113). Richardson states of this period that “The deaths of John and Waldo [Emerson] called out a response in Thoreau that dealt with grief by means of a powerful willed affirmation of the life principle” (115). Thoreau, while deeply pained by the deaths of two people so close to him, seems to have still persevered in the face of death here, and actually affirmed his own life and philosophy in nature in spite of the circumstances. The theme of Thoreau affirming life and his own philosophy upon engaging with death is one I also hope to also bring out further in Thoreau’s confrontation with the ocean in *Cape Cod*.

The next death in the Thoreau family was to occur when Helen, Thoreau’s sister, died of tuberculosis (the same disease Thoreau contracted in 1835 which would affect him for the rest of
his life, and would lead to his own death in 1862) in June of 1949. Only shortly after Helen’s death in June, in October of 1849, Thoreau took his first journey to Cape Cod with Ellery Channing where they walked all the way from Orleans to Provincetown, at the end of the Cape. This first trip, which was taken immediately following his sister’s death, founds the basis of the whole *Cape Cod* narrative and forms the backbone for what the final structure of the travelogue would look like.

In June of 1850, Thoreau returned to Cape Cod again, and Richardson suggests that from his journal entries at this time, it seems Thoreau is full of life, “filled with a forward-looking sense of being fully alive in a smiling and all-sufficing present” (207). Come July 1850, however, (what could only have been a few weeks after his second trip to the Cape), Thoreau was sent out by Emerson to Fire Island, where a few nights before, transcendentalist Margaret Fuller and her family had been shipwrecked (Richardson, 212). Thoreau was told especially to look out for the manuscript Margaret Fuller had been carrying with her, but also to look out for her remains or any property that may have belonged to her. Richardson theorizes further of this incident that “Walking out on the now-empty beach early Saturday morning, in search of that wreck of a body, made a lasting impression on Thoreau” (213). This lasting impression was also to make its ultimate debut as one of the most critical and poignant chapters of *Cape Cod*, in “The Beach Again” chapter and was to emphasize for Thoreau his most clear understanding of the fragility of human life and the unmistakable connection between death and nature.

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6 Fire Island is located directly off of Long Island, New York.

7 While this incident appears in “The Beach Again” chapter in *Cape Cod*, this act of looking for Margaret Fuller’s body also can also be seen reflected in the very first chapter of the book, “The Shipwreck.”
The next trip Thoreau took to Cape Cod was in July of 1855, again accompanied by Ellery Channing. Although, before this trip, Moldenhauer tells us that “Thoreau felt unwell, oppressed by a strange weakness in the legs, and he would not ‘begin to feel some stirrings of life’ in himself until mid-September, ‘after 4 or 5 months of invalidity & worthlessness’” (HI, 265). As we know though, Thoreau did eventually take the trip to the Cape in July and he wrote in a letter of his expectations of the trip that “‘I have been a little inclined to go there & sit on the seashore a week or more…I go simply for the medicine of it’” (HI, 260). From his journals, here, we can see that before and during his trip to Cape Cod in July 1855, Thoreau was most likely feeling the effects of tuberculosis on his body. Furthermore, on his last trip to the Cape alone two years later in June 1857, there is more evidence for Thoreau experiencing continued symptoms of tuberculosis. In an article from the website of the New England Historical Society, it is noted that in Thoreau’s journal entry, “On June 20, 1857, Thoreau was staying at Small’s in Truro [Cape Cod]…He complained about the fog in his diary; Thoreau suffered from tuberculosis…and the fog probably bothered his lungs.”8 On these last two trips to the Cape then, we can see Thoreau was experiencing a deterioration in his body which most likely made him ruminate even further on death in the landscape of Cape Cod.

The last familial death Thoreau was to experience in his lifetime was his father’s: John Thoreau Sr., in 1859. After his father passed away, Thoreau himself continued to decline in health from tuberculosis and also from contracting a bad bout of bronchitis in 1860. As noted above, Thoreau continued work on the manuscript of Cape Cod during this period, but his main focus was on getting other works published. In his biography, Richardson posits an interpretation concerning Thoreau’s feelings on his brother’s death versus his feelings on his

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own death, saying that “Thoreau had been unable to cope with his brother John’s death many years earlier, but now he fully accepted his own” (388). Henry Salt also believes of this time before Thoreau’s death that “The thought of death was never a cause of anxiety to him” (211). Further describing Thoreau’s behavior near the time of his death, Richardson notes that Thoreau remained committed to his writing and philosophy of nature, and when: “No longer able to write, he dictated to Sophia. By early April his voice had been only a faint whisper for many weeks. But his mind, wit, and spirits held” (388).

