Humanity, Divinity, and the World in Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* and Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*
With all its sham, drudgery, and broken dreams,
it is still a beautiful world.
Be cheerful.
Strive to be happy.

Max Ehrmann, Desiderata
ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis is to demonstrate the ways in which Annie Dillard and Henry Thoreau approach the problem of the human in the world as separated from God and the divine. Through a close textual analysis of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *Walden* the position of each writer is determined. The thesis is broken into three chapters, each including its own subsequent sections for the purpose of further clarifying the arguments within for the reader. The introduction provides a background for why this thesis exists, its conception, and influences, as well as a thorough outline of the thesis body to follow. Chapter one focuses on the way in which Dillard and Thoreau both view the relationship of humanity with the divine, with the natural/animal world, and the obstacles that those individual relationships give rise to. Chapter two is concerned with Dillard's and Thoreau's ideas regarding what the symptoms humanity has to its plight as outlined in the first chapter are, and also with the human reaction to the symptoms they find themselves confronting. Finally, chapter three outlines Dillard's and Thoreau's specific solutions to combatting and overcoming the human reaction to its existence in the world in a way that will open a connection between the human being and the divine and that will allow the individual to more fully exist in a reality unclouded and uncovered by human production, materialistic obsession, and a linguistic framework of meaning and imposed suggestion on all things found in the world. The conclusion reiterates the overarching argument of the thesis and segues into a consideration of further questions that were raised over the process of developing the thesis project, including the difficulties faced by Thoreau over the course of living *Walden*, and the uniquely tangled relationship between Dillard and Thoreau that came into clarity by the project’s end.
INTRODUCTION

Coming into this project was very much like, in its own way, undertaking a journey like those taken by Henry David Thoreau and Annie Dillard in their respective projects - something entirely unexpected, occasionally frustrating and infuriating, and sometimes remarkably rewarding. The original motivation for this thesis was rooted in Georges Bataille’s Theory of Religion, a text that concerns itself with the state of the human in the world. In Bataille’s opinion, humans have been entirely shut out of the animal world. “Nothing,” he writes,

as a matter of fact, is more closed to us than this animal life from which we are descended. Nothing is more foreign to our way of thinking than the earth in the middle of the silent universe and having neither the meaning that man gives things, nor the meaninglessness of things as soon as we try to imagine them without a consciousness that reflects them.1

Bataille argues that humans are fundamentally isolated in the world due to their unique perspectives and modes of thought. As he says in the passage, the idea of trying to comprehend of the world and the universe in a way divorced from human-imposed meaning is foreign to us, is all but impossible. To Bataille’s eye, “every animal is in the world like water in water.”2 In other words, there is no separation between the embodied animal and the natural world; they exist together, flawlessly. Humans, however, see things, and that gets in the way of a seamless existence: “There was no landscape in the world where the eyes that opened did not apprehend what they looked at, where indeed, in our terms, the eyes did not see.”3 When we see things, we immediately busy ourselves with making sense of them, and if we do not see, then we are left “stupidly contemplating that absence of vision. There was no vision, there was nothing but an

2 Ibid, 19.
3 Ibid, 21.
empty intoxication limited by terror, suffering, and death.”⁴ Where human intelligence is able to grasp nuances of vision, “the animal cannot realize them.”⁵ Thus, in essence, Bataille argues that humanity is definitively separate from the animal. It was not only Bataille’s perspective regarding the human position in the world, but also his unique attitude regarding the actions taken by humanity in response to its isolated existence, that prompted *Theory of Religion* to haunt many a thesis dream.

Bataille links humanity’s discomfort and sense of unbelonging in this intensely foreign world to a push towards a mimicry of immanence (the acceptance of mortality and the inevitability of death) and of intimacy (a sense of total immersion in the world, to be like water in water). “The animal accepted the immanence that submerged it without apparent protest,” whereas man horrified.⁶ Animals have no trouble at all living in the natural world, unthinkingly surrendering themselves to its processes. Humans have a huge amount of trouble. The animal opens for the human a depth. “I know this depth,” Bataille writes, “it is my own. It is also that which is farthest removed from me, that which...means precisely *that which is unfathomable to me.*”⁷ We can’t get into that depth, and so we try to forget about it, through creation. Humanity begins to make things to fill the world, to create a world in which it can exist like water in water, and yet, “the effect of works is eventually to reduce divinity - and the desire for divinity - once again to thinghood.”⁸ Essentially, Bataille argues that our desperate bid for salvation and unification with the natural world is entirely wrong and that if we are going to go about doing it correctly, “it is a question of tearing man away from the order of works.”⁹ In brief, these were

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⁴ Ibid, 21.  
⁵ Ibid, 19.  
⁶ Ibid, 22.  
⁷ Ibid, 22.  
⁸ Ibid, 88.  
⁹ Ibid, 89.
the themes from *Theory of Religion* that were so appealing and hung around to provide inspiration for the ultimately settled-upon subject: The human condition as portrayed in *Walden* and in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

After initial concerns about winding-up in a position of either summarizing Bataille’s points from *Theory of Religion* in order to argue for their correctness, or one of simply making *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* into an allegory of *Theory of Religion*, Bataille was shelved. A new pursuit took shape in the form of a comparative project focused on *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *Walden*. Both Annie Dillard and Henry David Thoreau grapple with issues of the human condition and the misplacement of divinity in the world. Each tackled topics related to those initial inspirations from Bataille while being separate and individual to each of the writers. Most difficult was having the awareness that I was going to have to wait for the texts to speak to me, rather than having a message in mind to which I wished to make them speak. It was like knowing that I had to give speech on a soap box where the box and the crowd were waiting but where the speech did not exist. The project started on very broad terms with no delineated rhyme or reason, governed only by a vague sense of keeping an eye out for the animal presence in each of the texts. It hardly needs to be said that this vague sense didn’t do any particularly powerful propelling. Just as Dillard and Thoreau waded through human condition and natural world alike, attempting to alight upon divinity, I waded through Dillard and Thoreau, intent upon finding analytical breakthrough.

Over the course of reading *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *Walden* it became increasingly clear that both writers were dealing with variations on the same theme: humanity in the world. Thoreau is interested in making his way outside of the social box, to live a noble life, different
from that of most people around him, and having embarked on this path, he discovers that it is not an easy or straightforward one. In Thoreau’s *Development in Walden*, Paul Schwaber writes,

> What becomes clear through the course of the book, and what commands our respect for the man and the lessons he would teach us, is that he slowly, patiently, even arduously, attains that life he values and by which he judged the lives of his neighbors to be insufficient models for him to follow.\(^\text{10}\)

However, it is actually made fairly clear that Thoreau does not feel that he has ended-up exactly where he intended, that the values of society still hold him in their grip. But, it is true that Thoreau’s progress is painstaking and determined. He wants to discover humanity’s true place in the world, outside of the place it has carved for itself, “Society was made for man.” Man was not made for society. “The mass never comes up to the standard of its best member, but on the contrary degrades itself to a level with the lowest.”\(^\text{11}\) It is this that Thoreau wishes to address.

Dillard’s intent in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is less to escape from society and more to uncover the human through an examination of the natural and the animal. She makes observations about what she sees and then puts those observations into conversation with her ideas about human beings and “unlike Thoreau’s *Walden*, where the author’s imagination speaks for nature, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* allows nature itself to reveal the divine.”\(^\text{12}\) Dillard attempts to put herself at a vantage point from which she will receive everything that comes her way from the natural world. She is a receiver while Thoreau is an imposer. Elaine Tietjen has the following to say in her work *Perceptions of Nature: Annie Dillard’s Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*:

> Looking so closely at eternity, Dillard was torn between beauty and horror throughout her ‘mystical excursion’ in *Pilgrim*. The *logos* force compelled her

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to explore, analyze, and question the meaning of existence, and eventually to write a reasoning book. *Logos* also, necessarily, divided her from the very world she sought, while the force of eros compelled her toward integration. *Pilgrim* is Dillard’s effort to find a balance point between reason and intuition, classification, and unification.”

As the passage states, Dillard holds a stance the straddles thought and emotion. The back and forth between thought and emotion continues as a constant thread throughout the novel and is a driving force for Dillard’s perspectives regarding humanity.

Dillard and Thoreau are both interested in finding a way to unify humanity with the divine. Both writers are of the opinion that humanity has gone off track with respect to their relationship with the world and with the divine. The divine for Dillard is the whole picture - it is the combination of earth, universe, and all of its inhabitants. The divine is the sense of the world as it exists, its truths and realities. Humans are separated from the divine due to their particularities as human beings, certain traits and attributes that are different from those possessed by animals. For Thoreau the divine exists through a development of the mind; God and the divine exist in simplicity and creative thought. Humanity has become distracted by itself, having relegated God to a distant and far-off position, and convincing itself that success, both spiritual and worldly comes through materialistic means.

This project explores the question of “How do Dillard and Thoreau feel humanity may reach its greatest connection with the divine?” in three parts. Chapter one concerns itself with the position of the human in the world: the human and the divine, the human and the natural world/the animal, and the obstacles faced by humanity. Both Dillard and Thoreau see the human as being a misplaced creature in the world, and through our misplacement, we look for the

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13 Elaine Tietjen, "Perceptions of Nature: Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*," *North Dakota Quarterly* 56.3 (Summer 1988).
divine. Dillard sees a humanity that has created a God to reflect itself and to reassure itself of rhyme and reason in a world that spins unthinkingly on its axis. God is something unfathomable in the literal sense, mysterious, yet can be intuited. For her, the Fall and creation are one and the same, and the Fall was certainly not a negative event, but rather, a gift to humankind, giving it beauty and feeling. Dillard sees us as denying that truth. Thoreau argues that the overall incomprehensibility of the universe and nature is an indicator of a divine presence, but, that we mistakenly make God a wholly foreign presence. Thoreau sees the Fall by the book: it was a loss of the perfect state for humanity, and redemption involves a reestablishment of a state similar to that of an unfallen Adam and Eve.

Humanity’s relationship with the natural world/animal is equally as conflicted as the one with the divine. Thoreau sees human beings as being in a constant battle with the animal part of themselves, brought onto the same level as the animal through the tumble from grace. The animal is representative of those baser impulses that Thoreau sees as keeping humanity from its poetic, spiritual self, the self that is needed to achieve a connection to the divine and God. Sadly, for Thoreau, humanity has more or less given itself over to that animal self, resigning itself to a hurried and relatively unthinking existence that leaves it with a sense of desperation. Dillard takes the stance that humanity buffers itself from the natural and animal worlds because to keep itself open to it in its entirety would be damaging and overwhelming. Human beings are blessed and cursed with imagination and emotion, and are innately self-aware. For Dillard, these things create a conflict with interacting with the reality of nature. Where Thoreau sees there being tension between the human and the animal, Dillard sees a general disconnect. However, both Dillard and Thoreau feel that humanity is vastly ignorant of the world in which it lives.
The relationship that human beings have with the divine and with the natural/animal world gives rise to obstacles that must be addressed. First and foremost, the state of ignorance doubles as a definitive obstacle in both Dillard’s and Thoreau’s opinions. Thoreau sees this overall lack of knowledge as translating into a lack of passing on of worthwhile information from one generation to another. We all exist in a state of relative blindness, which acts as a barrier between ourselves and advancement. Dillard agrees with this notion of ignorance and argues that as children we have the potential to to take everything in because we don’t know better, but that as we grow older, we feign confidence and knowledge, and block ourselves from the natural world and natural abilities of perception.

Chapter two is focused on humanity’s reaction to its plight. In other words, the way we respond to our position in the world and to the obstacles with which we are confronted. In this chapter there are two subsections: the symptoms of our plight and the way we address those symptoms. Dillard makes the claim that the immediate human symptom is emotion. Our state in the world is a lonely one, being the self-reflective, conscious creatures that we are, and seeing that the universe and evolution are unconcerned with right and wrong, life and death, prompts an emotional storm coupled with human valuations. Dillard thinks that we wind-up in a position of potentially feeling too much, to a point where, should we be unprepared, it could be damaging. Thoreau suggests that humans’ symptoms are a lack of faith and trust rooted in the incomprehensibility of existence as a whole and an intense sense of superiority that leaves us feeling as though we have the game figured out, when, in fact, that superiority is nothing more than an illusion. We understand that we cannot understand and that things happen without rhyme or reason, and are left shaken and unwilling to relinquish control. This control is connected inextricably to our sense of superiority.
Dillard and Thoreau feel that humanity responds to these symptoms differently. Dillard argues that our self-made solution for dealing with the crushingly cold world that envelops us is to warm it up through our own devices. Human beings, innate perceivers, are also innate namers, and as such, we put a label, a meaning, a significance on everything by which we are surrounded. By doing this, Dillard believes, we are casting a metaphorical veil of dissimulation over natural reality by buffering ourselves with manmade notions. Thoreau agrees that human beings are covering the natural world form themselves, but he sees production and a driving interest in material objects as being the way in which they do it. By producing and seeing the fruits of our labor, Thoreau suggests that we solidify the sense we have that we are superior and in control. Dillard and Thoreau think that, with respect to finding the divine, these human reactions are the wrong way to go about handling the condition in which we find ourselves.

