Nature and Culture: Teaching Environmental Awareness Through Literature

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ABSTRACT


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1. Introduction

Thoreau wrote *Walden* because he was an activist dissenter, and he was an activist dissenter because he was strengthened and guided by his powerful belief in the sacredness of all planetary life. The same refusal to accept what we call conventional wisdom, ideas in his time about the impossibility of ever ending slavery or of the earth as an inexhaustible resource existing for the sole purpose of being exploited by human beings, inspires the nature writing and the political activist pieces (Ammons, p.61-62).

Reports of melting ice caps, disappearing rainforests, and people living in almost slave-like conditions due to an unsustainable consumerism seem to be part of our every-day lives. The commodities and comforts of modern day life are often taken for granted and far too many seem to be either uninterested or unaware of the consequences that might follow our high standard of living. Many of us seem to forget that our culture affects the nature around us just as much as nature affects culture, if not more.

Ever since the dawn of time, people have pondered and thought about their place in the world, their role in society, and how one affects the other, but not all have questioned it. This essay will deal with two individuals who questioned the ways of life in their respective cultures to the extent that they eventually decided to leave and search for a different life in nature, away from society and its beliefs. I believe that the ideas and values of these two individuals are worthy of reflection and consideration, and that some of them need to be discussed and applied to our society and frames of mind, at least to some extent. One way of achieving this could be to introduce and promote a more earth-centered way of reading, such as *ecocriticism*, in our schools.

1.1 Aim and Approach

The aim of this essay is to explore and examine the relation between nature and culture, based on the literary accounts and ideas of two individuals who left modern society to lead a simple life in nature. The accounts in question are Henry David Thoreau’s autobiographical *Walden* and *Into the Wild*, which is Jon Krakauer’s biographical account of Christopher McCandless. By reading, analyzing and comparing these two texts through the lens of ecocriticism, I hope to find similarities and differences in the respective protagonist’s ways of perceiving nature and its relation to culture and society. Furthermore, I hope to find a suitable way of introducing an ecocritical way of thinking, reading and working in the Swedish classroom.

I think it is necessary to introduce an earth-centered way of reading and thinking in
our schools because the concepts of culture and society seem to drift further and further away from nature. The technologies and conveniences of modern life cause a gap between the two, where one is more or less disconnected from the other. Since most people only see the finished products sitting on shelves in grocery stores, furniture stores and so on, most products’ natural origins are left unknown. We do not see the trees that are cut down to make our new furniture, and we do not see the living animals from which the meat in our grocery stores comes from. Many people today do not seem to realize that people and their societies are affecting – and are affected by – nature. In the essay “From Transcendence to Obsolescence – A Route Map” (1978) published in the anthology The Ecocriticism Reader by Glotfelty & Fromm (1996), Harold Fromm investigates how the technological advances and commodities that the Industrial Revolution brought about affected humankind’s perception of nature. He states that the many conveniences of modern life have not only caused humankind to “suffer a spiritual death” (Fromm, p. 32), but it also causes us to become ever more detached from nature. The mysteries and dangers of nature that were once explained and managed by religion are now explained by science and technology. Humans are no longer caught in a life or death struggle with nature, where the former are more or less left at the latter’s mercy. Instead, our technological prowess has allowed us to rise above nature, rendering the idea of religion as a means of transcending nature obsolete. But is that really possible to transcend nature? Is there not an interconnection between nature and culture?

In this essay I will explore the relation between nature and culture, based on the accounts and thoughts of two individuals who left modern society to lead a simple life in nature. Why do the protagonists choose a life close to nature over a life in society? What are their incentives? What are their thoughts about nature and society?

I will argue that the two protagonists share similar views of nature and its relation to society and culture despite the distance of time and space between them, and that some of their ideas and thoughts need to be considered and implemented in our schools in order to change the prevalent notion of nature as an inexhaustible resource to our way of life. I will suggest a way in which these ideas can be introduced and incorporated into the Swedish school system, and specifically the English subject and the study of literature.
1.2. Method and Theory

How does one engage in responsible, creative and cooperative biospheric action [actions that benefit our ecosystem] as a reader, teacher (especially this), and critic of literature? I think that we have to begin answering this question and that we should do what we have always done: turn to the poets. And then to the ecologists. We must formulate an ecological poetics. We must promote an ecological vision (Rueckert, p. 114).

This question, posed by William Rueckert in 1978, is the issue that I will try to address in this essay. How can we, as teachers of literature, promote an ecological vision? I will, just like Rueckert suggests, turn to the poets or, rather, authors to achieve this. The authors in question are Henry David Thoreau and Jon Krakauer. How can their works of literature be used to increase the environmental awareness in our schools? Literature is an important part of cultural heritage. The more or less inherent cultural heritage of our culture shapes and affects our individuality, which in turn affects the way we think and perceive the world around us. In short, literature has the potential of changing our frame of mind, we might just have to look at it differently. This is where ecocriticism is beneficial. Ecocriticism is a field of study that endeavors to investigate how nature and the environment is represented in literature, and what relationship between nature and culture said representations signify. Ecocriticism will be discussed in greater detail below.

Timothy Clark writes in his *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (2011) that “No distinctive method defines environmental criticism” (Clark, p.4). In other words: ecocriticism is a relatively young field of study and its methodological foundations remain a bit vague. To investigate how the relationship between nature and culture is thought of in the two primary sources of this essay, I will pay special attention to how concepts like wilderness, society, civilization, and of course nature and culture, are used and thought of in the two books. But before I start, I should explain and define these terms and concepts, along with their application to this essay. *Nature* will in this essay be viewed as geographical areas that are largely unaffected by human beings. In contrast to *nature*, *culture* will be considered synonymous to *nature*, that is; geographical areas that are largely unaffected by human beings. In contrast to *nature*, *culture* will be viewed as everything that is created by humans. Everything from human-made objects and institutions, human relationships, social conventions and traditions, towns, laws – everything that was made by
humans will be considered to be *culture*. Concepts like *society* and *civilization* will be considered to be synonymous to *culture*, since they are also products of human creation. With the help of these definitions I will investigate how the concepts of *nature* and *culture* are thought of in the two primary sources, along with how the relationship between the two concepts is depicted.

Above, I mentioned that one of the aims of this essay is to find ways of increasing the environmental awareness in our schools through literature. Environmental awareness will in this essay be defined as a desired frame of mind in which thought patterns, actions, attitudes, ideologies etc. work to protect and better our natural environment. The environmentally aware individual is also aware of the dangers and possible consequences, both moral and practical, of mistreating our environment. The aim is to find a sustainable view on the relationship between nature and culture.

1.3 Material and Sources

For this essay I have chosen two primary sources. They are introduced and discussed below.

Primary sources:

*Walden* by American naturalist, essayist and transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau, was first published in 1854. It is often considered to be *the* account of “dropping out of modern life” as Peter Barry puts it in his book *Beginning Theory – An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* from 2009 (p.241). Thoreau lived between 1817 and 1862, and this book is the product of his two-year stay (1845-1847) in a cabin by Walden Pond outside Concord, Massachusetts. By this “return to nature” (Barry, p 241), Thoreau hoped to renew the self by a simple way of life, philosophical reflection and contemplations of the essential things in life. *Walden* is the result of these contemplations, and it is seen as one of the foundational works of American ‘ecocentred’ writing.