By recounting part of Thoreau’s life and the context behind his four trips to Cape Cod, it becomes clear that this latter period of Thoreau’s life was fraught with thoughts on death—of family members, shipwrecks, and his own mortal illness. However, especially looking to Richardson’s examination of Thoreau in his biography, it seems that Thoreau never lost faith in life or nature, and remained positive and devoted to his writing until his last days. From these encounters with death and sickness, rather than losing hope, Thoreau instead derived a knowledge of life which became powerful to him—for as he wrote in Walden, “The amount of it is, if a man is alive, there is always danger that he may die” (his emphasis, 106). Yet, this same danger must be acknowledged, for if we or Thoreau are to live and be awakened, we must also recognize that part of life is death, and revel in that fact. Cape Cod, from the first chapter of “The Shipwreck,” confronts the facts of life, and especially the fact of death in nature, with a force unlike any of Thoreau’s other works. In Cape Cod, Thoreau truly comes to “front only the essential facts of life” and death (Walden, 65). As I shall continue to contend in my argument, Thoreau ends up redefining and reevaluating his conceptions of the sublime, the power of nature, his wakefulness doctrine, and his own perceptions from constantly interacting with death on the shoreline of Cape Cod.
On his four trips to Cape Cod, one of the simplest lessons Thoreau learned from the
terrific and awe-inspiring ocean—that “strange shore”—was experiencing a type of beauty like
none he had ever known (CC, 24). In the first chapter of his book titled “The Shipwreck,”
Thoreau learns on his way to Cape Cod that the *St. John*, which was carrying Irish passengers to
America, has recently shipwrecked off the coast of a town called Cohasset (which is located
before the beginning of Cape Cod). Because of this, Thoreau decides to take a detour to the
beach at Cohasset to view what remains of the wreck, which occurred only three days before his
arrival. Walking along the shore at Cohasset, Thoreau comes upon across many pieces of the *St.
John*, such as: cloth, parts of the ship, and even bodies washed up on shore. Reflecting on all he
has seen in his first encounter of the shore and the power of the Atlantic, Thoreau notes, “I saw
that the beauty of the shore itself was wrecked for many a lonely walker there, until he could
perceive, at last, how its beauty was enhanced by wrecks like this, and it acquired thus a rarer
and sublimer beauty still” (CC, 10). Here, Thoreau discovers that a “sublime beauty” of nature
is imparted to him through the recognition of death and its powerful effect upon the shore. From
this first chapter of *Cape Cod*, then, as Thoreau begins to acknowledge nature’s frequent hand in
death, nature additionally takes on a more potent, amazing, and beautiful quality for him.

Only a few days after Thoreau comes to the realization of how nature can be enhanced by
scenes of death at the beach in Cohasset, Thoreau continues to encounter some of the most
beautiful, mystical, and enchanting landscapes of his life on the Cape. In one particularly
descriptive and powerful passage, Thoreau writes about the changing colors of the ocean. Sitting
beside Ellery Channing on the sand-bank, looking out to sea as he had become accustomed to do
on this journey, Thoreau notes:

“’To-day it was the Purple Sea, an epithet which I should not before have accepted. There
were distinct patches of the color of a purple grape with the bloom rubbed off. But first
and last the sea is of all colors….Commonly, in calm weather, for half a mile from the shore, where the bottom tinges it, the sea is green, or greenish…then blue for many miles, often with purple tinges, bounded in the distance by a light almost silvery stripe; beyond which there is generally a dark-blue rim, like a mountain ridge in the horizon, as if, like that, it owed its color to the intervening atmosphere…Thus we sat on the foaming shore, looking on the wine-colored ocean” (CC, 93-94).

This passage is one of Cape Cod’s loveliest and most detailed descriptions of the beauty of the sea. As Thoreau reveals to us in the quote above, he sees colors which produce a phenomenon in nature that he would not have believed before his visit. This all-colorful ocean, which changes tint and ferocity within minutes, is one that truly inspired Thoreau, and impressed upon him a new sense of the wonder and power of nature—and of its particular beauty.

Another place in Cape Cod where Thoreau revels in the particular beauty emphasized by the more desolate aspects of the Cape Cod landscape, is towards the end of his journey. Touring around Provincetown, the last town at the very tip of the Cape and Massachusetts, Thoreau walks over the top of a sand dune and discovers:

“Notwithstanding the universal bareness, and the contiguity of the desert, I never saw an autumnal landscape so beautifully painted as this was. It was like the richest rug imaginable spread over an uneven surface; no damask nor velvet, nor Tyrian dye or stuffs, nor the work of any loom, could ever match it…Coming from the country as I did, and many autumnal woods as I had seen, this was perhaps the most novel and remarkable sight that I saw on the Cape…the brightness of the tints was enhanced by contrast with the sand” (CC, 152-153).