The final chapter, chapter three, is a discussion of the ways in which Dillard and Thoreau feel that humanity should react to its plight, in other words, those things that people should do that will effectively bring them closer to the divine. Dillard says we have to get rid of our veil, to disassociate ourselves from learned meanings, from labels, in order to try to approach the natural world from an open perspective. This is done by regaining an innocence and adapting to include forgotten animal traits, like being able to exist in the present, divorced from the past and future. Ultimately, Dillard feels that our greatest chance lies in combining human traits like emotion and creativity with animals’ easiness, unthinking comfort, in the world. Thoreau wants humanity to allow the spiritual side of itself to trump the animal side. We must develop our higher consciousnesses and turn away from distracting ourselves with the physical world of our own making. We have to stop trying to overcome the Fall by placing ourselves in a
place of faux-mastery. Instead, we should find a real place of stewardship by honing our creative, higher impulses.

Essentially, this thesis is a journey through the human condition as seen through the texts of *Walden* and *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. It seeks to explore humanity’s position vis a vis the divine and the world, the problems and ramifications of those problems, and where humanity should aim to go. The reader will no doubt find ideas that stand in line with those belonging to Georges Bataille that were mentioned at the start of this introduction; this is to be expected as Bataille was the fundamental driving force for the project. However, ultimately, the claims and concerns of each chapter and of the work as a whole are firmly embedded in and drawn from Dillard and Thoreau. The reader should expect to find a conversation between two writers who are each seeking to elucidate themselves and their readerships about both the tragedies of human existence and the untapped potential that lies therein.

**Chapter I: The Human in the World**

In *Walden* and in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, both Thoreau and Dillard respond to the human condition. Although they react to and explore the same issues, their responses to those issues differ. There are three specific areas on which Dillard and Thoreau focus: humanity's place vis a vis the divine, humanity's relationship to the animal in itself and outside of itself, and the obstacles that present themselves due to the unique position of humans in the world. Within the examination of the divine is included Thoreau's and Dillard's distinct perspectives regarding the Fall, each of which impacts the attitude each writer takes with regard to the animal. For Dillard, humanity has *fallen into the real*. For Thoreau, humanity has suffered from a *lost reality*, existing in a state removed from truth of existence. The human relationship to the animal
brings about a discussion of humanity's imagination, self-consciousness, awareness, and its distinctive trait of emotion as all being things that separate it from and complicate its association with the animal and with the natural world. For both Thoreau and Dillard, those complications bring about certain obstacles. Humanity reacts to its differences by hiding from the discomfort that they evoke - Dillard pinpoints inattention as the ultimate problem to be overcome if the divine is to be accessed; Thoreau argues that labor, work, and production are what drive the wedge between humans and the divine still deeper. Thoreau and Dillard make the argument that for humans to truly find divinity, those obstacles have to be conquered.

THE HUMAN AND THE DIVINE

The human in the world is a misplaced creature, a part of the natural world even as it stands outside the inescapable processes of it. Both writers agree that humanity has long been in search of a lost divinity, a lost presence, a *something* that exists around us, greater than the world and the universe, to act as a reassurance for the presence of meaning in life, to convince ourselves that life indeed has purpose. The myth, the belief, the possibility of such an entity haunts human consciousness, fueled by our will to make sense of our environment and by our ceaseless questioning of ‘why.’ Why things unfold the way they do, why incomprehensible cruelties exist, why we are alone. Annie Dillard and Henry David Thoreau, at two different points in history, have made an attempt to discover where divinity hides, and to determine how one may greet it, and coexist with it, and consequently, find a position of higher existence. Centrally placed for both writers is the role and the impact of humanity’s Fall. In Dillard’s mind,
it was an event that will ultimately prove to have helped humankind. Thoreau is of the opinion that it really did impose limitation and remove us from a transcendent position. Dillard includes the usually excluded natural world while Thoreau takes the stance of the divine existing only where there is an absence of the animal. In other words, Dillard feels that the link between humanity and the animal is an important part of the human condition. Thoreau, on the other hand, is inclined to feel that anything having to do with the animal is both a barrier between humans and the divine, and a weight, pulling the individual away from accessing divinity.

For both writers, the simple idea that there is way more going on around us than we can possibly conceive of serves as a catalyst for both introspection and a careful examination of the human condition. Nature is “power and beauty, grace tangled in rapture with violence.” ¹⁴ It is practically a synaptic overload - too much for the brain to comfortably wrap itself around and internalize: “We don’t know what’s going on here. If these tremendous events are random combinations of matter run amok, the yield of millions of monkeys at millions of typewriters, then what is it in us...that they ignite?”¹⁵ The randomness of everything, the magnitude of everything, throws us for a loop. And yet, Dillard says, there is something about our inability to conceive of everything that spurs us forward. The universe may be made-up of the equivalent of the random firing of an infinite number of synapses but the result of that firing stirs us. Whether we can nail down exactly what it is or not, we are moved. Dillard wants to know why.

Similarly, Thoreau recognizes that the events of the universe and the things of the world are outside of our realm of comprehension. For him, the incomprehensibility of it all suggests a divine presence. It is this presence that prevents us from grasping the all-encompassing complexities of our universe:

¹⁵ Ibid, 16.
If we knew all the laws of Nature, we should need only one fact, or the description of one actual phenomenon, to infer all the particular results at that point. Now we know only a few laws, and our result is vitiated, not, of course, by any confusion or irregularity in Nature, but by our ignorance of essential elements in the calculation...Even when cleft or bored through it is not comprehended in its entireness.\textsuperscript{16}

The impossibility of locking down every rule, law or specificity of nature is an indicator of the divine’s greatness, of the divine’s indisputable presence. We are not hindered by a misunderstanding of nature, or by nature itself as something entirely unpredictable; instead we are hindered by not having a grasp on the very core, on the fundamental structures of nature’s functioning. In fact, even when we get literally to the center and out the other side of something, there is always an element that remains a mystery - evidence of divine presence.

Dillard suggests that God, and the universe, has grown to a size past our comprehension.

“God is subtle,” Einstein said, “but not malicious.” Again, Einstein said that nature conceals her mystery by means of her essential grandeur, not by her cunning.” It could be that God has not absconded but spread, as our vision and understanding of the universe have spread, to a fabric of spirit and sense so grand and subtle, so powerful in a new way, that we can only feel blindly of its hem.\textsuperscript{17}

However, it seems far more likely that God has not changed in the slightest. Rather, God has become hidden, perhaps buried, beneath humanity’s own agendas and ideas regarding themselves and the world. What Dillard suggests in this passage is that we have caused God to grow and to become more complex as we ourselves have grown and become more complex.

And yet, arguing such a point stands to interfere with the idea that as our visions and

understandings have grown, we have moved farther from the roots of our existence, into a realm of shadows and thoughts, into our skillfully created world that rests on notions of the active mind alone. In other words, our perception of God may have become overly intricate to reflect our own increasingly convoluted natures. That is the move that Dillard argues isolates us from a world to which it is important to be connected.

Thoreau shares the sentiment. “Men esteem truth remote,” Thoreau writes,

in the outskirts of the system, behind the farthest star, before Adam and after the last man. In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and places and occasions are now and here. God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages.18

The connection between humanity and God is one of estimation and awe. We value unreachable truths and we put such truths on the figure of God. However, in this passage, Thoreau argues that God is not in some distant place “behind the farthest star.” God is right here and right now, God is the present and this God that exists in the present is not any less divine than the conception of God to which humans cling of an entity present in the passage of time but not in the now. Just as we are struck by our inability to comprehend the wholeness of an object, of Nature, we are struck by our inability to comprehend God, and search no farther, assuming that God is only distantly present. It is the same sentiment expressed by Dillard. Human beings push God away, either by overcomplicating the idea of the divine presence (as Dillard theorizes) or by pushing God into the past, compartmentalizing God in box wholly separate from the realm of human existence. Both of these ideas could be firmly rooted in the notion of humanity’s fall from grace because, according to Christian tradition, the Fall severed humanity and God. Both Dillard and Thoreau have their own ideas regarding the nature of that fall.

Dillard writes, “Creation itself was the fall, a burst into the thorny beauty of the real.”\(^{19}\)

Her attitude towards humankind’s tumble from grace is unconventional. In fact, even referring to it as a “fall from grace” with regards to Dillard is incorrect. She does not distinguish a before the Fall and an after the Fall state for human beings. Rather, the moment we were created we were fallen, and not negatively so. Instead, by being created we were given reality in one fell swoop, complete with pain and beauty, the bad and the good. Dillard puts a new spin on a quotation from Genesis, “Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee;” when she follows it with,

> A terrible curse: But does the goldfinch eat thorny sorrow with the thistle, or do I? If this furling air is fallen, then the fall was happy indeed. If this creek-side garden is sorrow, then I seek martyrdom. This crown of thorns sits light on my skull, like wings.\(^{20}\)

It is an exceptionally heavily-laden passage, overflowing with explicit religious imagery specifically referring to the gardens of Eden and Gethsemane. The first half of the passage addresses Eden with references to thorns, thistles, and sorrow, but instead of accepting this state of affairs, Dillard rebels. She wants to argue that the natural world is no bed of thistles, that living in it is far from only being sorrowful. From this position, she transitions into allusions to the garden of Gethsemane and the crucifixion. Taking two locations that stand-in for the two greatest tragedies of humanity, Dillard twists them, turning them into blessings, asking the reader to divorce herself from commonly held perspectives in favor of considering a clean world. If the garden is sorrow, then she wants to be completely drenched in it, for it is not sorrow at all but the result of a happy fall (the felix culpa). She subtly puts herself in Jesus’ place, prompting the reader to apply Dillard’s thoughts to Jesus: perhaps Jesus, too, saw the natural world in this way,

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\(^{20}\) Ibid, 208.
removed from the Fall in Genesis. Jesus did not see his death as tragedy, but rather as a gift. As human beings, our creation is the crucifixion: pain blooming into redemption. There is no true pain in this kind of martyrdom for Dillard, everything is connected: the goldfinch, the thorny sorrow and thistle, the crown of thorns, the wings. They are the same. With creation came beauty and pain. In fact, the pain is the receptacle for the beauty. Dillard is suggesting that before the fall, before creation, there was a deficit of beauty, that beauty is inextricably attached to the real. She makes a distinction between the human and the animal with her inclusion of the goldfinch. A goldfinch will not comprehend sorrow, a person, on the other hand, may make the active choice as to whether or not to feel the sorrow, or have it thrust upon her unasked for. Feeling is martyrdom, and feeling is knowledge. When Dillard speaks of the creek, she speaks of it in its wholeness, including both the harsh realities of loss and death, and the mysterious beauty contained therein. Arguably, the thorns and the thistles exist only for humans as it is humans who have the ability to be hurt in ways that are not physical.

Though Thoreau shared an opinion regarding humanity’s attitude toward God with Dillard, his view regarding creation stands in stark contrast to Dillard’s. Thoreau makes the argument that the Fall resulted in a loss of the real, in a removal from the ideal reality and existence to which humans ought to return. Thoreau would emphatically deny that creation and the Fall were one and the same. There was creation, which was perfection, and there was the Fall, which was the eradication of that perfection. When the Fall occurred, Adam gave up his role as steward in favor of being a creature in need of stewardship. His and Eve’s transgression removed them from their original, higher position over animals. Thoreau is grounded in the more traditionally Christian idea of God and humanity’s (unfortunately) dualistic nature. We are
torn between the higher, spiritual identity, and the lower, animal identity. Thoreau focuses on temptation, the avoidance of it, and the inability to shake it.

We are conscious of the animal in us, which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers. It is reptile and sensual, and perhaps cannot be wholly expelled; like the worms which, even in life and health, occupy our bodies. Possibly we may withdraw from it, but never change its nature. I fear that it may enjoy a certain health of its own; that we may be well, yet not pure.21

It is impossible not to see the connection between this passage and the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis. The allusion to the serpent of the Old Testament cannot be ignored and neither can Thoreau’s negative attitude toward the animal presence. The serpent is portrayed in its tempter’s role: seductive, sinewy, subtle, and sneaky, and is then likened to the “animal in us.” By doing this, Thoreau forges a bond between the negatively positioned serpent of biblical story and all animal presence that exists within us. In her rendition of the Fall Dillard connects the human to a bird, a creature of the air, free and flying, thus demonstrating the positive element of creation/the Fall. However, Thoreau relies both on the negative imagery of the serpent and on Genesis, which says that Adam is to have dominion over the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and, yet, in our present state, we stand side-by-side with the animal, the very thing we should have power over and should not be struggling against. In fact, Thoreau writes, “I am wont to think that men are not so much the keepers of herds as herds are the keepers of men, the former are so much freer.”22 For Thoreau, the Fall was the elimination of our freedom has human beings. Because we were relegated to a co-existence with animals, we lost everything. Animals are at their fullest potential as animals, however, human beings are confined whilst living on the same plane. The demonstrated disdain which Thoreau has for the animal presence

22 Ibid, 51.
existing alongside the human one reveals a bitter attitude toward the Fall. Our joining with the
natural world has trapped us in impurity and attached us to a parasitic-like presence that occupies
our bodies “even in life and health.” This normative stance towards humanity’s Fall gives high
color to the overarching concerns of the book and to Thoreau’s tone when discussing nature and
humanity’s relationship to it, as he advocates a role of stewardship, self-denial, and self-control.