*Into the Wild* (1996) by American writer and journalist Jon Krakauer is the story of Christopher McCandless, who in the early 1990’s, left his well-to-do family to go alone into the wilderness of Alaska, “in search of a raw, transcendent experience”, as Krakauer puts it in the foreword of the 1996 travel account. The story of Cristopher McCandless, a young man who deliberately disappeared into the wild, due to dissatisfaction with the values and norms of the society in which he lived, is a non-fiction travel account. Even though it was written as non-fiction it is important to remember that McCandless himself did not write it, ergo, it is not
always his exact words and thoughts that we get to read. The book is based on the article “Death of an Innocent”, also written by Jon Krakauer and published in *Outside Magazine* in January 1993. The article is the result of Krakauer’s journalistic research and retracing of McCandless’ journeys. The material and the facts for the article are collected from entries in McCandless’ personal journal, and from the accounts of the people who met McCandless during his travels. Jon Krakauer is an author, who:

won’t claim to be an impartial biographer. McCandless’s strange tale struck a personal note that made a dispassionate rendering of the tragedy impossible. Through most of the book, I have tried – and largely succeeded, I think – to minimize my authorial presence (Krakauer, p.2 of authors note).

1.4 Previous research

*The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* by Lawrence Buell (1995) is a study about how nature is perceived, understood, and represented in literature, as well as how that representation of nature has affected our way of thinking over the years. Buell also contemplates the significance of ecocriticism and its application to classical works of nature writing, such as Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*. Thoreau, “the patron saint of American environmental writing” (Buell, p.115), and his views on nature and the environment are discussed at length. Although *Walden* is not the only title discussed in this extensive study, it does get a lot of relevant and thought-provoking attention, making the study’s worth to this essay undisputable.

This chapter could not be considered complete without having mentioned the scholar Greg Garrard, who is currently (May, 2014) employed as Sustainability Professor at the University of British Columbia. Garrard has done some substantial research on ecocriticism as a literary theory, as well as the teaching of it. Garrard has devoted a great portion of his life to teaching and researching ecocriticism, and he has published a lot of appurtenant material. I have chosen to include two of Garrard’s works here.

*Ecocriticism* (2012) is a great introduction to ecocriticism, in which the author discusses ecocriticism from a variety of perspectives such as queer- and postcolonial ecocriticism. The author explores and discusses the relationship between human culture and the environment, which is also one of the main purposes of this essay. He also discusses Henry David
Thoreau’s *Walden* specifically, making the book even more useful.

As mentioned above, Greg Garrard is a very devoted teacher of ecocriticism. In the chapter “Ecocriticism: the ability to investigate cultural artefacts from an ecological perspective”, featured in *The Handbook of Sustainability Literacy: skills for a changing world* (ed. Arran Stibbe, 2009), Garrard contributes with a concrete example on how ecocriticism can be taught in a handy step-by-step guide. The whole book, including Garrard’s chapter, is available online for free and it is a great resource to anyone who endeavors to teach ecocriticism. Garrard’s extensive research and knowledge in the field of ecocriticism makes this guide an invaluable asset and a template for the didactic parts of this essay, which will be discussed in greater detail in the next section.

Timothy Clark is a professor in the department of English studies at Durham University. His *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (2011) is a great introduction to ecocriticism and its methods. In this book, Clark also discusses the concepts of nature and culture along with the relation between them, making it very useful to the thesis of this essay. Thoreau’s *Walden*, being “almost too famous to need description” (Clark, p.27), is used as an example of environmental writing on numerous occasions. The discussions about nature and culture, along with that about *Walden*, found in this book are valuable assets to the analysis section of this essay.

### 1.5 Ecocriticism and the teaching of environmental awareness

What then *is* ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies (Fromm & Glotfelty, p.XVIII).

This is Cheryll Glotfelty’s definition of ecocriticism, taken from the Introduction to her book *The Ecocriticism Reader – Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996). Ecocriticism is a relatively young field of study, and its methodological grounds are not quite established yet. It is believed that the term itself was first coined by William Rueckert in 1978, in his essay titled “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism”. In this essay, featured in the
anthology edited by Glotfelty & Fromm, Rueckert argues that poems and other forms of creative texts could be considered as renewable sources of stored creative energy. Just like a green plant is a deposit of solar energy that can be eaten and thus absorbed by whatever being that feeds on it, creative texts, such as *Walden* or *Into the Wild*, are deposits of creative energy and inspiration waiting to be harnessed and absorbed by a reader. Just like the animal who feeds on a plant attains sustenance by absorbing the energy stored in the plant, the reader absorbs the message of the text and takes it into his mind, where it becomes fodder for further reflection and thought, or fuel for the refining of his values and ideas. The reader incorporates the energy, or the essence, of the text into his way of thinking, reading, understanding and, possibly, changing the world around him (Rueckert, p.116-117). This is something that we can take advantage of when teaching texts with an ecological and environmental significance. By emphasizing the ecological dimensions contained in the texts we teach, we might have a chance of changing the prevalent notion of nature as an inexhaustible resource to our way of life. These are the concluding lines of Rueckert’s essay:

To charge the classroom with ecological purpose one has only to begin to think of it in symbiotic terms as a cooperative arrangement which makes it possible to release the stream of energy which flows out of the poet and into the poem, out of the poem and into the readers, out of the readers and into the classroom, and then back into the readers and out of the classroom with them, and finally back into the other larger community in a never ending circuit of life (Rueckert. p.121).

Rueckert’s elegant conclusion sums up the goal and purpose of this essay nicely. The ecological purpose I wish to promote is the development of environmentally aware pupils, as described above. The poems, or the tools, that will be used for this are *Walden* and *Into the Wild*. By finding a suitable way of introducing ecocriticism in schools, I hope to release the stream of energy that is stored in *Walden* and *Into the Wild* into the classroom, which in turn will release it into the larger community.

But how can these streams of energy be released into the classroom? The inspiration and the template for the didactic and educational dimensions of this essay is provided by Greg Garrard’s contributive chapter in *The Handbook of Sustainability Literacy: skills for a changing world*. In this chapter Garrard presents an example of how to teach and promote ecocritical thinking in the classroom via a three-step lesson plan that he calls “Three Hours to Save the Planet!” Simply put, the plan offers a way of investigating, contemplating and comparing contemporary culture with nature, along with a view on how the two (nature and culture) are represented in literature. This plan, originally developed for students at a university level, lets students reflect on what is considered important and noteworthy in the
culture that surrounds them. How do the values of culture correlate with those found in nature when the two are put in contrast to each other? How do one’s thought-patterns get affected by culture and how do they change when one is closer to nature? And, finally, what role do these cultural and natural influences play in the creation of literary works, such as poems? (Garrard suggests using poems by William Wordsworth and A.R Ammons) Garrard’s plan can, with great benefit, be adapted to suit the purposes and goals of this essay. In this essay, the plan is intended for upper-secondary school, and the literary works that will be used are *Walden* and *Into the Wild*. Garrard’s lesson plan will be described step by step below.

Step one is called “Hour One: Infosphere”. In this part of the three hour lesson, the students are tasked with watching television for an hour. While doing so, they are supposed to chart and contemplate the different conventions, norms and patterns of our culture, as made visible through commercials, music videos, news, and the world of media at large. The student is required to switch between all available channels in order to “get a real sense of scope” as Garrard puts it (Garrard. 2009 p. 2). When switching through the channels trying to form an opinion on what our culture really is like, these questions, taken from Garrard’s chapter, are provided to guide them in that pursuit:

- What sorts of places are represented on TV? Which countries and on what sorts of scales (i.e. inside houses, underneath rocks, from space, etc.)?
- What is the good life, as seen on TV? What makes us happy? What is valuable? What about death?
- Where does history begin and end, and what sorts of things happen in it?
- What about pace? Are there implications about whether faster or slower is better?
- What counts as nature? What sorts of creatures, doing what sorts of things, in what locations?
- What is news – and what is not? (Garrard. 2009 p.2).

The purpose of this step is to investigate what kind of observations can be made about our culture simply by watching television for an hour. Which parts of our culture are represented and which are missing? Why? (Garrard. 2009).