Thoreau, who spent two years writing at and on Walden Pond, living in the woods, encounters the most beautiful autumn he has yet seen in the barren and sandy Cape landscape. That Thoreau had “never [seen] an autumnal landscape so beautifully painted as this was,” says volumes of the natural beauty Thoreau experienced on the Cape—for even Walden, his home-away-from-home, his woodland sanctuary—cannot compete with the autumnal landscape displayed by the Cape that Thoreau describes here.
On Cape Cod, however, Thoreau also newly learns that for himself, the sublime in the landscape of Cape Cod, and all nature for that matter, has become a type of intense beauty for him.9 Travelling along a bumpy road by stagecoach, Thoreau’s guide points outside, mentioning that “‘The view has not much of the beautiful in it, but it communicates a strong emotion of the sublime” upon which Thoreau addresses his reader, saying, “That is the kind of communication which we love to have made to us” (CC, 21). As opposed to the preferences of their guide, however, for Thoreau, beauty is indeed present in this sublimely dreary landscape. Thoreau even states this fact himself in “The Plains of Nauset” chapter, proclaiming: “Every landscape which is dreary enough has a certain beauty to my eyes, and in this instance its permanent qualities were enhanced by the weather. Everything told of the sea” (CC, 25). Here, Thoreau confirms and coalesces ideas about nature and the wild which he had famously stated in “Walking”: “My spirits infallibly rise in proportion to the outward dreariness. Give me the ocean, the desert, or the wilderness!...Life consists with wildness. The most alive is the wildest” (275, 274). Thoreau’s reverence for dreariness and his exhilaration in the wild are reaffirmed and cemented on the Cape, even though nature there has a quality of morbidity Thoreau had never conceived of before. For, in Cape Cod, this same dreariness he praises in “Walking” now takes on a sublimity and also “has a certain beauty” to his eyes. Later, Thoreau underscores even further what he thinks is a notable aspect of the sublime, commenting on the Cape town he preferred above all others, that “we liked Dennis well, better than any town we had seen on the Cape, it was so

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9 While the sublime and beautiful are by definition different, and in most contexts the beautiful does not denote the sublime, nor vice versa, Thoreau seems to become cognizant in Cape Cod, that the sublime is his new conception of the beautiful. Just as many other poets and writers who have come before and after Thoreau also seem to note, the sublime becomes the same as beauty in nature. For similarly, Wordsworth announces in his Prelude that, “I should need/ Colours and words that are unknown to man, / To paint the visionary dreariness” (Book 12, line 255-256) or as Wallace Stevens writes in his “Sunday Morning” that “Death is the mother of beauty” (line 48). For many poets and writers then, death and dreariness spur an experience of the sublime which becomes further beautiful when represented in nature.
novel, and, in that stormy day, so sublimely dreary” (CC, 21). Thoreau’s definition of sublime, while certainly complicated, is clarified here, since in Cape Cod he encounters a sense of the sublime only in confrontations of death, and dreariness. Thoreau’s realization of the sublime and thus also the dreary, as beautiful in Cape Cod, marks a distinct shift from his more conventional sense of what is beautiful in Walden. On the Cape, the landscape of the sea and death challenge Thoreau, and force him to understand that at this later point in his life, he experiences nature as beautiful especially in its expressions of sublime dreariness, death, and wildness.

Aside from simply discerning that the sublime and dreary in nature are beautiful to him, Thoreau also learns in Cape Cod that the ocean has an immutability which seems to apply to no other thing in nature. The ocean, Thoreau apprehends, unlike Walden Pond and its woods, cannot be changed by man. Thoreau knows well that woods can be felled and used up by industry, and Walden Pond could one day eventually become the reservoir of public water for Concord—but the ocean, though it can be sailed—cannot be tamed. Thoreau persuasively describes the ocean’s immutability in a passage in “The Sea and the Desert” chapter, where he recollects about when the whaling industry was at its zenith:

“Though there were once more whales cast up here, I think that [the sea] was never more wild than now. We do not associate the idea of antiquity with the ocean, nor wonder how it looked a thousand years ago, as we do of the land, for it was equally wild and unfathomable always. The Indians have left no traces on its surface, but it is the same to the civilized man and the savage. The aspect of the shore only has changed” (CC, 148).