THE HUMAN AND THE ANIMAL/THE NATURAL WORLD

The duality of humanity, the fact that within us is a spiritual half and an animal half with
it, is a chord Thoreau likes to strike again and again in reference to the state of human beings in
the world. The human body, Thoreau seems to believe, is a battleground. The spiritual half is
sleeping, is sound asleep. “To be awake is to be alive,” Thoreau says, “I have never yet met a
man who was quite awake.”23 He continues later, saying, “We are sound asleep nearly half our
time.”24 As has been made apparent, Thoreau adheres to the more Christian idea of humanity’s
relationship to the divine and to the natural world. In Thoreau’s mind, the metaphorical snake of
Genesis exists everywhere, in ourselves and outside of ourselves. We are spiritual and
impulsive animal, governed by urges - like the one that propelled Adam and Eve towards eating
the forbidden fruit. The animal, being likened to a parasitic worm, which “enjoy[s] a certain
health of its own,” develops as it gains a foothold, much to Thoreau’s chagrin, and in its
development, it keeps purity at bay. Health or robustness is immaterial to the animal, which
exists in-spite of these. We are torn between the higher, spiritual identity, and the lower, animal
identity.

By comparison, Dillard takes a different tack. Where Thoreau’s humanity is battling an
animal that has been thrust onto it, Dillard’s humanity is pushing the animal away and is trying

23 Ibid, 85.
24 Ibid, 310.
to place itself in a position that is wholly separate from the animal. We are not conscious of this self-imposed separation, yet it happens nonetheless due to innate differences that we have from the animal. One key difference is the human comprehension of time and self-awareness. “It is ironic,” Dillard says, “that the one thing that [separates] us from our creator - our very self-consciousness - is also the one thing that divides us from our fellow creatures.”

Dillard took note of this as she sat on a curb with a cup of coffee and playing with a puppy,

This is it, I think, this is it, right now, the present, this empty gas station, here, this western wind, this tang of coffee on the tongue, and I am patting the puppy, I am watching the mountain. And the second I verbalize this awareness in my brain, I cease to see the mountain or feel the puppy. I am opaque, so much black asphalt. But at the same second, the second I know I’ve lost it, I also realize that the puppy is still squirming on his back under my hand. Nothing has changed for him.

The humans condition in the world is one in which the expanse of time: the past, present, and the future, is processed and understood; it is wholly different from the animal’s condition, where every moment is the only moment. Animals, like the puppy, have the ability to have each moment be the only moment. Humanity, on the other hand, is forever trapped in an expansion of time and cannot turn it off. Because of this, there is a clear line between human beings and the natural world, which exists for existence’s sake. Dillard captures that sort of existence for a matter of seconds as she sits on the curb. And then she thinks about the fact that she is existing, and it’s gone. She draw attention to the separation between herself (the human) and the puppy (the animal) when she states that nothing has changed for the puppy. Everything has altered for her, but the puppy persists on squirming, living moment by moment. Dillard writes, “I wonder if

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26 Ibid, 80-81.
we do not waste most of our energy just by spending every waking minute saying hello to ourselves.”27 By saying hello to ourselves regularly, we forget to say hello to the world around us. In other words, our self-involvement provides an impenetrable barrier between ourselves and nature.

For Thoreau, the animal and the spiritual are connected and intertwined. There is animal and then there is spirit, but both dwell inside each individual. Thoreau believes that some men have one side more developed than the other. He gives the example of a Canadian woodchopper he met whilst living in his Walden cabin,

In him the animal man chiefly was developed. In physical endurance and contentment he was cousin to the pine and rock...But the intellectual and what is called spiritual man in him were slumbering as in an infant.28

The passage makes clear that in terms of operating, humans run off of either chiefly the animal or chiefly the intellectual/spiritual. Thoreau draws a line between the human and the animal that keeps the two from ever existing in a shared, equal plain. He makes clear the fact that the woodchopper, like most humans, has a more developed animal side than spiritual side. As animals belong to the natural world, kin to their surroundings, so to does the woodchopper, being likened to the pine and rock. Intellectually, the spiritual in him is tight asleep. Again, it is obvious that Thoreau sees that there is ostensibly no equality between man and animal; there is only hierarchy: the spiritual ought to trump the animal every time, but is closeted more often than not.

It is clear in the description of the woodchopper that Thoreau views him as being stunted, or unawakened, in the spiritual sense; the “spiritual man in him [was] slumbering as in an

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27 Ibid, 192.
infant.” The animal man is the man of unhindered impulse. Impulse is once again seen as being negative attribute, and animal action. In his description of the woodchopper, Thoreau depicts him as having “an exuberance of animal spirits.” There is a sense of admiration for the woodchopper on the part of Thoreau, to be sure, but it is in the way that one might be in awe of a majestic tree. Coupled with this implied admiration, however, there is a feeling of condescension - the man is still an infant. He is endearing, jubilant over life, but untaught and unrefined. Of course, the implication here is that Thoreau is the judge and in a position to regard those who are around him as lesser creatures. This further enforces the idea that Thoreau sees the world, and the human, as being clearly split between the spiritual and the animal as he is so easily able to classify his woodchopper friend. This is where Thoreau connects work as a laborer with a simpler, more animal nature, saying, “Man...not only works for the animal within him, but...he works for the animal without him.” The woodchopper, as someone who makes his living off of the land, is the perfect embodiment of this. Thoreau sees humankind’s link to labor (and to its fruits) as being problematic.

Dillard does not see that there is as much an active conflict between human/spiritual and animal as there being a question of emotion and vulnerability. Again, for Dillard humans are not battling the animal, but are rather shoving it away. To her, animals already see everything as it is; they know that they exist in the world, but they do not have the human opportunity to see divinity, because it is humans who are blessed - and cursed - with imagination, emotion, the ability to comprehend rather than to simply accept. The animal world is one of intense vulnerability. Every creature’s underbelly is exposed, so to speak. Animals are always laid bare - to themselves, to their fellows, and to the world. On a walk through the outdoors, Dillard

30 Ibid, 52.
stumbled across a spider egg sack. “I held it next to my eye and saw a tiny spider, yellowish but so infinitesimal it was translucent, waving each of its eight legs in what was clearly threat behavior.”\textsuperscript{31} The baby spider is helpless against Dillard. If she wanted to squash it, she could. Yet, its vulnerability is hidden to it, and instead, it attempts to defend itself.

Animals are more or less straightforward. Certainly each creature has its defense mechanisms, its forms of defensive dissimulation and disguise, like the spider, but all creatures nonetheless subsist in an unveiled world in which death is a daily force to come up against, where either they or a co-existing fellow will meet oblivion, where the fact that the universe is “blind, a robot” is taken as a matter of course.\textsuperscript{32} Humans, due to their self-acknowledgement and awareness are not like this. Dillard writes, “And we the people are so vulnerable. Our bodies are shot with mortality. Our legs are fear and our arms are time...That is why physical courage is so important - it fills, as it were, the holes - and why it is so invigorating.”\textsuperscript{33} We are aware of our own vulnerability, and as such cannot exist in the world the way that animals do. Instead, the fact that we could die at any moment dogs our steps. Our legs, time, walk us through a life that brings us closer to death, and we know it. Where animals defend themselves out of instinct, we actively hone physical courage to make ourselves feel safer. Again, humanity stands apart from the animal in the world.

In Thoreau’s opinion, humanity’s relationship with the animal is a tense one as opposed to a split one. Quoting Mencius, Thoreau writes, “That in which men differ from brute beasts is a thing very inconsiderable; the common herd lose it very soon; superior men preserve it

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid, 172.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid, 91.
That which is being discussed is purity. Thoreau continues, “Who knows what sort of life would result if we had attained to purity?” with the implication that the animal is decidedly impure. He follows this by stating, “Man flows at once to God when the channel of purity is open. By turns our purity inspires and our impurity casts us down.” The impurity of animals, of our internal animal is an enormous problem. If they can be escaped or tamped down, humanity will stand in a position to be connected with the divine, with God. Most of humanity belongs to the common herd, and as such has lost its purity, has all but forgotten about it. Because of this, in Thoreau’s mind, the channel between human and divine is blocked.

Human beings settle into a pattern of existence in the natural world that is akin to that of the lowest of the animal kingdom. He writes,

The gross feeder is a man in the larva state; and there are whole nations in that condition, nations in that condition, nations without fancy or imagination, whose vast abdomens betray them.

In this passage, Thoreau is comparing the populations of the countries of the world to grubs, to larva that have yet to achieve their final form. He quotes Kirby and Spence, to say that it is “a general rule, that almost all insects in [their final, adult form] eat much less than that of larvae. The voracious caterpillar when transformed into a butterfly...and the gluttonous maggot when become a fly” content themselves with a drop or two of honey or some other sweet liquid.

Thoreau is saying that to be human is to be a grub: fat and gluttonous. Additionally, in our current state, Thoreau isn’t hopeful that we’re going to evolve any time soon, evidenced by his decision to use the imagery of the undeveloped insect. Caterpillars become butterflies, yet

36 Ibid, 206.
human beings are stuck in the caterpillar state, perhaps containing the potential to become butterflies, but remaining stunted. It is a somewhat bleak outlook. Again, we see that Thoreau sees the animal as something that is unchanging, an adverse constant.

Despite their differences regarding the exact nature of the relationship between the human and the animal, Dillard and Thoreau agree that we are vastly ignorant of the things around us.

We don’t know what’s going on here...We don’t know. Our life is a faint tracing on the surface of mystery, like the idle, curved tunnels of leaf miners on the face of a leaf. We must somehow take a wider view, looking at the whole landscape, really see it, and describe what’s going on here. Then we can at least wail the right question into the swaddling band of darkness, or, if it comes to that, choir the proper praise.39

And we don’t know why because we are relegated to trod the topmost layer of existence. We can observe the world around us, but we only observe it in terms of ourselves. A big picture is lacking. The world, the universe is not accessible, it is, as she says, a mystery. An unexplored mystery, in fact. The analogy to the leaf miners is meant to be representative of the narrowness of our perspective. A leaf miner sees only tiny piece by tiny piece of a leaf. It takes a much larger creature, like a human, to see the entirety of the leaf for what it is, a leaf. By comparison, we are similarly near-sighted with respect to our earth: we don’t see it and Dillard, claims, we do not strive to see it. Likening the marvels of the natural world to pennies strewn on the street, she says, “It is dire poverty indeed when a man is so malnourished and fatigued that he won’t stop to pick up a penny.”40 What she means is that humans are so busy being human that they have no

40 Ibid, 15.
interest in looking at the small, but important, parts of existence. We are too worn-out through our separated existence to bother to take in the sights and sounds that surround us.

Thoreau argues that we are ignorant of our very ignorance. What we need to know to handle the necessities of the work we do to conceal the world from ourselves overtakes and overshadows all potential knowledge having to do with things that exist outside that limited realm of work. Knowledge is lost, forgotten, or never attained by humanity, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation...Yet they honestly think there is no choice left.”41 We are so good at making our frameworks of manmade notions regarding the world that we ultimately use them to trap ourselves. We create a structure in which we may dwell and lose sight of the fact that it is we who have constructed it and subsequently feel as though we cannot escape it. Our distractions overwhelm us and make us forget. But we do not completely forget because, as Thoreau points out, human beings often “lead lives of quiet desperation.” Thoreau suggests that we see that something is not right with the state of things. But our intuitive awareness never makes it to the conscious mind; we are too adept at avoiding the acknowledgement of our position. Humanity winds up feeling trapped and desperate without having the faintest idea as to what to do about it. The illusions we cast become our jails.

Dillard doesn’t exactly disagree with Thoreau, but she focuses on the underlying conditions rather than as what she sees as the symptoms (which, for Thoreau, is our sense of desperation, our self-imposed illusions). Dillard, too, recognizes that human beings know very little, “We’ve been on earth all these years and we still don’t know for certain why birds sing.”42 Something so common, so usual - step outside on any given day, and you’ll hear birdsong - and

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yet, we have no idea as to why it occurs, as to what it is that the birds are doing. “I see what I expect,” Dillard states.