The second step, which Garrard calls “Hour Two: Biosphere”, takes place outdoors. The students are asked to go outdoors for an hour, preferably to a place where they are cut off from each other and from civilization in terms of sounds, sights and other sensory impressions. To further increase this arranged distance from civilization and society, mobile phones and other electronic devices must be turned off. In their seclusion, the students are asked to contemplate and reflect on questions like the following, taken from Garrard’s chapter:

- Do you know what things around you are called – the names of trees, birds, clouds? Does it matter?
- What sort of ‘information’ could you glean – and what do you need to know – out here?
- Is it uncomfortable? Is discomfort bad? Why?
- Is it boring? What do we mean by ‘boredom’?
- Focus on each of your senses one at a time – sight, smell and taste, hearing, touch, temperature, inner physical sensations (tiredness, hunger, desire, muscular tension). What’s going on?
- Vary the scale a bit – try to take a long view, then get as close up as you can, turning over rocks or bits of rotten wood, looking behind things. What happens to your sense of time and space? What about death? (Garrard. 2009 p. 3).

By answering questions like the above and by reflecting upon the thoughts and feelings that might arise during their time of seclusion in nature (much like Thoreau did in Walden) the students will hopefully form an opinion about nature and their relation towards it – an opinion based on experience. Garrard notes that even if this exercise will not likely lead to many epiphanies of the Romantic kind: the kind of epiphany promoted by 18th century return-to-nature romantics, “Silence, boredom, discomfort and non-competitive, unpaid exertion – anathema in TV world – turn out to yield strange insights.” (Garrard. 2009 p. 3), the insights that Garrard writes about could be about nature’s power and fragility, humankind’s place in it, and how one affects the other; all of which are relevant to the goal and purpose of this study, namely, the development of an environmentally aware classroom, and, by extension, an environmentally aware society.

The third and final step of Garrard’s lesson plan is called “Hour Three: Poetry”. In this step, the interconnections between culture and nature will (hopefully) be made visible through poetry, one of the ecocritic’s most useful sources in the search for examples of said interconnections. Garrard suggests that ‘Corson’s Inlet’ by A.R. Ammons and ‘Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey’ by William Wordsworth are used for this.

Following the same procedure as before, some questions are provided to facilitate the work with the poems:

- The most striking difference is surely formal: Wordsworth’s blank verse and Ammons’s jagged free verse lineation, and, correspondingly, iambic pentameter versus shifting, pulsating ‘eddies of meaning’ and rhythm. What difference does this make?
- How does the poetic persona relate to the environment? How is he physically situated in it? What sorts of lessons does he find in it?
- What do the poems have to say about memory, beauty, fragility, danger, constancy and change?
- Characterise the diction: the kinds of nouns, verbs and adjectives you find in each poem. What do these say about the poem?
- Which do you like the most? Why? (Garrard. 2009 p.3-4).
The purpose of this final step of Garrard’s lesson plan is to compare the two poems, find differences in the two poets’ ways of portraying nature, and by doing so; practice a form of ecocriticism.

In my adaptation of Garrard’s plan, ‘Corson’s Inlet’ and ‘Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey’ will be replaced by my primary sources *Walden* and *Into the Wild,* and the questions will be replaced with questions based on aforementioned primary sources and purposes of this essay. Furthermore, I will add a short discussion-based evaluation of the three steps, where the students get to discuss and compare their experiences and possible insights. This will be discussed in greater detail in the chapter “Teaching Ecocritical Reading and Environmental Awareness”.

**2. Analysis**

In this chapter I present the results of my analysis of my primary sources *Walden* and *Into the Wild.*

**2.1 Walden**

The very simplicity and nakedness of man’s life in the primitive ages imply this advantage at least, that they left him still but a sojourner in nature. When he was refreshed with food and sleep he contemplated his journey again. He dwelt, as it were, in a tent in this world, and was either threading the valleys, or crossing the plains, or climbing the mountain tops. 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 under a tree for shelter, a housekeeper (Thoreau, p.24).

In this short passage taken from *Walden*, Thoreau tells us how society, culture and human-made institutions and obligations have come to take nature’s place in the consciousness of humankind. In the earlier stages of civilization, humans lived closer to nature and knew how to appreciate it. People ate, slept and lived their lives close to, and in harmony with, nature. But as society evolved, more and more obligations evolved with it. Thoreau writes that where people were once independent and free to do what they wanted with their time, they are now (in the 1850’s) constrained by the many demands and expectations of civilized life. They “have become the tools of their tools” (Thoreau, p.24). Time that was once spent “threading the valleys” is now spent earning a living, living up to the expectations of society, or to earn enough money to be able to live sometime *in the future* (Thoreau, p.24). In short, Thoreau thought that the people of his time were too busy selling their time to actually be able to live
and to be free. These thoughts are visible in the following passage taken from a chapter where Thoreau discusses different forms of “dwellings” and other commodities:

Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind. With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meagre life than the poor (Thoreau. p. 8).

Thoreau continues to discuss the cost of a comfortable civilized life:

But how happens it that he who is said to enjoy these things are so commonly a poor civilized man, while the savage, who has them not, is rich as a savage? If it is asserted that civilization is a real advance in the condition of man, - and I think it is, though only the wise improve their advantages, - it must be shown that it has produced better dwellings without making them more costly; and the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run (Thoreau. p.19).

In short, Thoreau argued that the society of his time required the citizens who were part of it to work too much, or sell too much of their time in order to enjoy a good life:

Most men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them (Thoreau. p.3).

Thoreau thought that the maintaining of one’s self should be a pastime rather than a hardship that would seize the majority of one’s lifetime (Thoreau. p.46). He went to live in the woods by Walden Pond in order to make this way of life possible. Time which society would expect one to spend earning a living and following various social conventions, Thoreau intended to spend actually living. A simple life in nature would make it possible to find out and contemplate what is essential in life.

Nature, to Thoreau, is the source of life and of spirituality and he writes about it in an almost religious manner. Although nature (which he almost always spells with a capital ‘N’, signaling a perceived greatness to the concept) is a source of spirituality, Thoreau seems to think that the more a community or a society evolves, the farther away it comes from nature and the spirituality that is to be found there. People seem to lose interest in nature as they get increasingly integrated into society with its expectations, requirements and accepted ways of being and living. From time to time, Thoreau had visitors at his dwelling by Walden Pond. He describes some of them like this:

I could not but notice some of the peculiarities of my visitors. Girls and boys and young women generally seemed glad to be in the woods. They looked in the pond and at the flowers, and improved their time. Men of business, even farmers, thought only of solitude and employment, and of the great distance at which I dwelt from something or other; and though they said that they loved a ramble in the woods
occasionally, it was obvious that they did not. Restless committed men, whose time was all taken up in getting a living or keeping it;

Thoreau continues:

young men who had ceased to be young, and had concluded that it was safest to follow the beaten track of the professions, - all these generally said that it was not possible to do much good in my position (Thoreau. p. 99).

Thoreau’s visitors seem to lose interest in nature as they grow older and their commitments and responsibilities to society increase. These farmers and townsmen seem to think that they are wasting their time by being in the woods when they could be working and making money instead. Money that could be used to improve their standard of living. To Thoreau, being close to nature is equal to being close to improvement of one’s life through spirituality and development of the self. Avoiding to spend time in nature due to work or other commitments to society should thus result in a decreasing spirituality among Thoreau’s contemporaries.

Another group of people that visit the pond are interpreted and described in a completely different way:

Early in the morning, while all things are crisp with frost, men come with fishing reels and slender lunch, and let down their fine lines through the snowy field to take pickerel and perch; wild men who instinctively follow other fashions and trust other authorities than their townsmen, and by their goings and comings stitch towns together in parts where else they would be ripped. They sit and eat the luncheon in stout fear-naughts on the dry oak leaves on the shore, as wise in natural lore as the citizen in artificial (Thoreau. p.182-183).