From this passage we learn that not only can the sea not be tamed by man, but if anything, as Thoreau notes, it “was never more wild than now”! The sea, unlike other aspects of the land and nature, levels all differences of class and power—for neither the Indian nor the colonizer can take control of the ocean. In this same passage, Thoreau discovers that the ocean has an additional special aspect of infinitude, for as he says, “We do not associate the idea of antiquity
with the ocean, nor wonder how it looked a thousand years ago, as we do of the land, for it was equally wild and unfathomable always” (CC, 148). Thoreau finds that while the ocean has never really changed, it does not connote a sense of antiquity, either. In many ways, from this small passage, we see the ocean falls under none of the constraints of man—for it can neither be conquered by the forces of power, nor time. The ocean is a part of nature entirely beyond man’s reach, infinite and infinitely wild, and as Thoreau proclaims at one point: “There is naked Nature,— inhumanly sincere, wasting no thought on man” (CC, 147).

Later in Cape Cod, Thoreau complements this particular passage on the ocean’s immutability and infinitude further, and continues to affirm the power that the sea carries over the land. At the end of his walk up the Cape, Thoreau realizes and addresses his reader:

“If you had started when I first advised you, you might have seen our tracks in the sand, still fresh, and reaching all the way from Nauset Lights to Race Point, some thirty miles,—for at every step we made an impression on the Cape, though we were not aware of it, and though our account may have made no impression on your minds” (CC, 212).

Here again we see the pliability and mutability of the land as opposed to the ocean. By walking on the very sand which touches the ever-rolling waves, Thoreau and Ellery Channing have made their mark on the land of the Cape since “at every step [they] made an impression on the Cape.”

In his chapter titled “Axioms for Reading the Landscape: Some Guides to the American Scene,” Peirce Lewis would thus classify the shore of the Cape which is imprinted by Thoreau and Ellery Channing, not as a natural landscape, but as a “landscape made by humans—what geographers call cultural landscape…All our cultural warts and blemishes are there, and our glories too” (11-12). The shoreline, and all land for that matter, can be classified as a cultural landscape with which humans continually interact. The sea, however, while it changes its temper daily and is “a strip of glassy smoothness” one day, and “lashed into sudden fury” another day, is one of the few
truly natural landscapes left \((CC, 98)\). The ocean is a place that cannot be altered by humans, and it is wilder than any nature Thoreau has ever encountered.

The distinction which Thoreau begins to draw at the conclusion of his journey to Cape Cod between the supreme power and immutability of the ocean versus the land, is one he had also previously thought about during his time at Walden Pond. Looking out to Walden from his boat, Thoreau describes the depths of the pond and the surrounding scenery:

> “Walden is 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. Viewed from a hill-top it reflects the color of the sky, but near at hand it is of a yellowish tint next the shore where you can see the sand, then a light green which gradually deepens to a uniform dark green in the body of the pond” \((Walden, 121)\).

As Thoreau contemplates the color of Walden Pond, he finds that it reflects both the sky and the land. From this passage, Thoreau depicts Walden Pond as equally tied to the heavens and the earth—a piece of nature which reflects both the ethereal realm of the sky, and is grounded by its clear water which shows a bottom of sand. In comparing the ocean as another body of water in the same way this passage does in Walden, we can see further how Thoreau comprehends there is no link between the fluidity of the ocean and the stability of the land. In the chapter titled “The Beach Again,” as Thoreau walks along the beach, he looks out to the vessels sailing on the sea, and discovers that the distance which lay between the boats:

> “impressed us with a sense of the immensity of the ocean…and we could see what proportion man and his works bear to the globe. As we looked off, and saw the water growing darker and darker and deeper and deeper the farther we looked, till it was awful to consider, and it appeared to have no relation to the friendly land, either as shore or bottom, --of what use is a bottom if it is out of sight, if it is two or three miles from the surface, and you are to be drowned so long before you get to it, though it were made of the same stuff with your native soil?...I felt that I was a land animal” \((CC, 96)\).

Here, as opposed to Walden Pond which is still linked to the land through its reflection of both the sky and earth, the ocean shows no relationship to any land—shore or bottom. In many ways,
the untraceable bottom of the ocean also metaphorically emphasizes how Thoreau believes no man can truly understand the fierce ocean. For, in the same way Thoreau can neither see nor conceive of the ocean’s bottom—“awful to consider”—he cannot fully know the ocean, nor understand its relentless, indifferent, but also sublime force.

While Thoreau comes to learn he can never fully grasp nor understand the ocean, he is able to recognize from the landscape of the Cape the importance of acknowledging the entirety of the life cycle—including death. For, in the ocean, Thoreau sees the cycles of life played out again and again. And while death is a theme emphasized repeatedly in *Cape Cod*, life is often found to arise out of the death as well. Recalling what he has learned from an unknown historical source, Thoreau quotes that “‘the sea, and not the land, is the principal seat of life…and that…modern investigations…merely go to confirm the great idea which was vaguely anticipated by the ancient poets and philosophers, that the Ocean is the origin of all things’” (*CC*, 99-100). Here, Thoreau comes to understand that although death is ever present in the ocean, the sea, upon which so many have been wrecked, is actually the source of all life.