I once spent a full three minutes looking at a bullfrog that was so unexpectedly large I couldn’t see it even though a dozen enthusiastic campers were shouting directions. Finally I asked, “What color am I looking for?” and a fellow said, “Green.” When at last I picked out the frog, I saw what painters are up against: the thing wasn’t green at all, but the color of wet hickory bark.43

Humanity’s relationship with the natural world is a simplified and constructed one. We miss the nuances entirely, and instead paint broad ideas over specific things: a frog is green. We are ignorant to detail, something that means that we live in a bland world. Dillard recognizes that it is the artist, rather than the common person, who is able to capture the truth of reality.

THE OBSTACLES FACED BY HUMANITY

The state of the human being in the world is one that is blissfully unaware of the natural events unfolding around it on a constant basis - humans lack the ability to catch a glimpse of those things that exist more than three inches in front of their noses; this is a problem for both Dillard and Thoreau as it drives a wedge between human beings and the world. Dillard feels that humanity’s state is one of insulation from nature and the animal, while Thoreau believes that our state is one of unconscious, constant battle and conflict with the animal and the natural world. Both agree that ignorance is an obstacle. Dillard writes, “The stars and planets could smash and I’d never know.”44 For her, the world and the universe are basins for infinite mystery. With regard to natural knowledge, human beings do not have a wealth of information that places them far beyond the animal. We know so little. In fact, Dillard would arguably find Thoreau’s woodchopper to be closer to the divine because of his connection to the animal and to the natural

43 Ibid, 25.
44 Ibid, 29.
world. Where most of us would miss the collision of planets, the woodchopper would notice similarly overlooked events by way of his animal intuition. Thoreau feels similarly with regards to the breadth of human knowledge, however he is more consumed with the faulty information regarding things belonging in a higher level of thinking than specific matters of the grounded, natural world. For instance, Thoreau definitively defines humanity’s relationship with nature through a Confucius quotation: “‘We seek to perceive [the powers of heaven and earth], and we do not see them; we seek to hear them, and we do not hear them. Identified with the substance of things, they cannot be separated from them.’”45 In other words, despite the fact that we think we are looking, striving to capture an understanding of our world, we are hopelessly lost. Our ignorance comes from our attempt to pull things apart, to separate attributes from substance, an action that cannot be completed.

In Thoreau’s eyes, the human condition is one marked by blindness to the deeper realities of life. Very little, next to nothing, of true significance is passed on from one generation to another. Thoreau observes that human beings rarely learn the most important life lessons from their forebears. In fact, previous generations hardly ever teach us much of value at all:

I have lived some thirty years on this planet, and I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors. They have told me nothing, and probably cannot tell me anything, to the purpose. Here is life, an experiment to a great extent untried by me; but it does not avail me that they have tried it. If I have any experience which I think valuable, I am sure to reflect that this my mentors said nothing about.46

If there was ever any evidence for the futility of what we humans are about, this is it. The fact that we can live our entire lives and receive not an ounce of notable advice regarding what we

46 Ibid, 7.
are doing here, running about over the surface of this hunk of rock, is quite astounding, not to mention disheartening. Obviously, our hard work and production are not really cutting it or making the grade. Our forebears can, and do, pass on pertinent information regarding the running of a family business or the conducting of some affair or another, but when it comes to the big questions, we are more often than not given nothing. Humans have walked the earth for thousands of years, and yet we are no closer to discovering a breakthrough. As Thoreau points out, many may have walked the same paths, but that is not particularly helpful - the same experiment is conducted again and again, each time without any functional or utilitarian result. We’ve become so caught up in the daily buzz of activity circling around making, buying, selling, and keeping things usable, that we don’t absorb information from any other realm or existence. We could be hit by a lightning bolt on a daily basis, or bear witness to stars and planets crashing, but unless it had to do with materialism, we wouldn’t have an inkling.

Openness to perception holds a position of striking clarity in Pilgrim at Tinker Creek; it is the difference between the questioning child and the jaded adult. Human beings hold both the potential and the loss of it embedded into their very lifelines. Dillard delineates perception and an ability to be involved with respect to nature. She writes, regarding an infant: “He hasn’t the faintest clue where he is, and he aims to learn. In a couple of years, what he will have learned instead is how to fake it: he’ll have the cocksure air of a squatter who has come to feel he owns the place.”47 Children understand that they don’t understand the world. Or, rather, they have no expectation of understanding the world. All they want to do is see and absorb. It is the notion that children hold a key, that their wonder is something that must be retained because when it is not, there is just a game of fakery in its place. According to Dillard, “Some unwonted, taught pride diverts us from our original intent, which is to explore the neighborhood, view the

landscape, to discover at least where it is that we have been so startling set down, if we can’t
learn why.”

This, to Dillard, is a fundamental obstacle for humanity. We lose our urge to see
and absorb in favor of feeling overly confident about the world. Pride proves to be a stumbling
block, and when we no longer acknowledge our lack of knowledge and understanding, we are no
longer vulnerable to those things that exist outside the realm of comprehension. Thoreau is an
example of someone who has attained the “cocksure air of a squatter”. He has no interest in
“where” and “why,” but rather, at most, looks for the “how” in regard to overcoming nature and
the animal. And he is mostly interested in finding purity within the human while honing mastery
and reducing animality with the purpose of reattaining the lost divinity. Comprehension, true
innate comprehension, is all but an impossibility when we move through the world of illusion
that we create for ourselves: “We wake, if we ever wake at all, to mystery, rumors of death,
beauty, violence.”

Our illusions relegate us to a half-life, conscious only of what we allow
ourselves to be conscious. Even when we have split seconds of clarity, moments where we get a
look through the illusion, we are faced with more things we do not understand. Nothing is for
sure, even when we are at our most aware. It is a lonely existence in an unpredictable universe,
and humanity finds itself in a position of needing to assuage its discomforts and fears through
methods that serve to make it easier to forget that we are feeling creatures in a cruel world
(Dillard) and that we are fallen creatures wholly divorced from our original place in the Garden
of Eden (Thoreau).

Chapter II: Humanity’s Reaction to Its Plight

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48 Ibid, 19.
49 Ibid, 10.
The differences between human beings and their animal counterparts create varying levels of discomfort and the urge to do something both about the differences and about the uncomfortable nature of existence. In terms of humanity’s reaction to its plight, to its position in the world, Dillard and Thoreau address two key areas: the symptoms of humanity’s plight and what we do to address our situation. Dillard argues that human beings’ knee-jerk reaction to their position in the world is to feel too much, to be too emotional, which is painful and damaging. Thoreau believes that humanity feels a sense of (wrongful) superiority, which does not exist by nature of humans’ fall from grace. Dillard’s humanity tries to make itself feel better through casting a veil of dissimulation and inattention over reality by creating manmade notions and labels for everything that surrounds it, while Thoreau suggests that the human response to its plight is to work, to produce, and to cover the world with things. Dillard feels that human beings are avoiding reality and Thoreau feels that humans are distracting themselves from reality. For both writers, these varying forms of aversion to reality take, prove to be roadblocks for accessing the divine.

**THE SYMPTOMS OF HUMANITY’S PLIGHT**

Both Dillard and Thoreau feel that humankind is affected by our severing from the divine through self-deception, even as we shrink from a conscious acknowledgement of the rift. For Dillard, the symptoms to our plight manifest through feeling. Our emotions run rampant if we look at too much; we are overly aware of ourselves and of our surroundings. If we lacked in emotion, there would be no need for self-deception, for we would be neither shocked, nor appalled, nor saddened by the cruelty of the world. The truth is, for humanity, seeing and feeling are completely bound-up with each other. Even Dillard, in her description of emotion, cannot avoid the interplay of emotion and observation, “My rage and shock at the pain and death of
individuals of my kind is the old, old mystery, as old as man, forever fresh, and completely unanswerable. “What Dillard is saying here is that the human emotional reaction is a mystery and is timeless - we see fellow humans die and react instantly and violently, feeling pain ourselves for their pain. Humans feel emotion, there is no way for us to avoid it, and to Dillard, it is something that can be both a help and a hindrance. Ideally, it reveals truth, and, more often than not, it sparks humans to conceal those things that might make them feel too much, and to attach meaning to those events that may, in fact, mean nothing. Dillard writes: “We are moral creatures, then, in an amoral world.” It is an amoral world where the universe exists without apparent agency, empathy, or interest for those beings which inhabit it; as Dillard says, the universe is “fixed and blind, a robot programmed to kill. We are free and seeing; we can only try to outwit it at every turn to save our skins.” Being caring creatures in an uncaring world is terrifying, especially when the threat of barren meaninglessness looms large on the horizon.

As emotional creatures, we are no match for the world in which we live,

| Our excessive emotions are so patently painful and harmful to us as a species that I can hardly believe they evolved. Other creatures manage to have effective matings and even stable societies without great emotions, and they have a bonus in that they do not need to mourn. (But some higher animals have emotions that we think are similar to ours: dogs, elephants, otters, and the sea mammals mourn their dead. Why do that to an otter? What creator could be so cruel, not to kill otters, but to let them care?) It would seem emotions are the curse, not death - emotions that appear to have devolved upon a few freaks as a special curse from Malevolence. |

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51 Ibid, 172.
52 Ibid, 172.
If we let ourselves see those things that are unpleasant and painful to take in, there is danger because we might see too much, might see more than we can handle, due to our emotions, due to our ability to process and to feel. Dillard is arguing that the disadvantage at which our emotions put us is so great that the fact that they even exist is mind blowing. They limit us by causing us to tread carefully, to be afraid of living, to self-protect. Thoreau himself responds to this idea when he says, “I went to the woods because I wished to love 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 time to die, discover I had not lived.”\footnote{Henry David Thoreau, \textit{Walden} (Boston: Beacon Press Books, 1997), 85.} Thoreau and Dillard both understand that if we avoid the essential facts of life, we may die untaught. But beyond this, Dillard refers specifically to mourning, an action that takes place in response to the loss caused by death. Emotions provide the spark for moving \textit{away}, as fast as we can from everything that sparks those negative emotions. “I bring human values to the creek,” Dillard says, “And so save myself from being brutalized.”\footnote{Annie Dillard, “Pilgrim at Tinker Creek,” in \textit{Three}, by Annie Dillard (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990), 174.} It is what we all do, she argues. We bring human values with us everywhere we go so we may avoid being irreparably damaged. Our values are important because they give us a way to sort, classify, and explain the world. Humans want both to be a part of the world from which they are excluded by their nature, as discussed in chapter one, and to be apart from and better than that world. In other words, we find ourselves torn between wanting to own animal traits, and wanting to hold our uniquely human traits still closer at the expense of the animal ones. What Dillard says is true: our ability to feel emotion runs us through the mill. One only has to look to the headlines to see crimes committed from passion to know that emotion is rather obviously harmful to us, even on a superficial level.
But the harm Dillard identifies runs far deeper than murders and broken hearts. Our emotions spur us toward dissimulation. They make liars out of us - they are responses to a truth, which provoke painful emotion; the truths that spark them must be gotten rid of, must be hidden. Dillard quotes J. Henri Fabre, who wrote, regarding the unthinking cruelty of the creatures of the world,

“...I have seen the Wasp, with her prey, seized by the Mantis: the bandit was rifled by another bandit. And here is an awful detail: while the Mantis held her transfixed under the points of the double saw and was already munching her belly, the Wasp continued to lick the honey of her Bee, unable to relinquish the delicious food even amid the terrors of death. Let us hasten to cast a veil over these horrors”56

Such images spark a visceral reaction on the parts of the human observer. Fabre’s description alone is enough to support the idea that we respond excessively to the terrible events that unfold all around us. Fabre projects the “terrors of death” onto the menage a trois of deadly eating, and then follows this up with an urging to hide such “horrors” from ourselves. It is dissimulation at its finest; it is unabashed and hurried. Though perhaps not consciously acknowledged, there is the unaddressed fear that if such horrible things happen so easily to “dumb” creatures, why should we be safe from them? We, with more agency, who are perhaps more deserving of horrible deeds done against us. And not only that, but the horrors done in the natural world are gratuitous, are overkill. The idea that we, as a human collective, should put understanding or trust into such a violent world is almost laughable.