This passage seems to suggest that this group of fishermen is very different from the “restless men” mentioned in the previous passage (see above). While the townsmen are concerned with procuring or keeping a living along with a role in society, these “wild” men seem to have a strong connection with nature. The way Thoreau describes these men makes it seem like they are disconnected, or at least profoundly different from the people who live and work in towns and society. Thoreau writes that they “instinctively follow other fashions and trust other authorities than their townsmen” signaling that these men do not primarily follow the human-made institutions and rules of society that the people in towns follow. Instead, they follow the rules of nature. Instead of political and institutional changes, they follow the seasonal changes, instead of social conventions they keep track of weather conditions and where game is to be found. Furthermore, Thoreau writes about natural as well as artificial lore; the fishermen wise in the former, and the townsmen in the latter. The natural lore that Thoreau writes about, I interpret as knowledge about nature and how it works, whereas artificial lore seems to be knowledge about how society and other human-made institutions work. The two groups of people described by Thoreau along with their respective mindsets and skills seem to
be disconnected from each other, signaling a fissure between nature and culture, the natural and the artificial.

Thoreau’s deep love for nature is not hard to detect. It is made visible in numerous extensive descriptions of the scenery surrounding his cabin, his observations of birds and animals, and his contemplations of what is to be considered essential in life. Neither is it hard to detect his discontent with some of the things that civilization, greed, and technological advances bring about. Close to where Thoreau built his cabin, the railroad passed by. In the following description of the railroad and the trains that frequent it, Thoreau seems to be a bit ambivalent towards the benefits of the train and its effects on the surrounding landscape:

When I meet the engine with its train of cars moving off with planetary motion, - or, rather, like a comet, for the beholder knows not if with that velocity and with that direction it will ever revisit this system, since its orbit does not look like a returning curve, - with its steam cloud like a banner streaming behind in golden and silver wreaths, like many a downy cloud I have seen, high in the heavens, unfolding its masses to the light, - as if this travelling demigod, this cloud-compeller, would ere long take the sunset sky for the livery of his train; when I hear the Iron horse make the hills echo with his snort like thunder, shaking the earth with his feet, and breathing fire and smoke from his nostrils, (what kind of winged horse or fiery dragon they will put into the new Mythology I don’t know,) it seems as if the earth had got a race now worthy to inhabit it. If all were as it seems, and men made the elements their servants for noble ends! If the cloud that hangs over the engine were the perspiration of heroic deeds, or as beneficent as that which hangs over the farmer’s fields, then the elements and Nature herself would cheerfully accompany men on their errands and be their escort (Thoreau. p. 75-76).

The words Thoreau uses in the passage above almost make it seem as if he was aware of the disadvantages of fossil fuels and their pollutant properties. The (presumably) coal-fired train that would “take the sunset sky for livery with its plumes of steam and smoke” is obviously something that bothers Thoreau to some degree, but at the same time he seems to appreciate and acknowledge the possibilities of the train. He is, however, worried about the effects this human-made piece of machinery might have on his beloved forest and he seems to wish that this technology could be used in a different way. He seems to infer that the train causes ramifications in the harmonious relation between human and nature.

There are more examples of how Thoreau questions humankind’s views on nature and its rights to exploit it. The following passage is taken from a part of the book in which Thoreau describes the different ponds in his vicinity:

*Flint’s Pond!* Such is the poverty of our nomenclature. What right had the unclean and stupid farmer, whose farm abutted on this sky water, whose shores he has ruthlessly laid bare, to give his name to it? Some skin-flint, who loved better the reflecting surface of a dollar, or a bright cent, in which he could see his own brazen face; who regarded even wild ducks which settled in it as trespassers; his fingers
Once again, Thoreau provides a great example of a clash between nature and culture. The seemingly irresponsible and thoughtless farmer gives priority to his greed before the wellbeing of the pond, something that is unthinkable to the nature-loving Thoreau. Someone who allows a human-made and socially constructed concept such as money to compromise the natural beauty and integrity of the pond is not worthy of naming it, according to Thoreau. Greg Garrard writes, in Ecocriticism (2012), that:

‘It is no coincidence that this view of nature took hold most strongly with the rise of capitalism, which needed to turn nature into a market commodity and resource without significant moral or social constraint on availability’ (Garrard. p.69).

This capitalist view of nature represents a clash with that of Thoreau, that much is clear. The underlying reasons for Thoreau’s anger are not all that clear though. Is he angry with the farmer simply because his greed destroys the beauty of the pond, or is he aware of the disorder that the farmer’s deforestation and pollution will cause to the ponds ecosystem, that being the main reason for his anger? Regardless of what the underlying reasons for his anger are, the passage shows that Thoreau thinks that some things have a natural right to inhabit and take advantage of an area, while others do not. In this case, the farmer tries to claim the pond for his own selfish needs, something which he has no right to do, and thus evicting the creatures who have a natural right to be there, in this case represented by the ducks.

Timothy Clark (2011) notes that when Thoreau writes about his natural surroundings in Walden “he does not use the term wilderness, which would suggest a large unsettled area implausible for Massachusetts in the 1840s, but wild. This suggests a more fluid quality, less localisable and in part a function of human attitudes” (Clark. p.33). Whether Thoreau’s choice of words was an aware choice or not we do not know. Did Thoreau think of the area he inhabited as a relatively wild area, to some degree affected by the doings of humans, instead of a pristine area of land untouched by the influence of humans, as the word wilderness would suggest? I think that Thoreau realized that the doings of humankind (culture) reverberate in nature due to the subtle but fundamental interconnection between the two. I think that Thoreau realized the impact that culture had had on nature in the area he inhabited, thus refraining from referring to it as wilderness. The Massachusetts of his time was not pristine enough to be called wilderness.

As the passages above show, Thoreau has some strong opinions concerning what rights people have to mistreat and take advantage of the nature around them. A reading of
Walden also tells the reader a lot about Thoreau’s thoughts about society, its institutions and habits, and the way some people are taken advantage of. Thoreau was strongly opposed to the slavery that prevailed in the United States at this time, and he encouraged other people to actively demonstrate their dislike of governments that allowed it to continue. The following passage is a great example of Thoreau’s dislike of some of society’s institutions:

One afternoon, near the end of the first summer, when I went to the village to get a shoe from the cobbler’s, I was seized and put into jail, because, as I have elsewhere related, I did not pay tax to, or recognize the authority of, the state which buys and sells men, women, and children, like cattle at the door of its senate-house. I had gone down to the wood for other purposes. But, wherever a man goes, men will pursue and paw him with their dirty institutions, and, if they can, constrain him to belong to their desperate odd-fellow society (Thoreau, p.111).

Thoreau’s dislike of some parts and aspects of society are not hard to distinguish. It is even easier to distinguish in his essay “Civil Disobedience” (1849) in which he writes about the common people’s duty to prevent their governments from practicing and allowing different forms of injustice, i.e. slavery, to continue. Even if he states that this dislike is not the main reason for his moving into the woods, this passage, among others, is a clear indicator that Thoreau has steadfast opinions of what is right and wrong. Thoreau projects an image of a corrupted and decadent society which he does not wish to support. The “dirty institutions” that Thoreau writes about, where material wealth is desired to the degree that enslavement of other human beings is considered to be acceptable, need to be questioned according to Thoreau. It does not seem like Thoreau expected to completely cut his ties to society and its dirty institutions by moving into the woods, but he was openly against it and he urged other people to follow his example and countervail the morally corrupt government. Thoreau’s thoughts about what is right and wrong along with his acts of civil disobedience have inspired a lot of people over the years, including Christopher McCandless. This will be discussed in greater detail in the chapter “Conclusions”.