In her own essay, Talley also affirms that the sea is the origin of all life, but further complicates this idea by arguing that out of death, the sea also provides sources of new life. The basis of Talley’s argument is fortified by the idea that the inhabitants of the Cape are constantly supplied food and other necessities from shipwrecks, which allow them to further support themselves. Talley theorizes that “in *Cape Cod*, his least-known and darkest book, Thoreau uses food and drink symbolically to show how, in even the most desolate of circumstances, humans can adapt and improve their condition by recognizing the gifts of nature and living in correspondence with them” (84). Furthermore, Talley discovers that in *Cape Cod*, Thoreau learns that the natives’ diet consists of “an unconventional mixture of the wild and the cultivated,
[and] is largely dependent on the motley harvest they are able to reap from the ocean and their
garden…nature and shipwrecks are the source of both life and death” (88, 90). The natives of
Cape Cod thus subsist off of supplies and crops which are imparted to them through shipwreck.
In the landscape of *Cape Cod*, Thoreau’s notion of the cycle of life becomes clearer and more
expanded than had recognized before, as he deduces that both death imparts life, and life leads to
death. Talley concludes her study of gastronomic images in *Cape Cod* by supposing that
Thoreau’s words: “reveal his belief that humans should emulate the Cape Codders by
recognizing and accommodating themselves to God’s sovereign power and by accepting that
they are but a small part of the continuous flow of all life, an idea that does not necessarily mean
that death has the final word in nature’s infinite domain…physical death is merely a part of the
eternal cycle” (97). Consequently, recognizing the entirety of the life cycle and its origin,
destruction, and generation again in the ocean, is a significant piece of information the natives of
Cape Cod and the ocean convey to Thoreau. As Thoreau recognizes the importance of life as a
cycle which begins and ends in death, he seems to also begin the process of reevaluating his
philosophy of wakefulness and living in the present.

In the same way Thoreau encounters a new beauty and sublimity in nature, the particular
power of the ocean over the land, and the role death plays in both the beginning and end of life,
Thoreau also comes to a new realization of the faultiness of his own perception on Cape Cod.
Throughout the travelogue, the landscape of Cape Cod reveals time and again to Thoreau the
defectiveness of his own perceptions through the many mirages and mis-perceptions Thoreau
experiences on the beach. More specifically, through Thoreau’s increased familiarity with the
shoreline and ocean which constantly thwart his sense of reality, it seems he is forced to
recognize the uncertainty of life in the face of death. In his *Thoreau as Romantic Naturalist*,
McIntosh writes specifically on Thoreau’s perception in *Cape Cod* and concludes his analysis of “The Shipwreck” chapter by stating of Thoreau:

“He has indeed been troubled by the evidence of tragedy on the seashore; but he is able to overcome his trouble by the Thoreauvian effort of going again and again to nature…Probably it can justly be said that Thoreau moves away in the course of his career from a conception of his relation to nature as one of mutual sympathy toward a soberer conception, according which he perceives nature without expecting that it will offer him anything but his own perceptions in return” (234, 235).

Here, McIntosh aptly theorizes that by the end of his journey to *Cape Cod*, Thoreau apprehends that all nature truly offers him are his own perceptions. However, expanding further on McIntosh’s assertions, I want to contend that while Thoreau does realize that all nature may offer him now are his own perceptions, this does not necessarily distance him from nature.

Additionally, I believe that McIntosh’s idea becomes further complicated when Thoreau’s own perceptions of nature and the landscape, deceive him. For, this death-filled landscape is one which thwarts all of Thoreau’s prior conceptions: of life, of his own perceptions, and of certainty itself.