For Thoreau, the problems outlined in the first chapter lead to a lack of trust in our world. In plain form, mistrust and a denial of faith are symptoms of our plight. Because of this, we

56 Ibid, 66.
react in a way to make ourselves feel more secure and more in control than we are. Thoreau sees humans as struggling,

How vigilant we are! determined not to live by faith if we can avoid it; all the day long on the alert, at night we unwillingly say our prayers and commit ourselves to uncertainties. So thoroughly and sincerely are we compelled to to live, reverencing our life, denying the possibility of change. This is the only way, we say; but there are as many ways as there can be drawn radii from one centre.\footnote{Henry David Thoreau, \textit{Walden} (Boston: Beacon Press Books, 1997), 9.}

There is a certain irony in the fact that a population of creatures that has invented religion may be lacking in faith, and not simply lacking in faith, but flat-out trying to circumvent and steer clear of it. What this passage epitomizes is the innate tension that resides within all human beings. It is a tension between reason and logic, and wanting to be. There is a part of all of us that wants desperately to surrender to the enormity of the world and the universe, to processes far outside of our control. Then there is part of us that cannot bear the thought of giving-up even the pretense of control and power. It is only in sleep, as Thoreau indirectly points out, that we are confronted face-to-face with uncertainty. When we sleep, we give up control and become wholly vulnerable, both to our environment and to ourselves. If we die in our sleep, there is little we can do to prevent it. So it is with sleep that we grudgingly allow ourselves to put our fate in someone, or something, else’s hands. The truth, that there are many paths, is too overwhelming to accept - there is too much room for error, the chance of things getting out of control is high, so we simply pretend that all those varying paths do not exist. And we continue, blinded, on our merry, nearsighted way, preferring to pretend with all of our being to be in absolute control.

This is what Thoreau means when he speaks of denying possibility in favor of one path on which we must all trod.
Thoreau suggests that our symptoms manifest themselves when we kid ourselves into thinking we have the upper hand over our environment and surroundings. This is specifically in reference to the way we use work to fool ourselves about the world. By laboring and manufacturing, we place ourselves in a false position of superiority when we are, according to Thoreau, toe to toe with the animal in our fallen state. There is something odd about human society. It is, when one stops to think about, deeply odd for a creature to have an apparently deeply-rooted need to create an overlay for the world in which it exists. Thoreau writes, “Most of the stone a nation hammers goes toward its tomb only. It buries itself alive.”

Civilizations are built, created, on top of the earth, but the more we build, the more remote the natural world becomes. Human beings have the capacity to wonder, to learn, and to explore, not to mention the ability to imagine. All are traits that could lead to a fulfilled, grounded existence in the world. An existence that accepted the nuances of reality. But instead, we use them to further delude and entrench ourselves in illusion, building our tombs. Thoreau would have us develop a higher consciousness which he believes would result in an erasure of those baser animal instincts that overwhelm and lower the human race, the animal presence that acts as a predatory parasite in the human body. He says, “We are made to exaggerate the importance of what work we do; and yet how much is not done by us.”

In other words, we create a system in which what we do is always the most important thing. Anything we create, any laws we implement, any belief systems we hold dear, we set above everything else. Those processes that are not directly instigated by or those that directly apply to people and anything natural outside of social boundaries are left unacknowledged; *their* importance is not recognized. Yet, as Thoreau points

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58 Ibid, 53.
out, there is quite a lot that happens in the world that humanity has absolutely no effect, or control, over. This blatant ignoring of such integral parts of life is, simply put, trouble.

Thoreau claims that the impairment in perception, this active ignoring, only grows worse as we work to create social hierarchies. In other words, ironically, the further we have distanced ourselves from the fundamentals of nature and ensconced ourself in a world operating according to human laws, the less we can see of that divinity we seek. At the base of the hierarchy, we may be laborers, slaves to the earth, but at the top we are deluded and self-aggrandizing beings, lost in a fantasy construct: “I also have in my mind that seemingly wealthy, but most terribly impoverished class of all, who have accumulated dross, but know not how to use it, or get rid of it, and thus have forged their own golden and silver fetters.”60 The more wealth an individual has, the farther away from the origin of that wealth she is. Thoreau makes the claim: “Kings and queens who wear a suit but once, though made by some tailor or dressmaker to their majesties, cannot know the comfort of wearing a suit that fits. They are no better than wooden horses to hang the clean clothes on.”61 In other words, the wealthy have no concept of the fundamental value of things, no appreciation for the little things that they have come to take for granted. Although we begin with what is natural, we value it only when it has become something human. The wealthy exist at the top of our social hierarchies and they are the most removed from the natural, associated with and owning only those things that are purely human. Though Thoreau doesn’t specifically say this, one can assume that the binding of wealthy to purely human objects is stronger than that of the associated laborer. They are slaves to the earth because they are dependent upon those things humans reap from it, and they are enslaved again because they set much store by the value attached to material goods. This corresponds to the notion of the veil

60 Ibid, 14.  
61 Ibid, 9.
that Dillard argues that we create between ourselves and nature. An issue with this is that none of this activity gets us any closer to Thoreau’s “higher consciousness.” Instead, we swirl hopelessly in a circle, whirling, chasing our tails in a static dance of existence. This is no good. And certainly doesn’t aid us in finding ourselves or finding the divine. We’re sleepers, sleepwalkers in our lives and in the world.

**THE WAY HUMANITY ADDRESSES ITS SYMPTOMS**

What better way to combat fear than to take control? What better way to “overcome” mystery than to create a web on top of it? A web that makes sense. This, according to Dillard, is what we do. We turn nameless horrors into stories that contain a why; we draw our own lives tight around ourselves, making it difficult for outside things to creep in. We cannot understand anything without first adapting it to our own uniquely human experience,

> You are a man...who makes replicas as a hobby. You decide to make a replica of one tree...just a replica - it doesn’t have to work. ...you will have to work fairly big; if your replica is too small, you’ll be unable to handle the slender, three-sided needles, affix them in clusters of three in fascicles, and attach those laden fascicles to flexible twigs. The twigs themselves must be covered by “many silvery-white, fringed, long-spreading scales.”

Here, Dillard illustrates the complexity of creation in a way that is inextricably tied to the way in which a person would approach a physical project of creation. Creation, in the universal and divine sense, is more than the simple piecing together of components; “There is no one standing over evolution with a blue pencil,” Dillard writes. In other words, no one is editing or planning. No one sat down with a paintbrush and a hunk of clay and started to make the world - the whole process was vastly larger and more complicated. The effect of this “translation” to a

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63 Ibid, 133.
process easily understood by humans is to show that humanity is adept at breaking things down mechanically in a way that erases mystery - and also at assuming that God breaks things down in a similar fashion (this is not to say that Dillard has this perspective). In fact, Dillard points out that the Old Testament has God reassuring His people that the seasons would reoccur, “God makes this guarantee very early in Genesis to a people whose fears on this point had perhaps not been completely allayed.”64 The implication here is that people have the track record of placing structure onto the world, clinging to those things that are ordered, like the seasons, and giving them a story. This sense that God does things similarly provides an extra layer of reassurance; the way children look to parents to provide a safe space. Breaking things down in this way has the added bonus of providing a level of similarity between God and the human, which in turn provides this degree of reassurance and safety. If we can assume that God behaves in a way that we mimic, then we’ll be okay; it is another way in which we soften the harsh edges of the world for ourselves. When it comes to recreating a pine tree, as in the passage, human beings aim to replicate individual bits and pieces to get to the whole. We mull and plan, and yet, nowhere in that planning do we ever think to make the whole, to recreate the feeling evoked by the object or to see the object without the specific, individual pieces. Simple things are much less frightening than complex ones. And as emotions, as Dillard sees them, are humanity’s biggest curse, simplifying the world, translating it into a structure, and existing in it superficially, is a very good way of minimizing emotion.

As perceivers, we are innately namers and definers. As human beings, we move through the world pointing at objects and giving them weight and relevance. The more we do this, the thicker the barrier we construct between ourselves and the natural world. Dillard sees this as

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64 Ibid, 76.
being how we cover our world and dissimulate. On a walk through the woods, she ran across some signs that someone had tied to the trees

They said “SLOW,” “Slippery When Wet,” “Stop,” “PIT ROW,” “ESSO,” and “BUMP!!” These signs indicated an awful lot of excitement over a little snow. When I saw the first one, “SLOW,” I thought, sure I’ll go slow; I won’t screech around on the unbroken path in the woods by the creek under the snow. What was going on here? The other signs made it clear. Under “BUMP!!” lay, sure enough, a bump.”

It is a simple example, to be sure, but it demonstrates the way in which humans attempt to control the world and lay a safe structure over the dangers of nature. Before the signs labeled the pitfalls and risks of the path, those pitfalls and risks would have to be stumbled upon firsthand and experienced. After the signs were hung, any passerby would not only be able to avoid the dangers, but would also automatically have the learned sense of them in mind. Once we are able to lock meaning into our minds, it is an easy task to brush over the less pleasant specifics, “Form is condemned to an eternal danse macabre with meaning.” In other words, to the human mind, every object is permanently linked with its applied meaning or association. The macabre is the fact that there is no escape; we are eternally tied to the significance we attach to those things that surround us. When we name, we lose the intuitive effect of the object. It becomes a thought, or a series of thoughts, rather than an innate comprehension - we lose the sense of the object in favor of a taught understanding of it. This observation comes on the heels of a discussion of what the world looks like to people who were formerly blind but had undergone an operation to restore to them their sight.

When seeing the world for the first time, the newly sighted recognized no objects. Instead, what they saw was an interplay of light, darkness, and colors, forms without names.

65 Ibid, 52.
66 Ibid, 35.
And those nameless objects are awe-inspiring; there is a lack of names to accompany visual stimuli,

Finally, a twenty-two-year-old girl was dazzled by the world’s brightness and kept her eyes shut for two weeks. When at the end of that time she opened her eyes again, she did not recognize any objects, but, “the more she now directed her gaze upon everything about her, the more it could be seen how an expression of gratification and astonishment overspread her features; she repeatedly exclaimed: ‘Oh God! How beautiful!’”

The world to someone who has had no vision is a world of color swatches that don’t carry with them the baggage of named objects; only beauty exists outside of the system of labels. Objects don’t trigger the common associations that they do for the seeing population. A “red” apple is less likely to initially appear fire engine red and symmetrically shaped to someone who has not learned to connect manmade concepts to visual cues, who has not connected word/idea with object. To become newly sighted is to operate from a position of a blank slate. A thing looks exactly like what it is without the intrusion of acquired, human-made, notions. Those of us who are blessed with sight from birth do not have the luxury of seeing without attaching meaning. The longer we have sight (as we grow older) the more impossible it becomes to extricate ourselves.

Dillard maintains that human beings much prefer to see the world as innocent, and in this case, innocent means light as opposed to dark, removed from creeping horrors and unjust cruelties. Dillard writes, “Ants don’t even have to catch their prey: in the spring they swarm over newly hatched, featherless birds in the nest and eat them tiny bite by bite.”

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67 Ibid, 35.
68 Ibid, 14.
this with the idea that, to humans, “Cruelty is a mystery and the waste of pain.” We see events like the swarming ants, and things far more horrible than that, like frogs literally having their internal organs and bones dissolved so that they can be sucked dry by a hungry water bug, and wish to fix the world we see. It is our good intention, in fact, that so horribly hobbles us.

Dillard shares a story of an observation from a day in early winter: a store was selling neatly stacked logs made from rolled, pressed papers, “On the wrapper of each ‘log’ was printed in huge letters the beguiling slogan, ‘The ROMANCE Without The HEARTACHE.’” It is a clear example of hiding the natural world from ourselves. The “logs” are stand-ins for actual logs, which are already themselves removed from the trees from which they came. And not only that, but paper is a translation from tree to creation - human-made creation, so when an passerby sees the “logs,” they simply see another facet of our tightly stitched illusion. We recreate logs to forget the destruction of an environment, and we even attempt to recreate animals that surrounding us; steer, for example, “[The steer] are all bred beef: beef heart, beef hide, beef hocks. They’re a human product like rayon. They’re like a field of shoes. They have cast-iron shanks and tongues like foam insoles[...].” The steer are interchangeable with the human products for which they are stand-ins. We turn all that surrounds us into terms we can understand, into things we can use. It is an elaborate game of translation. And simplification is the name of the game.

In short, humans do what they can to move things away from their roots. Roots spring from unmasked truth. It is easier to live in a world which we have built-up ourselves, where everything fits a schema that is both predictable and under control, than it is to live in a world shrouded in and made from mystery in its purest form, uncontrollable mystery. Dillard asks,

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69 Ibid, 15.
70 Ibid, 13.
71 Ibid, 45.
72 Ibid, 12.
“How can an old world be so innocent?” It is not the old world that is innocent, but a new world, fitted atop of the *real* world, manufactured by creatures that are perceivers, that exists in a state of superficial innocence and naivete.

Thoreau locates the source of man’s solution for himself in work, labor, and stuff. Thoreau begins by calling attention to the negative aspect of owning property - specifically property that entails some level of work or upkeep in its ownership. He makes the point that these particular types of property are more like shackles than like agents of freedom, holding their owners indefinitely hostage, beaten down by responsibility after responsibility. Thoreau writes about the inhabitants of his town,

> “I see a young man, 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...Who made them serfs of the soil? ...Why should they begin digging their graves as soon as they are born?...But men labor under a mistake. The better part of the man is soon ploughed into the soil for compost.”