Based on the passages that I have presented above, I would suggest that Thoreau is a man with strong opinions on both nature, culture and the relationship between the two. Even if he does not wish to be completely and eternally secluded and detached from society, he does claim that there are qualities in nature that could not be found in the society of his time, partly because society has lost its connection with its natural origins. He seems to recognize some kind of primordial interconnection between nature and culture, although the latter has come to be ever more detached from the former; something that is visible in the emerging capitalist economy, social injustice, and people’s lack of interest in nature (apart from its monetary
values). There is an interconnection between nature and culture, an interconnection that Thoreau urges people to awaken and see: “The morning wind forever blows, but few are the ears that hear it.” In this poetic statement, Thoreau seems to infer that nature is always present and that it is the root of all life; including that life which exists within society and culture, but a lot of people seem to have forgotten that - maybe because they got distracted by the chance of procuring monetary wealth.

In his *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) Lawrence Buell describes Thoreau and *Walden* as:

> a record and a model of a western sensibility working with and through the constraints of Eurocentric, androcentric, homocentric culture to arrive at an environmentally responsible vision. Thoreau’s career can be understood as a process of self-education in environmental reading, articulation and bonding (Clark, p.28).

Thoreau learned about nature’s significance through a lifetime of observing it, and he urged other people to remember their connection to it. By seeing through the sometimes constraining and blinding obligations and conventions of society, such as an unquestioned affection for material excess and monetary wealth, Thoreau’s environmental awareness increased.

### 2.2 Into the Wild

Throughout Jon Krakauer’s *Into the Wild* (1996), the reader is told how Christopher McCandless was inspired and influenced by writers like Jack London, Leo Tolstoy, and, most relevant for this essay; Henry David Thoreau. A copy of Thoreau’s *Walden* containing several highlighted passages and handwritten notes was found with McCandless’s remains, suggesting that McCandless must have read it at least once. The fact that he brought it with him on his journey suggests that it was dear to him and that it might have served as some kind of guide or manual to living in nature and contemplating life. When reading *Into the Wild*, it soon becomes clear that McCandless shares with Thoreau both a deep love for nature, and, more prominently, a certain disbelief and skepticism towards parts of society. On numerous occasions, Krakauer writes about how McCandless spurned different social and institutional conventions, such as the well-recognized *need* to achieve a good education in order to pursue a career, followed by the *need* to increase one’s material wealth. McCandless was determined to live his life the way he wanted. His decision to journey across the United States of America and eventually into the Alaska wilderness was, in a way, a means of emancipating himself
from his upper-middleclass life along with its obligations and expectations, such as getting a job, earning a lot of money, and buying fancy cars to prove that you really are someone. McCandless wanted, much like Thoreau, to elevate his spirit by leading a simple life close to nature. In the following passage, McCandless’s college education instantiates the tedious obligations of his life; a life which he was not quite content with:

The trip was to be an odyssey in the fullest sense of the word, an epic journey that would change everything. He had spent the previous four years, as he saw it, preparing to fulfill an absurd and onerous duty; to graduate from college. At long last he was unencumbered, emancipated from the stifling world of his parents and peers, a world of abstraction and security material excess, a world in which he felt grievously cut off from the raw throb of existence (Krakauer. p.22).

Soon after his graduation, McCandless abandoned his life in society and set out to start a life “in which he would be free to wallow in unfiltered experience” (Krakauer. p. 22).
McCandless’s new life was abstemious in terms of food and shelter, but it was rich in extraordinary experiences and natural beauty. The simplicity of McCandless’s new vagabond lifestyle along with the experiences and the nature that surrounded him in his travels was much appreciated. He traveled, mostly on foot, around the United States, taking simple jobs where he could or when he wanted or needed to, and he was constantly looking for new experiences. To him, it represented a freedom that could not be found in his former life; a freedom that McCandless cherished. Obligations, expectations and problems appertaining to culture and society were hindrances that kept McCandless from living life the way he wanted. Only by leaving society behind would this life be made possible.

One of the aims of this essay is to investigate the relation between nature and culture (society) as depicted in Walden and Into the Wild. When it comes to the latter of the two titles, it is not hard to see what the protagonist thinks about the values and the politics of the society in which he lived. Krakauer writes that “Chris’s [McCandless’] seemingly anomalous political positions were perhaps best summed up by Thoreau’s declaration in Civil Disobedience: “I heartily accept the motto – ‘that government is best which governs least.’” (Krakauer. p.123). Neither Thoreau nor McCandless liked the idea of having a government or a set of norms to tell them what to think and how to act. Thoreau refused to be part of a society that sanctioned slavery, and McCandless did not want to be part of a society where material wealth determines an individual’s worth. Neither of them wanted to simply follow the beaten track without questioning where it would take them.

It is clear that Chris McCandless thought of society as a hindrance to his desired way
of living, and that the life he wanted was to be achieved through a simple existence in nature, away from the distractions of society. McCandless’s views on nature are not as apparent and evident as those of Thoreau though. This is due to a difference in incentives and purpose between the two individuals. They went into the wild for different reasons. Krakauer puts it like this:

Unlike Muir and Thoreau, McCandless went into the wilderness not primarily to ponder nature or the world at large but, rather, to explore the inner country of his own soul. He soon discovered, however, what Muir and Thoreau already knew: An extended stay in the wilderness inevitably directs one’s attention outward as much as inward, and it is impossible to live of the land without developing both a subtle understanding of, and a strong emotional bond with, that land and all it holds. The entries in McCandless’s journal contain few abstractions about wilderness or, for that matter, few ruminations of any kind. There is scant mention of the surrounding scenery.

Krakauer continues to write about McCandless’ view on his surroundings:

The journal is little more than a tally of plants foraged and game killed. It would probably be a mistake, however, to conclude thereby that McCandless failed to appreciate the beauty of the country around him, that he was unmoved by the power of the landscape (Krakauer. p.183).

The journal that was found with McCandless’s remains did not include many speculations about nature in relation to society or explicit descriptions of nature, but just like Krakauer suggests, this does not mean that McCandless was uninterested or uninspired by the landscape that surrounded him. First of all, he had no ambition to depict, in detail, the sights he saw in order to share it with an audience. Even so, there are many clues in the book that suggest that McCandless had a great interest in nature, despite the lack of explicit descriptions of landscapes and surroundings. During his travels, McCandless met several people to whom he would occasionally send letters as his journey progressed. Some of this correspondence has been preserved, and it served as a great source of information in Krakauer’s initial research of the story. McCandless wrote the following words to his friend and temporary employer, Wayne Westerberg: “I’ve been tramping around Arizona for about a month now. This is a good state! There is all kinds of fantastic scenery and the climate is wonderful” (Krakauer. p.33). This is sound proof that McCandless was paying attention to the landscape around him in his travels. The descriptions may not be as detailed as those found in Thoreau’s Walden, but it is still evidence that he actually noticed and cared about the scenery.

Lori Zarza was second assistant manager at a McDonald’s, at which McCandless was temporarily employed during his travels. Krakauer interviewed her in his search for information, and she remembers McCandless like this: “I don’t think he ever hung out with any of the employees after work or anything. When he talked, he was always going on about
trees and nature and weird stuff like that. We all thought he was missing a few screws[“] (Krakauer. p.40). Zarza’s recollection of McCandless and the statement she gave strengthens the notion of McCandless being an aware observer of nature. He seems to be very interested in nature, albeit a bit oblivious of his coworkers’ disinterest in what he had to say about it. Eventually, McCandless quit his job at McDonalds and resumed his travels. In a letter to his friend Jan Burres, McCandless writes that he had “grown tired of Bullhead [the town in which he was employed], tired of punching a clock, tired of the ‘plastic people’ he worked with” (Krakauer. p.43). Even if McCandless eventually grew tired of working in the Bullhead City McDonald’s, this employment might seem a bit unlikely considering McCandless’ ambitions to distance himself from society. McCandless did, however, take a few jobs during his travels to fund different projects he had, i.e. buying a canoe to paddle down the Colorado River to the Gulf of California. Before he started his journey, McCandless donated all of his savings to charity, leaving him penniless. Although he enjoyed being poor since the vagabond lifestyle became more of a challenge that way, as he states in a letter to his friend Wayne Westerberg (Krakauer. p.33), he soon came to know that money was sometimes necessary to continue his journey. He had to work from time to time even though he often loathed it and longed to resume his adventurous travels. On February 3, McCandless wrote in his journal that he was going to Los Angeles “to get a ID and a job but feels extremely uncomfortable in society now and must return to road immediately” (Krakauer. p.37). Taking jobs on occasion seems to have been a necessary evil to McCandless.