In the first few chapters of *Cape Cod*, Thoreau has already begun to learn how frequently his own senses, perceptions, and even his ability to write of this place, will be frustrated by this particular landscape. As Thoreau tells us early on in the travelogue, it is impossible to fully communicate the Cape in his text. Thoreau thus continues to try to relate the landscape and experience of the Cape to us, but identifies that some factors of his experience, such as the smell or sounds of the Cape, are harder to transcribe to words; he concedes: “Though for some time I have not spoken of the roaring of the breakers, and the ceaseless flux and reflux of the waves, yet they did not for a moment cease to dash and roar, with such a tumult that, if you had been there, you could scarcely have heard my voice the while; and they are dashing and roaring this very moment, though it may be with less din and violence, for there the sea never rests” (*CC*, 51). As
Thoreau has found with writing about nature before, such as at Walden Pond, it is impossible to give a full account of the experience of nature through writing. On Cape Cod, particularly, it seems that the task of transferring descriptions of nature and the landscape into the text becomes even harder, for Thoreau’s perceptions are not only astonished by the scenes of death he sees, but his perceptions are also continually being distorted here. Regardless, Thoreau does not give up trying to describe this landscape, and continues to write up passages specifically about the frustration of his perception. In his second chapter titled “Stage-Coach Views,” for example, Thoreau and Channing stop for the night after their first day walking on the Cape, and Thoreau composes the following thought about the uncertainty of their perception: “we stopped for the night at Higgin’s tavern, in Orleans, feeling very much as if we were on a sand-bar in the ocean, and not knowing whether we should see land or water ahead when the mist cleared away” (CC, 23). Thus, coming to the tavern in Orleans by night and presumably being able to still hear the dash of waves upon the shore, Thoreau’s senses as a stranger to this place cannot accurately tell him whether he is on land or on a boat, and it seems only the light of morning will clear up his predicament.

Yet, truly, Thoreau finds that not even the light of day can help him to perceive his surroundings more accurately. In the next chapter titled “The Plains of Nauset,” just as Thoreau and his companion Ellery Channing have begun their daily walk along the shore, he experiences an odd sight: “we saw [a solitary traveller] perambulating in the distance, loomed like a giant…Men and boys would have appeared alike at a little distance, there being no object by which to measure them. Indeed, to an inlander, the Cape landscape is a constant mirage” (CC, 32). In this landscape, Thoreau is not only a stranger and a visitor, but also an inlander. Thoreau thus believes that his status as an inlander causes him fundamentally not to be able to distinguish
objects, and even people, in the landscape around him. Yet—while Thoreau does not explicitly mention this—are not even the natives of Cape Cod, and all humans, truly, inlanders? It seems that though one may grow accustomed to the constant mirages of this landscape as a native, and also learn over time that what appears to be a distorted, looming giant, is in reality a man—that really—the natives’ eyes will still see the same mirage Thoreau himself first sees on his visit to the Cape.

Throughout the book and his walk across the Cape, we can appreciate that Thoreau thus encounters a variety of different kinds of mis-perceptions—ranging from mistaking the size of an object, to mistaking an object entirely for something else, to simply seeing something that is not there—yet he calls all of these apparitions or mistakes in perception, “mirages.” One example of a mirage of size Thoreau experiences is depicted for us in “The Beach” chapter. Thoreau comments in this chapter that “As we looked out over the water, the smallest objects floating on it appeared indefinitely large, we were so impressed by the vastness of the ocean, and each one bore so large a proportion to the whole ocean, which we saw” (CC, 52). Another type of mirage Thoreau sees as he walks along the last part of the Cape in Truro and Provincetown is the water mirage described in “The Sea and the Desert.” Thoreau observes of the mirage that:

> “On our way thither [to Provincetown] we had occasion to admire the various beautiful and colors of the sand, and noticed an interesting mirage…We were crossing a shallow valley in the Desert, where the smooth and spotless sand sloped upward by a small angle to the horizon on every side, and at the lowest part was a long chain of clear but shallow pools…They appeared to lie by magic on the side of the vale, like a mirror left in a slanting position. It was a very pretty mirage for a Provincetown desert, but not amounting to what, in Sanscrit, is called ‘the thirst of the gazelle,’ as there was real water here for a base” (CC, 150-151).

These two examples of mirages show the complex variety of ways in which Thoreau’s senses seem unable to the properly perceive the landscape of the Cape. Whether Thoreau’s perceptions
are constantly thwarted as an effect of him being an inlander or not, it seems the particular and peculiar landscape of the Cape is prone to producing an uncertainty of perception.

In his article titled “Thoreau’s Rhetoric of Estrangement in Cape Cod: Looking at America through a Knot-hole,” Bradley Ray King also talks extensively of the uncertainty produced by Thoreau’s exploration of the Cape. In the final passage of Cape Cod, King deems Thoreau’s physical positioning towards the ocean to be meaningful and to emphasize uncertainty; he elaborates on this, saying, “The text’s final image of Thoreau standing on the unstable shore and facing the unpredictable ocean materially expresses the unavailability of certainty” (42-43). Similar to King, in her own chapter of Thoreauvian Modernities, Laura Dassow Walls also believes Cape Cod is a book which breaks down certainty and all forms of human knowledge. Dassow therefore declares that Cape Cod is “riddled throughout with multiple viewpoints…and moods that pluralize, carnivalize even, any singularity of perspective…the planetary ocean…mocks our cardinal directions and nibbles at the base of all our foundations, from piers and ports to history and knowledge” (32). Here, adding to King’s sentiments on uncertainty, Dassow Walls posits additionally that the ocean, and nature itself, erodes all human knowledge and certainty. The unavailability of certainty on the Cape, then, is produced by not only the physical perceiving of the landscape itself and mirages produced therein, but is also seems to be produced upon the contemplation of the Cape and the themes of death so present there.