Responsibilities, like plowing fields and maintaining property, serve as distractions and buffers, blocking humans from the world. Once you are saddled with them, you’re saddled for good; they are “more easily acquired than got rid of.” “Serfs of the soil” he says. This is a particularly telling phrase as it exemplifies that reversal that so bothers Thoreau. Humanity, as he sees it, ought to be the steward of the earth. Living with it, to be sure, but owning and taking care of its bounty. With the introduction of production and work, the earth suddenly owns humanity, yoking it to her soil, enslaved forever. He argues,

> But lo! men have become the tools of their tools. The man who independently plucked the fruits when he was hungry is become a farmer; and he who stood...

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73 Ibid, 46.
under a tree for shelter, a housekeeper. We now no longer camp as for a night, but have settled down on earth and forgotten heaven. We have adopted Christianity as merely an improved method of agriculture.\(^{75}\)

Thoreau clearly lays it out. Men become subservient to their creations. Actions that began on a small scale, feeding a hungry stomach, taking shelter from a storm or for the night, turned into things with large scale effects as humanity becomes increasingly devoted to materialistic concerns. And as we do so, we forget the spiritual, trading it for the physical. In a move similar to the one Dillard makes regarding the human approach towards God, Thoreau makes the claim that we have adopted Christianity as a means to a productive end. Where Dillard sees human beings as adjusting God to be more similar and accessible to them for the purpose of reassurance and comfort, Thoreau sees Christianity as having been appropriated in order to fit humanity’s current modus operandi of systematic production. As Thoreau sees it, humans have the idea that their action of doing work is somehow liberating, that it somehow proves their domination. In fact, all that occurs is a general wasting of life: servanthood followed by a death that is neither majestic or dignified: compost until one is composted oneself.

Thoreau wants us to understand that if humans harness themselves to their possessions, the needs of those possessions end-up calling the shots. Thoreau writes, “...and instead of studying how to make it worth men’s while to buy my baskets, I studied rather how to avoid the necessity of selling them.”\(^{76}\) The point that Thoreau makes here is that once we make something, we are suddenly caught-up in a cycle out of our control. As a commodity, the basket takes on the requirements of that label: it must be bought and sold. The maker doesn’t matter anymore, only what can come out of having made the basket. Our materialism becomes the

\(^{75}\) Ibid, 34.
\(^{76}\) Ibid, 17.
vehicle we use to traverse our lives instead of living directly. Thoreau writes, “It makes but little difference whether you are committed to a farm or the county jail.” The conflict that this creates is unfortunate. More than linked, commitments are the physical and psychological manifestation of falling slave to the earth, to material goods, and to our own action of tying ourselves up, attaching human beings to the will and the requirements of their labor and their possessions that are greater than their own. A farm requires a repertoire of action and activity that ultimately subsumes the farmer. Animals must be fed and cared for, fields must be plowed, harvests must be made - these things are scheduled, non-negotiable, and, indeed, the livelihood and well-being of the farmer become entirely dependent upon these actions being taken. Maybe a farm doesn’t contain the bars of a jail, a warden to crack the figurative whip, but the responsibilities of farming fill limit a man as surely as jail does. Both Dillard and Thoreau recognize a human desire to direct one’s own fate, to navigate the waves according to their own maps and directional sense. However, as materialism results in the captain becoming servant to the whims of the ship (if she wishes to remain afloat), any sense of control is illusory. Another response to our malaise is to speed up our pace of living as though we could race it to the finish line and somehow wind-up being ahead of what controls us, flipping things around.

It is exactly this that Thoreau argues, “Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life? We are determined to be starved before we are hungry. Men say that a stitch in time saves nine, and so they take a thousand stitches to-day to save nine to-morrow.” It’s as though we imagine that we’ll somehow be exerting authority over our lives through speed. The use of starvation and hunger characterize his point quite well. Despite thinking that we move towards advancement and accomplishment, human beings are, in fact, jogging - or sprinting - towards an

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77 Ibid, 78.
78 Ibid, 87.
empty and bare existence. We are reaching for starvation. We’re carving out a chasm rather than filling a void. We are out-stitching ourselves, building-up a deficit for an illusory result.

Humanity has found methods for coping with its unique, and separate, place on the earth, but failing to grapple with the problems of the world presents a series of problems. Dillard’s humanity places labels, names, associations, and notions on top of everything, thus cushioning the pain and shock that will inevitably come from a universe that doesn’t care about the life it holds and from a world that is about surviving rather than nurturing. Thoreau is of the opinion that humanity is busily preventing itself from reuniting with the divine by obsessing of its activity of production. We have lost our formerly superior position on earth, but rather than acknowledge this and find ways of redeeming ourselves, Thoreau argues that we attempt to feign a position of superiority by creating a world that fits our ideas of superiority. However, this action only places us under the thumb of everything that we do. Clearly, coping is an activity that carries with it pitfalls. First, the farther humanity recedes into itself (and into its self-made world), the farther away it gets from being able to absorb the environment in which it makes its home, to see it and to accept its truths and to be nourished by it. Second, we cease to be able to see objectively; everything we view is automatically assimilated, through language and experience, into a framework that makes sense of things according to manmade notions. Third, time becomes the marker of life, rather than events serving as the foundation on which life is constructed. The dependence on time creates a barrier from the natural world. And, lastly, humanity’s denial of the animal creates internal tension and entrapment, leaving the individual stuck in a rut. It is a rut that grows out of a need to impose meaning, and it is a rut that Dillard and Thoreau want to fix.
Chapter III: The Ways in Which Dillard and Thoreau Feel Humanity Should React to its Plight

Dillard and Thoreau both tackle the problem of humanity’s lost connection to the divine, and both recognize that humanity is moving through the world in entirely the wrong way, losing itself still further rather than simultaneously finding itself and the divine. Both the human and the animal possess essential elements of the divine. Because of this, Dillard feels that the surest way to heal humanity and close the gap between the human and the divine is to find a way to unite the human/animal duality. The first step that Dillard suggests that humans ought to make is to find a way to peel back the veil that they have hung over the realities of the world, to halt dissimulation. Thoreau, adhering to standard Christian views regarding the human relationship to the animal, and the Fall, is far more divided in his approach. Following from his notion of the divine, Thoreau urges us not to unite with the animal presence that he believes dwells in every human, but to quell it. Only by turning away from our animal nature can we give purity and poetry a better shot at emerging into the world.

The idea of humanity being stuck in a sleeping state bothers Thoreau deeply, especially as he believes himself to be significantly less asleep than everyone else around him. Thoreau’s humanity is one that is locked in the throes of materialism and gross production, both of which are tying it inextricably to the physical and disallowing a reconnection to the divine. He would really have liked it quite a bit if he’d been able to shake some wakefulness into the population of his town or into his daily troupe of visitors who sat (and stood) about his house and ate his
cooking. Humans aren’t really alive yet and, instead, are stuck in a limbo between living and simply being here [on our little spinning chunk of rock and gas] as an unimportant presence. “To be awake is to be alive,” he writes, “I have never yet met a man who was quite awake...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 deepest sleep.” Thoreau’s choice of words here is interesting. He does not say “awaken” but rather, “reawaken,” implying that humanity was awake at least once before. There is no discussion of when this point occurs though the reader may safely assumes that Thoreau is referring to the time pre-Fall. In any case, Thoreau implies that there was a point at which people walked the world, awake. And apparently that wakefulness is supported by “an infinite expectation of the dawn,” which seems to be another way of referring to a sort of faith once held, now lost. As the reader may remember, Thoreau is concerned by the little faith humanity has in the world, a lack of faith coming from a lack of trust in our environment. An expectation of the dawn is a manifestation of a reinstatement of faith. It is an important idea to consider. What exactly does it mean? Perhaps it is a simple understanding of the acceptance of that march, the unfurling of past, present, and future. But it must be more than that, because all human beings have a knowledge regarding the fact that dawn arrives every morning - a knowledge acquired through generations of observation. We can’t prove that dawn will happen every morning, but we expect it. So Thoreau’s meaning must lie somewhere else. He writes,

“The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, and only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred millions to a poetic or divine life.”

80 Ibid, 85.  
81 Ibid, 85.
The specific expectation of the dawn must belong in the most exclusive of the categories, within the divine realm, within the spiritual realm. Dillard feels similarly when she quotes Jacques Ellul, “Launch into the deep, and you shall see,” before continuing this line of thought with, “The secret of seeing is to sail on solar wind.”\(^{82}\) Human beings must put their thinking, processing selves into the hands of the merciless universe, see it and embrace it. Like Thoreau, she suggests that we harness our skills of imagination and creativity to gain our freedom from our self-made illusionary world. And in that movement, there is the divine, because in order to see, we must be vulnerable, we must have blind faith and trust in ourselves and in the world. For Thoreau, waking is coupled with the elimination of mindless production, and wakefulness or, rather, the awakened individual desires to “flows at once to God when the channel of purity is open. By turns our purity inspires and our impurity casts us down.”\(^{83}\) The awakened individual makes the move towards inspiration.

Thoreau pinpoints a misdirection of focus as our issue; he struggles to find a way to express the way in which human beings might find a fix for the problem. But, just to show how deeply stuck we all are, Thoreau makes fun of the self-imposed human condition and our delusions of advancement, “If we do not get out sleepers, and forge rails, and devote days and nights to the work but go to tinkering upon our lives to improve them, who will build railroads? And if railroads are not built, how shall we get to heaven in season?”\(^{84}\) There is deep irony in this quotation. Thoreau implies that humanity believes that it can find the divine, find ourselves, by doing things that belong strictly to the manmade world. It is a complete misdirection of attention and focus. This quotation expresses several ideas. Perhaps most importantly, we spend

^{84}\) Ibid, 87.
a large amount of time on what we see as being personal growth and no time at all in determining our paths. But personal growth, true personal growth, really can’t begin until there’s an optimal environment must be expanded and explored. As a remedy, Thoreau says, “In short, I am convinced, both by faith and experience, that to maintain one’s self on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime, if we will live simply and wisely, as the pursuits of the simpler nations are still the sports of the more artificial.” In other words, the key to solving our misdirected existence is to reject complexity in favor of simplicity and to weed out the real from the artificial. Humanity should cease to concern itself with it’s drive to produce and instead concern itself with focused self-improvement. It is only through that that heaven will be found.

Dillard also sees a misdirection of focus as being our problem. For her, it is a matter of it appearing as though we focus too completely on those traits that are purely human and give no regard to honing traits that can be, and are, shared with the animal. Dillard feels that humanity perceives the world in a unique way, “A nightmare network of ganglia, charged and firing without my knowledge, cuts and splices what I do see, editing it for my brain.” In order to achieve the strived for unification with the animal, an individual must find a way to circumvent this unconscious process of interacting with the world. Dillard’s efforts to move away from the range of human emotion that dominates the day-to-day experience come far from easily. It is a struggle, “Imperceptibly at first, and now consciously, I shy away from the arts, from the human emotional stew.” It is an interesting route - harnessing consciousness in order to work towards unconsciousness. Additionally, she stands in contrast to Thoreau, who holds an estimation for the arts, and feels that divinity goes hand-in-hand with them. For Dillard, however, the arts and

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85 Ibid, 66.
87 Ibid, 174.
emotion must be quelled, at least initially, in order that we be able to see the reality we have attempted to hide under labels and notions. And yet, even it cannot quite triumph because Dillard still finds herself clinging to those ideas regarding values ingrained in her by years of existing within human society: she must still bring those human values and emotions with her as she approaches nature so as to save herself “from being brutalized.”88 It is not the workings of the universe that are troubling. Not at all. Instead, it is what humanity does with those workings, the meaning we lend them, and the ways they make us feel. Dillard’s suggestion, with respect to the divine, is that to reach it, we must leap through the fire of sight, understanding, and comprehension. We must burn ourselves on the truth of our emotional response to the world and on that ability to make sense of the world with which we are all equipped, and to learn to let go.

Dillard’s proposed solution starts off simply: it is a matter of beginning to see, but perhaps without comprehension. This is different from seeing the harsh realities of the world and understanding them, but it is a first step in that direction. For Dillard, access to the divine requires a person to first see the world in a way that strips away labels and expectations. It is difficult. It is the undoing of a lifetime of learned tricks of the trade, tricks of sight. Remember, “form is condemned to an eternal danse macabre with meaning.”89 When we look at the world, we see a place in which everything is a thing and has a name, a shape, a use, a role. We see and we automatically associate. And not only do we automatically associate, but we group what we see into a preconceived notion of that thing. This observation suggests that we’re stuck in a gruesome tangle with form, a tangle that includes meanings that have been created and defined to keep us from unmediated perception. A lightbulb will always and forever be a lightbulb and do the things that a lightbulb should do. There is no way to pull a lightbulb apart. Even if we try,

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89 Ibid, 35.
we still end-up with forms: a glass outer shell, metal wire making the filament. For a day after
learning about the blind people who were made seeing following an operation, Dillard

...walked among shifting color-patches that parted
before me like the Red Sea and closed again in
silence, transfigured, wherever I looked back...But I
couldn’t sustain the illusion of flatness. I’ve been
around for too long...I couldn’t unpeach the peaches.  