Krakauer compares Christopher McCandless to Everett Ruess, another vagabond that traveled through the wilderness of the southern United States in the 1930’s:

one is struck by Ruess’s craving for connection with the natural world and by his almost incendiary passion for the country through which he walked. “I had some terrific experiences in the wilderness since I wrote you last – overpowering, overwhelming,” he gushed to his friend Cornel Tengel. “But then I am always being overwhelmed. I require it to sustain life.”

Everett Ruess’s correspondence reveals uncanny parallels between Ruess and Chris McCandless (Krakauer. p.91).

Much like Ruess, McCandless went into the wild to be overwhelmed, to test his limits. Both Ruess and McCandless claimed that the experiences that the wilderness had to offer, often dangerous ones, are in one way or another a necessity of life. McCandless wrote in his journal: “It is the experiences, the memories, the great triumphant joy of living to the fullest extent in which real meaning is found” (Krakauer. p.37). To be able to really live, both Ruess and McCandless seem to think that extraordinary experiences and the testing of one’s limits is needed. This kind of extraordinary living, in close relation nature, would help open one’s eyes
to the real values in life. The following passage was highlighted in the copy of Thoreau’s *Walden* that was found with McCandless’s remains:

No man ever followed his genius till it mislead him. Though the result were bodily weakness, yet perhaps no one can say that the consequences were to be regretted, for these were a life in conformity to higher principles. If the day and the night are such that you greet them with joy, and life emits a fragrance like flowers and sweet-scented herbs, is more elastic, more starry, more immortal, - that is your success. All nature is your congratulation, and you have cause momentarily to bless yourself. The greatest gains and values are farthest from being appreciated. We easily come to doubt if they exist. We soon forget them. They are the highest reality. … The true harvest of my daily life is somewhat as intangible and indescribable as the tints of morning or evening. It is a little star-dust caught, a segment of the rainbow which I have clutched (Krakauer. p.47).

The fact that this passage was highlighted by McCandless would suggest that he shared Thoreau’s opinion. By subjecting oneself to the elements of nature, by living in the midst of it for example, one’s ability to see and appreciate what life has to offer increases. McCandless wrote in a letter to a friend, urging him to try living a life on the road:

You are wrong if you think Joy emanates only or principally from human relationships. God has placed it all around us. It is in everything and anything we might experience. We just have to have the courage to turn against our habitual lifestyle and engage in unconventional living (Krakauer. p. 57).

Both Thoreau and McCandless thought that out-of-the-ordinary experiences were needed in order to find the important things in life that would give it meaning. They both went looking for these important, or to use Thoreau’s word; *essential* things in life in nature, albeit in different ways. Thoreau went to the woods to fill his days with philosophical contemplations about life, close to the nature from which his, and all other life derive. McCandless was almost always on the move, looking for experiences that would seem extreme to most people of his time. The experiences are what give meaning to life according to McCandless, and experiences were often had by going against the norms of society in one way or the other. Thoreau did go against the norms of his times as well, but he did not seek it as actively and he did not take it as far as McCandless did. Even if McCandless’ journeys might seem extreme, he never went to the extremes with the purpose of attracting the attention of others. He did it for himself, to add joy and meaning to his life through experiences. Even if said experiences (like turning against a habitual lifestyle to live off the land in the Alaskan wilderness) might result in “bodily weakness”, as Thoreau puts it (see above), the rewards are greater than the sacrifices. Both Thoreau and McCandless argue that their experiences outside society changed their ways of looking at life. Both Thoreau and McCandless tested their own limits by stepping off the beaten track of society’s norms and expectations, but McCandless might have
trodden further away from the metaphorical track than Thoreau ever did. Thoreau knew that his taking up residence in the woods was an unconventional thing to do, but he did not do it for the sake of being unconventional. To McCandless, the search for the out-of-the-ordinary or the unconventional was the purpose of his journey.

In short, McCandless left a culture whose ideals and conventions he did not approve of to find a new life on the road. By living a simple life on the road, away from the constraining obligations of society, McCandless searched for freedom and the true meaning of life. Eventually he concluded that the only true meaning in life is had through experience. The secure and comfortable ways of our “habitual lifestyle” was a hindrance to these experiences (Krakauer. p. 57). After having experienced the more raw and untamed parts of the world, McCandless hoped to look at the world in a new, enlightened way. McCandless journey into the wild was a way of elevating the spirit through a constant transgression of supposed limits.

The following passage was written by McCandless on a sheet of plywood in the bus in which he lived and, eventually, died. McCandless signed the declaration with the name Alexander Supertramp, a name he adopted when he started his journey to further distance himself from his previous life.

Two years he walks the earth, no phone, no pool, no pets, no cigarettes. Ultimate freedom. An extremist. An aesthetic voyager whose home is the road. Escaped from Atlanta. Thou shalt not return, “cause “the west is the best.” And now after two rambling years comes the final and greatest adventure. The climactic battle to kill the false being within and victoriously conclude the spiritual revolution. Ten days and nights of freight trains and hitchhiking bring him to the great white north. No longer to be poisoned by civilization he flees, and walks alone upon the land to become lost in the wild.

Alexander Supertramp

May 1992 (Krakauer. p.163).

This confession-like declaration tells us a lot about McCandless’ intentions, goals, and thoughts about his journey into the Alaskan wilderness, and it sums up this analysis nicely. The first two sentences can be interpreted as his idea of how freedom is found. By leaving behind comforts like phones, pools, pets and cigarettes, or in other words; society and modern life, ultimate freedom could be attained, a freedom without constraints. He also states that the road is his new home to which he more or less fled, with no intention of returning to his previous life. With his newly found freedom, he set out to “kill the false being within”, a being that had been socially constructed during his previous life in society. The expectations and obligations of his past had tried to turn him into someone that he was not, and by renouncing these he was going to find his true self, he was going to “conclude the spiritual
revolution”. To McCandless, nature constitutes a refuge from his previous life in civilized society, which he saw as something that poisoned the self. McCandless states that he intends to “become lost in the wild”. This can be interpreted in a number of ways. First of all, he did not intend to be found by anyone. He sought seclusion and distance from other people and may have intended to purposely lose his bearings to further that distance. He *wanted* to get lost, in the very literal sense of the word. Another interpretation of this is that he wanted to lose himself in a more metaphorical manner. McCandless could mean that he wanted to “become lost” in the beauty and the experience of being in the wild. He might have wanted to immerse himself completely in the situation and all that it entailed in terms of sights, thoughts, experiences and challenges.

Compared to Thoreau, McCandless seems to have viewed nature as more of a refuge from society than Thoreau did. Thoreau turned to nature to find better ways of living just like McCandless did, but he never saw it as a *replacement* or an *alternative* to society like McCandless did. To McCandless, nature was a refuge, a means of getting away from society. Thoreau looks at nature and society in relation to each other whereas McCandless more or less views them as two separate planes of existence. Timothy Clark writes that “A fascination with the wild as the acultural or even anti-cultural pervades much environmental non-fiction. ‘Wild’ nature necessarily offers a space outside given cultural identities and modes of thinking and practice” (Clark. p.25). This view of nature and the wild as something that is disconnected from culture, or even anti-cultural, seems to consort with that of McCandless.