The idea of a comprehensive uncertainty produced by the landscape of the Cape, constant mirages, and dwelling upon death, is represented poignantly in perhaps the most significant passage of Cape Cod. This passage occurs in the chapter titled “The Beach Again,” where Thoreau continues to reflect upon mirages and his incapability to perceive the landscape
correctly. Thoreau is in a particularly relaxed state of mind before he confronts the newest mirage he will see. Thoreau writes that “We made no haste, since we wished to see the ocean at our leisure” (CC, 83). But then, walking along, Thoreau happens to turn back to see men hauling away an object that had just washed up on the beach behind him, and he relates to us what he saw:

“we turned round, by chance, and saw large black object which the waves had just cast up on the beach behind us, yet too far off for us to distinguish what it was…As we approached, it took successively the form of a huge fish, a drowned man, a sail or net, and finally a mass of tow-cloth, part of the cargo of the Franklin” (CC, 83-84).

Here, Thoreau’s perception on the beach morphs a simple tow-cloth into an abundance of strange and dark things. Further distilling his sentiments on mirages near the ocean, Thoreau notes that “Objects on the beach, whether men or inanimate things, look not only exceedingly grotesque, but much larger and more wonderful than they actually are” (CC, 84). Walking along the beach, Thoreau’s perception continues to be distorted, and he mistakes objects not only as larger than they actually are, but also as other than what they actually are, saying: “Lately, when approaching the sea-shore several degrees south of this, I saw before me, seemingly half a mile distant, what appeared like bold and rugged cliffs on the beach, fifteen feet high…but after a few steps it was proved to be low heaps of rags—part of the cargo of a wrecked vessel,—scarcely more than a foot in height” (CC, 84).

Subsequently, this mirage invites Thoreau to recall the memory of when, in July 1850, he went searching for the body of Margaret Fuller on Fire Island. While Thoreau never actually found the remains of Fuller, in the recollections of searching for her body which come next, he talks of some remains he did encounter along the beach at Fire Island. These remains also appear first as a type of mirage and Thoreau remembers of them that they exerted a much larger presence on the beach than he had anticipated:
“I expected that I must look very narrowly to find so small an object, but the sandy beach, half a mile wide, and stretching farther than the eye could reach, was so perfectly smooth and bare, and the mirage toward the sea so magnifying, that when I was half a mile distant the insignificant sliver which marked the spot looked like a bleached spar, and the relics were as conspicuous as if they lay in state on that sandy plain, or a generation had labored to pile up their cairn there. Close at hand they were simply some bones with a little flesh adhering to them, in fact, only a slight inequality in the sweep of the shore. There was nothing at all remarkable about them, and they were singularly inoffensive both to the senses and the imagination. But as I stood there they grew more and more imposing. They were alone with the beach and the sea, whose hollow roar seemed addressed to them, and I was impressed as if there was an understanding between them and the ocean which necessarily left me out, with my sniveling sympathies. That dead body had taken possession of the shore, and reigned over it as no living one could, in the name of a certain majesty which belonged to it” (CC, 84-85).

In this unforgettable and truly remarkable passage, Thoreau acknowledges the inherent connection shared between death and nature. Here, Thoreau demonstrates that death and the sea, one of the wildest parts of nature, have a connection deeper than any living being and nature ever will have, and as Thoreau states of the remains, “They were alone with the beach and the sea, whose hollow roar seemed addressed to them, and I was impressed as if there was an understanding between them and the ocean which necessarily left me out, with my sniveling sympathies” (CC, 84). In a sense, to become unified with nature, one must die. Thus, Thoreau, in his present state of life, cannot become as completely unified with nature as this dead body on the shore is. Rather, Thoreau’s very human “sniveling sympathies” and perceptions are inadequate to understand the sea, and he grasps here that he can never completely or wholly become one with this immutable, wild nature. While Thoreau is alive, then, he will always be somewhat distant from nature.