Despite capturing the ability to disassociate objects from their monikers, she couldn’t maintain it.
The objects sprang back into their known identities. The most important piece of information to
glean from this is that human beings are remarkably good at keeping themselves in the world
that works for them, even completely unintentionally and unconsciously. It is a cliche for a
reason: old habits really do die hard. One can imagine that if someone, like Dillard, who is
trying very hard to overcome learned patterns, has difficulties maintaining the change, anyone
who is not nearly as dedicated will probably never get to that point. Her final line is telling,
“I’ve been around for too long.” We grow beyond childhood and we’ve been around for too
long. We’ve lost our ability to transition easily from animal/nature to human.

But Dillard wants us to all become like painters. And unlearn our preconceptions - to see
what is rather than to see what we think ought to be. We’re taught as children to associate frogs
with the color green, as in Dillard’s experience with the enormous bullfrog at the campsite. If
we describe a frog, we assume we should say that it is green. We must see that bark isn’t simply
brown, that the sky can be many shades of blue and grey, that, just like the frog, leaves and grass
aren’t simply green. Dillard identifies to methods of seeing and perceiving that humans may
employ. “Seeing is...a matter of verbalization. Unless I call attention to what passes before my
eyes, I simply won’t see it.”  

90 Ibid, 35.
91 Ibid, 36.
and is, an almost analytical interaction with the world. “When I see this way I analyze and pry. I hurl over logs and roll away stones.”92 However, “there is another kind of seeing that involves letting go,” Dillard says,

“When I see this way I sway transfixed and emptied. The difference between the two ways of seeing is the difference between walking with and without a camera. When I walk with a camera I walk from shot to shot, reading the light on a calibrated meter. When I walk without a camera, my own shutter opens, and the moment’s light prints on my own silver gut. When I see this second way I am above all an unscrupulous observer.”93

In the first type of seeing, everything we see is first filtered through our vast library of associated objects, notions, and labels. It undergoes the firing of our synapses and is assimilated into our ideas of the world. The second type of seeing bypasses that process entirely. Instead, it is a matter of stimuli to gut, from seeing to feeling. The individual becomes an impartial observer rather than a meticulous recorder. To describe the world and universe accurately is to be on the first step toward uncovering the divinity that we carry along with ourselves all of the time. It is a move that necessitates a return to childhood - where wonder and the absorption of each and every stimulus was par for the course. Dillard quotes Rabbi Elimelekh, “Later on you don’t see these things any more.”94 Just as she was unable to continue to see the peaches as color-patches, she recognizes that adults will struggle with achieving the second kind of seeing.

Although Dillard recognizes emotions as being, in some ways, a curse to humanity, her attitude toward them is more nuanced and subtle. Emotion should be embraced for what they are and held dear because it is only with their input that humanity will be able to have any hope at all

92 Ibid, 37.
93 Ibid, 37.
94 Ibid, 36.
for seeing in the second way. She is truly not anti-emotion, something captured in her choice of words,

“All right then. It is our emotions that are amiss. We are freaks, the world is fine, and let us all go have lobotomies to restore us to a natural state. We can leave the library then, go back to the creek lobotomized, and live on its banks as untroubled as any muskrat or reed. You first.”

She issues a challenge. Who actually wants to be lobotomized? Emotions are patently painful, but who is going to give them up? When it comes down to it, very few people are going to want to eliminate their ability to feel - we want to retain it. Obviously, emotions are of value. They do something for us and they certainly separate us from our animal counterparts as Dillard sees it. She is nothing if not consistent: those things that are uniquely human ought to be cherished. Emotions, though potentially a curse, should be embraced. As vulnerable creatures, humanity should embrace our bodies “shot with mortality” and our limbs of fear and time. We must allow seeing and feeling to occur if we are to correctly address our human condition and find the divine.

Dillard feels that regaining a sense of innocence in the world is key because innocence will offer the individual a fresh perspective. In the end, everything Dillard suggests be done is linked back to achieving new perspective and innocence is an important component,

“Innocence sees that this is it, and finds it world enough, and time. Innocence is not the prerogative of infants and puppies, and far less of mountains and fixed stars which have no prerogatives at all.”

Somehow, when we grow-up, we begin to operate under the idea that innocence is outgrown and only exists for youth and for creatures. And we are content believing this when, in fact, neither

95 Ibid, 174.
96 Ibid, 91.
97 Ibid, 83.
youth nor animals have a prior claim on or an entitlement to, innocence. It is something that can 
be retained or regained. “It is possible to pursue innocence as hounds pursue hares:
singlemindedly, driven by a kind of love, crashing over creeks, keening and lost in fields and 
forests.”98 Innocence doesn’t disappear over the horizon once we hit a certain age. It can be 
gone after, and it should be gone after. For Dillard, lost innocence is an acquired awareness of 
mortality and not the committing of sins. We are not like trees, which have a better chance of 
living the longer they live,

“We run around under these obelisk-creatures, 
teetering on our soft, small feet. We are out on a 
jaunt, picnicking, fattening like puppies for our 
deaths. Shall I carve a name on this tree trunk? 
What if I fell in a forest: Would a tree hear?”99

As adults we become truly self-aware. We become conscious of ourselves in a way that extends 
beyond bodily knowledge. We begin to be highly mindful of our identities and of those 
identities in relation to our fellows who surround us.

When we lose our innocence - when we start feeling 
the weight of the atmosphere and learn that there’s 
death in the cards - we take leave of our senses. 
Only children can hear the song of the male house 
mouse. Only children keep their eyes open. The 
only they have got is sense; they have highly 
developed “input systems,” admitting all data 
indiscriminately.100

Suddenly our world is not one in which we, as individuals, figure very largely. We are small, 
vulnerable, surrounded by living things far larger and far better at existing in the world than we 
are, like the trees. We come to this realization and panic, blocking out everything that threatens 
to knock over the house of cards that is our lives. We don’t want to take in those things that

98 Ibid, 83. 
99 Ibid, 93. 
100 Ibid, 91-92.
remind us of our vulnerability of mortality, but, according to Dillard, we need to. A child would not ask of the tree “would it hear me?” A child would simply cavort among the trunks, the difference between it and the tree, unimportant. Thoreau is in agreement, “Every child begins the world again, to some extent, and loves to stay out doors, even in wet and cold. It plays house, as well as horse, having an instinct for it.” Children are the strived-for clean slate. For Thoreau, the battle between spiritual and animal has not yet begun in earnest - children can achieve spiritual purity with ease. For Dillard, children are the embodiment of the blurring between the traits that are uniquely human and uniquely animal. Dillard’s observations in the aforementioned passage points to the notion that as adults we become hyperaware of the big picture: death as inevitable and as fast-approaching. We need to embrace it as opposed to hiding from it.

For all intents and purposes, *Walden* does not strive to make the reader see the world as though for the first time. Thoreau is not interested in becoming a painter, capable of painting the divine. Rather, for Thoreau, the search for divinity requires a distancing of oneself from civilization. Civilization is not any kind of advancement in the state of man, “If it is asserted that civilization is a real advance in the condition of man...it must be shown that it has produced better dwellings without making them more costly.” In other words, Thoreau views society as a place of shortcuts and ostentation, rather than a place that fosters any sort of true development of the spiritual or mental capacity of humanity. It is necessary that there be space between human clutter and the individual so that the external divinity may be located,

> At last, we know not what it is to live in the open air, and our lives are domestic in more sense than we think. From the hearth to the field is a great distance. It would be well perhaps if we were to spend more

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Likening the poet to the saint, Thoreau suggests that neither would exist successfully if they were not so aware of the heavens, if they did not live so simply. Humans no more belong indoors and domesticated than do birds belong in isolated captivity. This argument has its roots in the idea that humanity is easily distracted by its own creation, that to find God it has to approach the world without worldly goods - an idea very similar to those presented in New Testament Christianity. In fact, by escaping the immediate confines of a socially ruled environment, Thoreau places himself in an optimal position to discover the divine through an improvement of his spiritual self. However, it is still important to note that Thoreau refrains from advocating any return to nature in Dillard’s sense. We ought not be using any element of the animal - we ought to be wholly human, in as pure a form as we can be. Where Thoreau advocates for a movement away from structured society in order to better see God, Dillard’s view supports the idea that humanity needs to re-achieve its most perfect root: the place that allows us to be both as human as we possibly can be, while also still embracing that animal element that is often lost to the mad shuffle of life.

Thoreau does not trouble himself with being stripped bare and vulnerable to the physical world when it comes to finding divinity, as Dillard does. Instead, Thoreau appears to be going for an achievement of stewardship, on the part of humanity, over the natural and animal worlds. Dillard feels that acquired nakedness toward the physical dangers of the world is a means to an end. By being laid bare, an individual is able to achieve a new form of perception, of seeing.

Thoreau places himself in a different position with respect to searching out the divine. For him,

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103 Ibid, 25.
finding divinity seems to consist of first exerting authority or mastery over the land around him. It is an existence that requires the reality of animals in order to continue; they are what we see, what surround us, and what give us our identity. In other words, despite taking issue with the animal, Thoreau still feels that we must have nature and animals because they allow us to define ourselves by what we are not. In a move that closely shadows Adam’s initial role in Eden, Thoreau sees humanity as a steward for the world. Existing with it, but not a part of it in the sense of complete closeness,

...But I was interested in the preservation...as much as though I had been Lord Walden himself; and if any part of [the forest] was burned, though I burned it myself by accident, I grieved with a grief that lasted longer and was more inconsolable than that of the proprietors [...].

Thoreau describes his position as one that is akin to, but far more profound than that of any proprietor. He feels both guilt and pain on the level of a parent or a guardian grieving for pain or discomfort suffered by a child. Yet, despite this, there is still a division. Thoreau is not the forest, he is outside of it. He places himself at the top of the hierarchical pyramid, on a pinnacle that rises above even the traditional human hierarchy. There is a role that carries more weight and responsibility than being the owner of something. Thoreau suggests implicitly that it is a role of stewardship. It is a role that carries with it a deep and abiding affinity for nature, an almost paternal role, and it is the role that humanity, as a collective, ought to have in the world. It is a role that will free humanity from its slavery towards objects and responsibilities as it will cement humanity’s position as being above the animal that threatens constantly to pull the human down. The animal must be overseen in the same way the natural world must be overseen; spiritual development must take a kind of precedence and exert its authority over the animal, because,

104 Ibid, 235.
“we are so degraded that we cannot speak simply of the necessary functions of human nature.”\textsuperscript{105}

When properly harnessed, “the spirit can for the time pervade and control every member and function of the body, and transmute what in form is the grossest sensuality into purity and devotion.”\textsuperscript{106} In other words, when purity is placed in a position of superiority and control over the person, it turns the baser aspects of nature, namely sensuality, \textit{into} the desired purity.

Thoreau believes that the impurity that has cast a pall over us, that prevents us from understanding our “true” role in the world, absolutely has to be overcome, and as it comes from the unwelcome animal, the animal must be overpowered.

Again and again Thoreau fills the pages of \textit{Walden} with explanations and lists of all things regarding land management and organization. He relates a story of a hunter and his hounds. The hounds had been chasing a fox when the hunter’s shot rung out. When the hounds reached the dead fox, they were, according to Thoreau, puzzled by its death,

\begin{quote}
“\textit{At length the old hound burst into view with muzzle to the ground, and snapping the air as if possessed, and ran directly to the rock; but spying the dead fox she suddenly ceased her hounding, as if struck dumb with amazement, and walked round and round him in silence; and one by one her pups arrived, and, like their mother, were sobered into silence by the mystery.”}\textsuperscript{107}
\end{quote}

However, the puzzlement only lasted until the hunter arrived on the scene, “...[he] came forward and stood in their midst, and the mystery was solved.”\textsuperscript{108} Again, an instance of human mastery; a situation in which a man may exert his influence and be recognized in his higher position by the surrounding nature. Thoreau writes of the event with an air of reverence and respect directed towards the hunter. The animals occupy a lower, but not disrespected, position, looking to their

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid, 208.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid, 206.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid, 262.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid, 262.
master for enlightenment. The hunter, like Thoreau with respect to the forest, holds a paternal role, a teacher to his hounds. And made abundantly clear is the awe which the human hunter inspires in the animals. It obvious that the environment in which the event unfolded is idyllic and desirable. Where Dillard seeks to insert herself into nature, to combine it with her own human tendencies with nature, Thoreau seeks to put his human tendencies to work for him in the comprehension of nature. For Thoreau, this comprehension is more of an embrace of processes than an intuitive grasp of them - Thoreau’s people still skim the surface, mentally, relative to Dillard’s immersion, while Dillard’s people operate more superficially physically. There is a quiet acceptance that where humans walk, the natural course of things is altered: with their ability to name and to create, they change the face of the world in a way that they believe suits them, even if this is not so. The difference between Thoreau and Dillard is subtle, but far-reaching. Where Dillard attempts to change both human ability and nature to uncover the divine, Thoreau wants to use human ability for the purpose of forcing a modified understanding of nature, and following that, divinity or God. Thoreau is still in the throes of creating, or uncovering proof of, an external deity.