### 3. Teaching Ecocritical Reading and Environmental Awareness

We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep. I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor. It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts (Thoreau, p. 59).

As this passage shows, Thoreau is an advocate of a kind of *awakening*, meaning that people must learn to see both the sheer beauty of nature, but more importantly, to see its significance to *every* living thing along with the dangers of mistreating it. By awakening from the mindset in which nature is often forgotten we can see the world through new eyes, and thus improve both our own lives and the world around us. He argues that we must learn to see past the
accepted conventions and habits of everyday life. We must question the expectations of the world around us and not blindly follow the beaten track. Thoreau went to the woods to find and contemplate the essential things in life, and by doing so he managed to “carve and paint the very atmosphere” through which he looked (Thoreau, p.59). I think ecocriticism can help carve and paint the atmosphere through which we look at nature and our relation to it, making our society a better place both morally, qualitatively and atmospherically. That is, by treating nature in a more ethical and responsible way, we can improve the quality of our environment.

The first step of any project where ecocriticism is involved should be to introduce the term ecocriticism, what it means, what it does, how it is practiced, and, perhaps most importantly, why it is important. Ecocriticism is a field of study that investigates how nature and the environment is represented in literary works. This is done by subjecting works of literature (such as Walden and Into the Wild) to a literary analysis where physical surroundings are of special interest. How is nature described and what does it mean? What is nature’s relation to culture? By asking questions like these, we can come to valuable insights about nature, culture, and how one affects the other. In a time where climate changes, global warming, and environmental disasters are part of our everyday lives, the importance of the ecocritical perspective and its possibilities to change an unsustainable mindset for a sustainable one is undisputable. Hopefully, the students will agree. If they do not, I would say the need for ecocriticism is even greater.

As previously mentioned, Greg Garrard’s lesson plan included in The Handbook of Sustainability Literacy: skills for a changing world (ed. Stibbe. 2009) will work as a template for this section of the essay. In the first step of this plan, the students are to reflect upon their contemporary culture by looking at television for an hour. The second step consists of an excursion to some form of natural setting. Here, the students are to reflect upon nature and what it means. The purpose of steps one and two is to reflect upon culture and nature and putting the two in contrast to each other. Steps one and two of the plan will be kept more or less the way they are. Step three on the other hand will be adapted to better suit the purposes and the material of this study. Walden and Into the Wild will take the place of the two poems suggested by Garrard, in the effort to increase the students’ environmental awareness and knowledge about ecocriticism.

Steps one and two of the lesson are constructed to facilitate the students’ forming of opinions regarding society and culture (step one) and nature (step two). They can also be used to raise awareness of different circumstances in nature and society that the students may not be aware of. After all, a lot of students might not have any real experience of nature, since
society seems to drift further and further away from nature. Harold Fromm writes, in his article “From Transcendence to Obsolescence”:

To the average child of the United States in the present day Nature is indeed a great mystery, not insofar that it is incomprehensible but insofar as it is nonexistent to his perceptions. Not only do most children obtain without delay the nurturing commodities for a satisfied bodily life, but they are rarely in a position to experience a connection between the commodity that fills their need and their natural source (Fromm. p.33).

Both Thoreau and Krakauer writes about nature and society in relation to each other, and it would be very hard for students with little experience of either one of these to understand the interconnectedness that this essay strives to make visible. This is why step two of Garrard’s lesson plan is so important. I do not mean to suggest that an hour spent in some grove on the outskirts of the schoolyard will make students more familiar with nature, but going there with a purpose, in this case represented by the questions that need contemplating, will hopefully make the students pay attention to nature in ways they have not done before. This new way of observing nature might, however, make the students look at nature differently in the future.

Step one of the exercise will let the students experience and contemplate society and culture, and step two will make them experience and contemplate nature. These contemplations will be required to properly execute step three. In Garrard’s plan the students read poems by William Wordsworth and A.R Ammons and answer a few questions based on them. In my version of step three, these poems have been replaced by Walden and Into the Wild. The purpose of this step is to investigate the relationship between nature and culture as portrayed in the two books. Since the students now have formed their own opinion on the relationship between nature and culture through steps one and two, they now have something to compare with when they investigate that same relationship in Walden and Into the Wild. When reading aforementioned texts (or at least parts of them, depending on how much time is available), the students are, just like in steps one and two of Garrard’s lesson plan, accompanied by a number of questions to be discussed. The students will be asked to reflect on the following questions:

1 Garrard’s step three (summarized by the author of this essay): Read ‘Corson’s Inlet’ by A.R. Ammons and ‘Lines Composed a Few Miles AboveTintern Abbey’ by William Wordsworth. After reading the poems, discuss the following questions:
- The most striking difference is surely formal: Wordsworth’s blank verse and Ammons’s jagged free verse lineation, and, correspondingly, iambic pentameter versus shifting, pulsating ‘eddies of meaning’ and rhythm. What difference does this make?
- How does the poetic persona relate to the environment? How is he physically situated in it? What sorts of lessons does he find in it?
- What do the poems have to say about memory, beauty, fragility, danger, constancy and change?
- Characterise the diction: the kinds of nouns, verbs and adjectives you find in each poem. What do these say about the poem? Which do you like the most? Why?
• How do the two protagonists perceive nature? Are there any differences and similarities in their perceptions?
• In relation to nature, what do the two protagonists seem to think about society and culture? Do their opinions differ from your opinion? How and why?
• Do you think that either of the protagonist’s views on nature would change if their perception of society changed, and vice versa? How and why?
• In Walden we learn about Thoreau’s opinions on misusing nature (i.e. the passage about Flint’s Pond). If he lived today, what do you think he would have to say about the current human-nature relationship? Think back to what you learned in step one and two!
• Based on what you have learned from Into the Wild, what do you think was Cristopher McCandless’ main reason for going into the wild? Why do you think so?
• If Thoreau and McCandless were to answer the questions from steps one and two of this exercise, what do you think their answers would be?
• Is there any wisdom in Thoreau’s and McCandless’ respective views on nature and culture? Have they affected your view on the relation between nature and culture in any way?

During all three of the steps, the students should take notes and write down their reflections. These written reflections will facilitate the discussions. Preferably, these notes and reflections should be written down in some kind of journal – creating another connection to the two primary sources of this novel and this lesson plan. Both Thoreau and McCandless recorded their thoughts and reflections in a journal, and it is of interest to investigate possible differences and similarities in the journals.

During this lesson plan, but in this final step in particular, the aesthetic stance as Bo Lundahl calls it in his book Engelsk språkdidaktik – Texter, kommunikation, språkutveckling from 2012, is of great importance. When reading the texts and answering the questions above: “The contents of the text (the plot, the characters, the surroundings and the text’s basic problem) form the starting-point for the comprehension, but in addition to that the reader reacts to the text in terms of memories, emotions and associations. During the reading we are therefore not just spectators but also participants” (Lundahl. p.240, my translation). The students’ own views and experiences are of great importance when interpreting the texts and answering the questions. After all, the purpose of this lesson plan, this introduction of ecocriticism, and, in a sense, the whole essay, is to compare one view of nature and culture
with another; Thoreau’s views are compared to those of McCandless, McCandless’ views are
compared to those of the students, students compare their views with other students. These
comparisons are made throughout the whole exercise, and everyone is welcome to contribute
to the discussion. The point of this exercise is not to find one true answer, but to take part of
and maybe be inspired by other people’s opinions. Lundahl (2012) goes on to list some of the
characteristics of reading in the aesthetic stance, all of which correspond with the goals and
procedures of this exercise:

In aesthetically aligned reading (creative reading)
- the forms of response are more open. The reading leads to discussions, writing and
dramatizations.
- only parts of the text are dealt with, that is to say the parts that the students and the
teacher draw on.
- the readers’ inner imagery and imagination are emphasized.
- the contents of the text are related to the students’ experiences and emotions.
(Lundahl. p.241 my translation).

