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Walden essay

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E. B. White’s “Walden” is packed with irony because in trying to mimic Thoreau, the author goes against all of his beliefs. He condemns the Lemming theory, yet he behaves as a lemming himself, following Thoreau over a new societal cliff.

A core belief of the transcendentalists – which Thoreau and the author both claim to be – is to avoid being a follower, but White unknowingly betrays this idea. Thoreau explains that a transcendentalist should “be at once pilot and captain, and owner and underwriter” (Thoreau 9). He believed that in order to get back to the basics, one had to control his own destiny. One should not let the actions and ideas of others influence the ways in which he behaves. If one was to live his life following the lead of others, the result would be dreadful for him. White acknowledges this by claiming “the turtle had come up too to cross the road and die in the attempt” (White 97) right after witnessing the snake get crushed. This relates to people because blindly following people and their actions will not bring us physical harm – Rather it will bring us mental harm. A form of stagnation of the mind in which no ideas will be fashioned, thus rendering the mind obsolete and squandering its capability of evolving. But little does he know, this is in fact what is becoming of White’s own mind. A true transcendentalist would not let the actions of others – including Thoreau himself – influence his own actions, but White is actually going out of his way to copy Thoreau. It is this reason which lead White to Concord. He believed that if he behaved just as Thoreau did many years ago, including walking “back to town along the railroad, following your custom” (White 101), he would become more of a transcendentalist. In fact, it would appear as though he visited Walden for the same reason the other people he saw at the pond did - To become more of a transcendentalist. However, White scorns these villagers, claiming that forming these villages gets them “bogged deeper in the mud than ever” (White 99). He thinks that forming a community only leads to new societal problems and thus a harmful environment for individual thought. What he fails to realize is that it is not the physical community which causes their transcendentalists ideals to become corrupt, but it is the fact that their ideas are not new – These people are part of a much larger “community “ of people, encompassing White, who have the audacity to falsely call themselves transcendentalists. Every one of these people has merely copied Thoreau, blindly following each other over a societal cliff. They convinced themselves – just as White did – that if they think as Thoreau did, and behave differently than the larger part of society, then they are automatically transcendentalists. Since Thoreau exclusively came up with the ideas and put all the thought into it, he is the only one who is a true transcendentalist. The others simply behave like him, putting absolutely no thought into their own ideas, which would have never evolved their minds at all.

Although White believed that behaving like Thoreau would make him more individually enlightened, his mimicry displays how his aspirations of becoming more of a transcendentalist ironically backfired.