Both Dillard and Thoreau approach the question of fixing the human condition from decidedly different positions. Dillard wishes to impress upon her readers the importance of not stifling that which we have often associated with the uncouth, the crass, the uncivilized: the animal. The animal side of the human is invaluable when it comes to human advancement. With it, humans can learn to live in each moment as it comes, temporarily shutting down the incessant babbling of a brain that strives to connect dot after dot and to cloak the world in learned associations. She wants to say that human beings must retain their emotional trait, and not only retain it, but apply to those things in the world from which they have previously
attempted to hide, because the shock is too much. Thoreau argues that humanity must find again a lost faith and trust in the world. We must awaken ourselves by aiming for inspiration. Only through such a faith can humanity place itself to be in a position of regaining a lost stewardship - until we can oversee the natural and animal world again, we will remain hopelessly degraded, the channel between human and divine closed. Humans live in a world over which they have run roughshod with material possessions and responsibilities rooted in ownership and production. As long as this is the state of things, we’ll continue to move farther from the divine; humans ought to strive to have a poetic nature. Thoreau suggests that if we spent more time focusing on the development of ourselves and less on the development of our nations, we would find ourselves on heaven’s doorstep. Together, Dillard and Thoreau weave what they each see as being a cure for the human condition, each imagining a better world.
CONCLUSION

The world is lacking in a certain kind of reality for both Henry Thoreau and Annie Dillard, who both share the impression that human beings are somehow existing in an unauthentic world that they have created for themselves. A grounded reality in the divine is what each seeks for humanity, and both recognize that due both to human attributes and human action that comes from those attributes, human beings manage to trip themselves up, acting as their own adversaries. For Dillard, humans are sensitive, emotional, and very vulnerable, but are unwilling to acknowledge that vulnerability, and so, try to keep themselves safe. We harness our creative, imaginative abilities to hang a veil of notions about ourselves. Our self-awareness keeps us self-involved, and we constantly keep tabs on ourselves rather than trying to exchange that self-consciousness for an open and unmediated perspective regarding our world. Dillard’s solution to finding divinity rests in separating ourselves from ourselves, ceasing our overzealous processing of the names and significances around us, and letting our emotions come up against the universe in order to see a world that, while unconcerned with right and wrong, life and death, is deeply steeped in the beauty of the divine, of creation.

The divine, according to Dillard, exists in the potential of our perception, the possibility of our perspective, and our capacity to look beyond what we have been taught to see, past our visions of safety and security. She writes,

“Christ as fish, and fish as Christ. The more I glimpse the fish in Tinker Creek, the more satisfying the coincidence becomes [the rapid appearance and vanishing of the fish in the water], the richer the symbol, not
only for Christ but for the spirit as well.”

This passage exemplifies the fickle and hard-to-grasp nature of the natural world. Again and again things happen and cease to happen, and most of the time, humans drift by those events, unseeing. Dillard uses Christ to show the human personification of this aspect of the world. Christ existed for only a short time, seen by and affecting large numbers of people, and then was gone. He is like the silver fish, reflecting sunlight, there one moment and gone the next, dark water and nothing more. It can be a meaningless event or it can be a divine occurrence, and which of those it is, depends on the viewer, the perceiver. The divine exists in the combination of the dispassion of the cosmos and the human will to spin narrative for awareness.

Thoreau sees a lost humanity living in a world postlapsarian. It is a lost humanity that is blindly fumbling around, trying to regain lost footing without even being consciously aware that it has lost it in the first place. In Thoreau’s view, we produce, value material goods, and create social structures all to implement a sense of control, to keep ourselves busy, and to feign a stewardship over the natural and animal world when in fact the human spirit and the animal exist on the same plane. For Thoreau, escaping our current state lies in removing ourselves from the trivial issues that mostly occupy our conscious minds. It’s necessary that human beings stop distracting themselves and that they work to find their footing on a spiritual, not physical, plane. Stewardship can come from being attuned to the natural world and to its functions - we must understand in order to develop an ability to open the channel between the human and God.

God already exists in a state of permanency. Thoreau writes, “All men want, not something to do with, but something to do, or rather something to be.” An external god provides the outlet for being. That external god gives meaning to the inexplicable bits and pieces

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of existence and also acts as the ultimate role model, being the pinnacle of all that is. That god gives a name to those things which we are simply unable to figure out or to fathom. Thoreau’s divine is a motivator for being rather than simply undergoing a resignation to existing. “Not till we are lost,” he says, “in other words, not till we have lost the world do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations.”

It is necessary to lose hold of the preconceived notions we have about by that which we are surrounded, and to find the greater mystery wrapped around everything. The implication is that the mysteries form a web, and it is a web that links humanity to everything else. It is the influence and the effect of the external god. Although, similar to Dillard’s ideas about de-labeling everything in order to see things as they exist objectively, Thoreau’s thrust here is more aimed at demonstrating the way in which one goes about seeing the external divine through the incomprehensible vastness of Nature. Its “vastness” and “strangeness” are the same as God’s “vastness” and “strangeness.”

To see these characteristics, we must work towards a higher state of being by disentangling ourselves from the humdrum and tedious details of daily life. It is not a union with nature, as it is for Dillard, but a moving through nature. It is a denial of animal impulse, of human ability, like emotion, that is tied too closely to animal impulse.

This thesis initially started as an exploration of human condition as seen by Thoreau and Dillard, fueled by a deeply-seated interest in the ideas of humanity and animality as addressed by Georges Bataille. The intent was to look strictly at the portrayal of humanity, particularly of the animal/human connection and relationship. Human beings are constantly asking ‘why?’ We have an attachment to our existence on the earth and want to know why we are here and why we are the way we are when everything else around us is the way it is, which is vastly different from our own state of being. Dillard and Thoreau both tackle the matter of the ‘why,’ and as such,

111 Ibid, 162.
address a matter of great importance to humanity. It is a subject that has fascinated people for
time out of mind, and one that will surely continue to do so long, perhaps forever, into the future.
Particularly if, as Thoreau suggests, generations continue to fail to pass on much of importance.

However, over the course of writing this thesis, larger questions began to take root,
questions that fell outside of the structure of the project, but in their own way were as pressing
and fascinating as those that are addressed within the preceding text. As I wrote, I found myself
mimicking Thoreau’s own thrashing around in Walden: I thought, coming into the process, that I
had a clear-cut job ahead of me, that I knew the questions to ask and that I knew the approach to
take. But, the deeper into my own metaphorical woods I got, the harder to grasp what I wanted
became and the more I questioned my path. At the opening of Walden, Thoreau seems to know
exactly what it is that he aims to do: “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 time to die, discover that I had not lived.”112 Thoreau felt that he was missing quite
a lot in his life in society, that most people around him were getting it all wrong, and that he had
a fairly solid sense that by getting away from society, living on his own, and being surrounded
by nature, he would be given exactly what he needed to have a breakthrough. However, by the
end of Walden, a reader sees that this is not entirely so.

Certainly Thoreau found that he developed in his time away from society and came away
no less emphatic in his sense that humanity was flawed, but he discovered that fleeing society
did not fix the flaw, “For the most part, we are not where we are, but in a false position.
Through an infirmity of our natures, we suppose a case, and put ourselves into it, and hence are
in two cases at the same time, and it is doubly difficult to get out.”113 Wherever we go, we carry

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112 Ibid, 85.
113 Ibid, 306.
preconceived notions of the state of things. As Thoreau says, we create suppositions and then apply ourselves to them, regardless of what the reality existing outside of those suppositions may be. It is exactly what Thoreau found when he attempted to escape society. He traveled from one state of supposition into another.

In his chapter, Economy, Thoreau condemns human society as being gluttonous and that “men remain in their present low and primitive condition.” Society does little more than keep us all in a state of unfortunate stasis, our jailor and our master - the more we perpetuate it, the more it controls us. It is this that Thoreau wished to escape. Yet, he never manages to do so. It is impossible to break free of the master’s house with the master’s tools, but this is exactly what Thoreau winds-up attempting to do. While he lives by Walden Pond, he keeps meticulous expense records and inventory lists. Despite railing against materialism, Thoreau writes the following: “My furniture, part of which I made myself, and the rest cost me nothing of which I have not rendered an account, consisted of a bed, a table, a desk, three chairs, a looking-glass...a pair of tongs and andirons...” The list goes on, ending with a “japanned lamp.” When he observes the natural world, he does it in heavily human terms: “Instead of going to the pond to bathe or drink, [the villagers] are thinking to bring its water...to the village in a pope, to wash their dishes with!” While Thoreau is outraged at the human application of human wants to something so natural, he still cannot avoid bringing human concerns with him every time he sets foot into nature. It is clear that although he has separated himself from society, he is still very much a part of its tangled web. In spite of his best attempts, Thoreau traps himself by using the tools that will keep him in his prison. In spite of suggesting a distancing of the self from the

114 Ibid, 38.
116 Ibid, 60.
117 Ibid, 181.
human concerns that keep us embroiled in a futile cycle of life and death, Thoreau continues to hold those same human concerns that keep him absorbed in the system and confounded. This fact makes *Walden* an extremely confusing read because as the novel unfolds, the Thoreau that the reader sees becomes increasingly separate from his initial ideas as presented in the earliest part of the book.

Perhaps the most rewarding discovery, however, was finding that Dillard and Thoreau were connected in a completely unexpected and unlooked for way. Though they each tout certain beliefs and ideas for how humanity ought to progress, in actuality they each fit the profile of the other’s intent. When one reads *Walden*, one is immediately struck by how physically grounded Thoreau is, how focused he is on the nitty gritty details of the physical world; he is naturalist-like. Certainly this is evidenced by his interest in making lists and keeping track of the impersonal particulars of those things that surround him. In fact, the physical world always interested him. As a child at Miss Phoebe Wheeler’s private “infant” school, Thoreau asked, “Who owns all the land?”118 The concrete, the palpable, is the realm in which Thoreau operates.

And when one reads *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* it is impossible to not see the fluid, emotional, spiritual nature of Dillard’s writing. In fact, it is so overtly there that “Eudora Welty wrote in the New York Times Book Review: ‘I honestly do not know what [Dillard] is talking about.’”119 Elaine Tietjen writes, “Although many readers admire her as both a naturalist and a mystic, she is primarily, fundamentally, an artist, and the core of her book is not about the whole

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of Nature, but only one small part - *Pilgrim* is about human beings.*"120 Dillard’s writing is reflective of a deeply contemplative mindset, one that is driven by emotion and sensation.

However, when one looks beyond what each writer produces in favor of what they are saying that they want to produce, one sees the following: Thoreau argues for transcending the physical plane in order to achieve a level of mental and poetic acuity. To develop the spiritual, we must develop the mental and exist in a creative and intellectual plane. Dillard argues that we need to be more attentive to the specifics of the physical world that surround us, that we need to get *out* of our heads, where we process and label, and into our bodies where we can simply observe the *physical*. Dillard epitomizes what Thoreau wants, and Thoreau epitomizes what Dillard wants. It is an unexpected revelation to say the least, and could certainly have its roots in gender difference. It is a question that a reader might want to pursue, because certainly the fact that Thoreau is a man and Dillard a woman, potentially has a bearing, large or small, on what each has written, due to differences in perspective and placement in society. Ultimately, though an exploration of the general human collective in the world, both Thoreau and Dillard have written their personal stories and struggles, each a stand-in for the general “you” they wish to address.

This thesis works towards the purpose of introducing a reader to the connection of human intellect, consciousness, emotion, and self-awareness to the human state in the world. Beyond the explicit arguments of the thesis, the discussion of the texts allows for a look into the thought processes employed to tackle the big, human question of “why?” It demonstrates the struggle of one man who saw the flaws of human existence and the literally constructed nature of reality and wished to escape it in order to find the real outside of the constructed, and the spiritual trek of a

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120 Elaine Tietjen, "Perceptions of Nature: Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*," *North Dakota Quarterly* 56.3 (Summer 1988).
woman who was tired of having to always see the world through the tired eyes of humanity that had ceased to see newness or beauty, having traded those out in favor of established meaning.

Jaded, misguided, lost, and imperfect as we may be, human beings still retain a desire to find a meaning that exists outside of all imposed framework and human agency. We move through our lives, mostly nearsighted, focused on the pressing concerns of our tiny, subjective realities, but with the constant, fluttering hope that one day we’ll figure out what it all means. And we’ll keep dreaming of that revelation, forever trying to find it. Dillard and Thoreau both believe that the divine, that God, is here and now, accessible, and that to believe otherwise is to miss out, to lose out, and to delude. Pay attention, they argue, absorb the world. Put down the hammer, put away the plow, turn off the radio, and close the laptop. Go out into the world, ignore what you think you know, and perceive all that surrounds you without expectation. Go.

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