The discussions could, with benefit, be held in two stages. First, the students discuss their
reflections in smaller groups of 3-4 students per group. In these smaller groups, the students
might feel more secure and more willing to share their thoughts and findings. When these
discussions are done, it should be easier to hold an open discussion with the whole class. In
this discussion, the reflections and ideas discussed in the smaller groups are shared with the
rest of the class, making further discussions, interpretations, and comparisons possible.

The three steps of the lesson plan presented above could be spread out over a longer
period of time, turning it into a project in ecocritical reading and environmental awareness.
The time requirements and the difficulty of the different steps can be altered with ease to
better suit the learners. Maybe the students do not have to read the entire book? Excerpts from
the books, such as those I have presented above, might be enough for the students to
familiarize themselves with the protagonist’s views on nature and culture. The different
materials and tools used in the exercise can be replaced with other, more easily provided ones
(e.g. the television, needed for step one as described above, could be replaced by a bunch of
old newspapers and magazines that the students get to browse through. The internet is another
nifty resource for this).

Furthermore, I think that there are great possibilities of working cross-disciplinary
with a project like this. It is not hard to think of ways to incorporate subjects like science and
philosophy in parts of this project, especially in step two where the conventional classroom
setting is replaced by a selected area outdoors. When the students are out learning about
ecocriticism, they could also use that opportunity to learn about the ecosystem and the different species that inhabit it, maybe for science or biology class. They might also bring what they learned from the questions with them into philosophy class. What did philosophers like Rousseau have to say about nature?

The very last part of this lesson plan is an evaluation. Since many of the questions dealt with in this lesson plan might be a bit difficult to answer, and sometimes there might not even be a right answer, both teacher and student will benefit from a concluding and summarizing evaluation. By discussing the three steps together, as a group, the perceived strengths and drawbacks of the lesson plan should be made visible. Questions like the following can be used to fuel the discussions:

- What did you think of the different steps? What was good and what was bad?
- What did you think about the methods we used (i.e. watching television and being in nature)?
- What was the purpose and the goal of this exercise? Did we reach our goal?
- Do you think that ecocriticism is something that we need more of? Why? Why not?
- Is there a better way of approaching ecocriticism (and environmental awareness)?

This evaluation will work as a confirmation that the students have taken part of the information and the knowledge that is to be gathered from the different steps, but it will also serve as a lesson in arguing, discussing, and motivating one’s answers, skills that the Swedish Education Administration puts much emphasis on in its curriculum (Skolverket, 2011. Lgr11, p.54-55).

4. Conclusions

It is clear that both Thoreau and McCandless have contemplated the relationship between nature and culture and that they both have strong opinions about both of them. Both Thoreau and McCandless were discontent with some aspects of the societies in which they lived, and both of them cherished nature and the freedom that it connoted to them. Their reasons and incentives for leaving civilized life were, however a bit different. Thoreau left for the woods to learn what is essential in life. By adopting a simple lifestyle, close to nature and its beauty, and away from the town of Concord (representing culture) with its numerous false and made up essentials, such as the need for monetary wealth, a fancy house, and a thriving social life,
Thoreau hoped to achieve a sort of enlightenment. His simple living in the woods surrounding Walden Pond should teach him to see what really matters in life, and thus improve the quality of life. McCandless too, went into the wild with the ambition to improve on his life. Although McCandless was clearly fascinated by the sheer beauty and power of the landscapes through which he traveled, he did not put as much emphasis on it in the written records that have been preserved from his travels. To him, nature and wilderness was about extraordinary experiences and ultimate freedom. Freedom from a constraining culture that expected him to do what was considered normal, or the right thing to do. McCandless wanted to leave the beaten track and live life the way he wanted. McCandless turned to nature and its simplicity in this pursuit.

To both McCandless and Thoreau, nature represented a form of refuge from the undesirable and sometimes obtrusive parts of their respective cultures, although the latter’s refuge was more temporary and not as definitive as that of the former. In nature they would be free to continue their pursuit for a true meaning in life. This was to be achieved through a lot of contemplation, contemplation that was best achieved through experiences and the transgression of one’s limits. Both Thoreau and McCandless endeavored to elevate the self by experiencing things that would later make them see the world through new eyes. Scott Slovic writes, in his essay “Nature Writing and Environmental Psychology- The Interiority of Outdoor Experience” from 1992:

> It is only by testing the boundaries of the self against an outside medium (such as nature) that many nature writers manage to realize who they are and what’s what in the world. (Slovic. p.352-353).

As Slovic suggests, nature writers such as Thoreau (and, in a way, McCandless) used nature as a means of testing their boundaries, or limits, to develop the self. This is an approach to nature that becomes apparent in both Walden and Into the Wild. Both Thoreau and McCandless tested their limits in terms of leading unconventional lives. By going beyond what was considered normal by their contemporaries, the two protagonists tried to better their lives. To Thoreau, the unconventional living was a means to an end. By living by Walden Pond, away from society and its distractions such as work and a superfluous social life, Thoreau was able to focus on his philosophical contemplations of what really matters in life. To McCandless, the unconventional dimensions of his traveling life was more or less what gave it its meaning. The out-of-the-ordinary experiences that were made possible by leaving society behind are what McCandless claimed would improve on and develop the self. To McCandless, the transgression of limits and the experiences that followed were closely
associated with improvement of the self. To Thoreau, the transgression of limits was a means to an end. By crossing a few lines of what was considered normal, Thoreau’s life-improving contemplations were made possible.

The introduction of ecocriticism in our schools is both a necessary and a feasible endeavor. The adapted version of Greg Garrard’s lesson plan is but one way of doing it. One of the greatest advantages to this lesson plan is the fact that it is developed by Greg Garrard, who has extensive knowledge in the field of ecocriticism as well as the teaching of it. The adaptations that I have made are solely made to make the methods, aims and goals of the lesson plan better correspond with those of this essay and to show that it can be applied to different kinds of literature.

In short, the students could be introduced to ecocriticism by integrating *Walden* and *Into the Wild* in this three-step project, inspired by Greg Garrard’s lesson plan “Three Hours to Save the Planet”. Steps one and two of the plans lets the students form and develop their own opinions about nature, society and their relation to one another. In step three, the most crucial step of this plan, they get to compare their views of the nature-culture relation with those of Thoreau and McCandless. By following these steps, the students should have increased their knowledge about both *Walden*, *Into the Wild*, and ecocriticism. And hopefully they have started to question what nature and culture really means, along with the unsustainable relationship between them. This questioning constitutes a step towards an increased environmental awareness.

Human culture may have negative effects on nature in terms of emissions, pollution and unsustainable consumerism, but it has produced some important and beneficent literary artifacts that, when used right, can be a great asset to the development of an environmental awareness. Literary works such as *Walden* and *Into the Wild* can be used to make visible the interconnectedness between nature and culture, and reverse the growing distance between the two. Timothy Clark writes, in his *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (2011), that:

A fascination with the wild as the acultural or even anti-cultural pervades much environmental non-fiction. ‘Wild’ nature necessarily offers a space outside given cultural identities and modes of thinking practice. (Clark. p. 25).

Clark’s statement applies to works in this essay (especially *Into the Wild*), but it also provides us with a valuable lesson: even if nature to some people is equal to something clean and untouched by the corrupting influence of society, and to others it is something dangerous and
dirty that should be removed from the safety of civilized communities, nature and culture are connected and they both affect each other.

5. Works cited

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