This realization of a distance from nature, however, does not mean Thoreau experiences a loss of faith in nature. I do not concede, as McIntosh does, that when Thoreau realizes all he is left with are his own perceptions of nature, he becomes completely alienated from nature. Contrary to this, from the indifferent and deathly scene he experiences on the beach and in
observing the ocean, I believe Thoreau rather renews and extends his own philosophy on nature and his wakefulness doctrine. In contemplating the ocean, particularly, Thoreau has a revelation about his doctrine of wakefulness and always living in the present. For he realizes, upon contemplating the body on the shore, and other forms of death that appear in the ocean, that embracing the future is an significant part of being able to live consciously.

Starting as early as the first chapter of *Cape Cod*, Thoreau notices the quality of futurity which exists in the ocean, and describes, “As I looked over the water, I saw the isles rapidly wasting away, the sea nibbling voraciously at the continent…On the other hand, these wrecks of isles were being fancifully arranged into new shores, as at Hog Island, inside of Hull, where every thing seemed to be gently lapsing into futurity” (*CC*, 12). In this way, Thoreau sees the dual quality of an ocean that is always destroying and creating. Specifically, though, the actions of destroying and creating are always motioning towards the future. And with the forward lapping motion of these actions, the past becomes forgotten, such as he notes of the beach where he viewed the shipwreck of the *St. John*: “The ocean did not look, now, as if any were ever shipwrecked in it…Not a vestige of a wreck was visible, nor could I believe that the bones of many a shipwrecked man were buried in that pure sand” (*CC*, 14). Not only does the ocean always seem to be lapsing into the future for Thoreau, then, but it also appears to have a timeless nature which recalls of no past. On Cape Cod, Thoreau realizes that being merely possessed by the present is not an encompassing enough philosophy for him now. In confronting death and all the forms of the future which the ocean represents in *Cape Cod*, there is thus a significant maturation of the wakefulness philosophy Thoreau espouses in Walden. Thoreau recognizes here that to be awake, and to also cherish the present, one must always be aware of the future, and one’s own mortal existence.
In this way, the Cape and the natural scenery of the ocean teaches Thoreau that one of the most important parts of life, is death. Indeed, our definition of life as humans would be far different if it lacked a finite mortality, and Thoreau learns that if one is truly to live life consciously, he must also realize that an integral part of life is death, and not slumber ignoring this inevitable fact. Walking along the backside of the Cape for thirty miles, adjacent to the ever-pounding sea, Thoreau is able to appreciate how the landscape of the Cape instills one with a knowledge of one’s own death (and thus all humanity’s future). In a very human way as well, Thoreau apprehends that this acknowledgement of one’s own mortality is frightening, and aptly summarizes this feeling, relating to us that:

“But the inhabitants travel the waste here and there…by narrow footpaths through which the sand flows out and reveals the nakedness of the land. We shuddered at the thought of living there and taking our afternoon walks over those barren swells, where we could overlook every step of our walk before taking it, and would have to pray for a fog or a snow-storm to conceal our destiny” (CC, 107).

The landscape of the Cape reveals, unabashedly, the destiny of all men. But, confronting the fact of death in nature is what truly makes Cape Cod such a significant work of Thoreau’s. By acknowledging death in nature, and death as a part of life, Thoreau comes to a fuller understanding of himself, and of his perceptions in nature. For, as Thoreau states in “The Highland Light” chapter, “There are more consequences to a shipwreck than the underwriters notice” (CC, 128).

From Thoreau’s ruminations throughout Cape Cod, we have seen that the further consequences of a shipwreck can include experiencing a sublime in nature like none other, comprehending the power and indifference of the ocean, and accepting that all nature is truly composed of, is one’s own perception. This last realization, especially—that all Thoreau can truly know of nature is what his own perceptions produce, (and that his perceptions as such can
be flawed in seeing mirages, etc.)—is another step forward in Thoreau’s coming to know nature and life more fully. Thus, through the death he sees on Cape Cod, Thoreau entirely cements his knowledge and relationship with nature and becomes more awake. Writing in Walden, Thoreau memorably theorizes his wakefulness doctrine, noting of humans: “We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep. I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor” (Walden, 64).

In going to Cape Cod, Thoreau attains this infinite expectation of the dawn through his new understanding of the future, and cognizance of death. Furthermore, upon confronting so much death in nature, and the dead body in harmony with the indifferent sea, Thoreau “elevates his life by a conscious endeavor” by more completely understanding nature as his own perception, and by understanding how life and nature still carry meaning when death is present and inevitable. In discovering that the indifferent, “sublimely dreary” sea is the product of his own perceptions alone, then, Thoreau actually bridges any gap which might stand in the way of man’s full relationship with nature. Truly, in this awakening of perception which Thoreau experiences in Cape Cod, Thoreau recognizes that he is not in fact distanced from nature—for nature exists within him.
Works Cited


Works Consulted


