

## Thoreau and Logic : An Analysis of “ Higher Laws ” in *Walden*

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In Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, “Higher Laws” is one of the most argumentative chapters. It is without doubt the central chapter. His essential ideas on the wild and the spiritual are stated. His statements in “Higher Laws” are so rhetorically powerful and skillful that readers would be affected by the assertiveness in his statements. His rhetoric is, in fact, very impressive, but his logic in these statements is fallacious and inconsistent. Therefore his ideas can hardly be understood logically by the readers. Richard Bridgman, in his *Dark Thoreau*, says: “Although philosophically Thoreau's most ambitious and rhetorically his most eloquent book, *Walden* paradoxically suffers from an insufficiency of depth and a confusion of attitudes. In some regards, it is a triumph of assertiveness. Thoreau has powerful negative arguments to make, and when they are coupled with a fresh and forceful rhetoric the result can be momentarily quite overwhelming. Nonetheless, the difficulties remain. I do not mean to condemn Thoreau with niggling accusations of inconsistency, but I am prepared to claim that his presentation will often puzzle and disconcert the attentive reader”<sup>1</sup>(76). Readers, if not the attentive ones, will feel the difficulties in understanding his attitude or stance in such an argumentative chapter as “Higher Laws,” which is caused by his fallacious and inconsistent logic.

In this paper the fallacy and inconsistency in the chapter “Higher Laws,” the central chapter in *Walden*, will be shown by examining some of his statements. “Higher Laws” would be one of the most suitable chapters to examine, because, as Bridgman says, “‘Higher Laws’ takes Thoreau more centrally into the wilderness of contradictions that existed in his mind than does any other chapter in *Walden*”(108).

First of all the theme of this chapter “Higher Laws,” that is, the wild and the spiritual will be examined. Thoreau's attitude toward the wild especially suffers from inconsistency, therefore it is hardly possible to understand clearly what he has to say in this chapter. For example he writes: “We are conscious of an 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”(219). When he says “an animal in us which should be expelled wholly,” it is natural for readers to assume that such “an animal” in us should

be rejected and negated. This is also assured by the following statement: "He is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him day by day, and the divine being established" (220). These Thoreau statements, however, are contradictory to one in the first paragraph in this chapter. He says: "As I came home through the woods with my string of fish, trailing my pole, it being now quite dark, I caught a glimpse of a woodchuck stealing across my path, and felt a strange thrill of savage delight, and was strongly tempted to seize and devour him raw; not that I was hungry then, except for that wildness which he represented" (210). After showing his interest in the wild, he soon concludes: "I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both. I love the wild not less than the good" (210). It is explicit that "the animal in us" is equal to "the wild." On the one hand, he writes that he loves "the wild," but on the other hand he writes that "the animal in us should be expelled wholly." Therefore his argument on the central theme of his "the wild and the spiritual" in this chapter is, after all, not consistent to be understood fully as his "idea."

Hyperbole is without doubt one of the most characteristic rhetorical techniques of Thoreau. However, in spite of the effective impact of this technique, his uses of extreme words often seem to tend to contradict themselves. Thoreau for instance writes: "If one listens to the faintest but constant suggestions of his genius, which are certainly true, he sees not to what extremes, or even insanity, it may lead him; and yet that way, as he grows more resolute and faithful, his road lies. The faintest assured objection which one healthy man feels will at length prevail over the arguments and customs of mankind.... Though the result were bodily weakness, yet perhaps no one can say that the consequence 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" (216). His argument on his "higher laws" in this paragraph seems to be contradictory, because it is characterized by extreme words. He says: "The faintest assured objection which one healthy man feels will at length prevail over the arguments and customs of mankind," but in the first statement he says that such objection may lead him to "insanity." And again he writes: "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." Judging from these statements, Thoreau's "life in conformity to higher principles" seems to be characterized by two extreme words "insanity" and "bodily weakness." Here he states his ideas on "higher laws," but because of his use of these extreme words, the consistency of this paragraph is completely damaged as these words cannot be associated with the images in the succeeding

sentence: "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." It is hardly possible to associate this poetical statement with "insanity" and "bodily weakness." After all Thoreau's bold statement breaks the unity of this paragraph in which his ideas on "higher laws" are stated.

Thoreau's argument on leaving off animal food is also characterized by too extreme words. These extreme words are used skillfully enough to impact readers rhetorically, but his argument itself, from the logical point of view, suffers from the logical jump caused by extreme words, therefore it is impossible to be accepted as a logical persuasion. For example, he writes: "Is it not a reproach that man is a carnivorous animal? True, he can and he does live, in a great measure, by preying on other animals; but this is a miserable way, . . . as any one who will go to snaring rabbits, or slaughtering lambs, may learn, . . . and he will be regarded as a benefactor of his race who shall teach man to confine himself to a more innocent and wholesome diet" (215-16). Skillfully enough by this use of an assertive rhetorical question, he forces readers to accept the image that "man is a carnivorous animal." The reason of his definition of man as "a carnivorous animal" should have been fully explained here, but without any proof of his definition this rhetorical question is followed by some very extreme words, full of impact to the readers, such as "prey," "snare rabbits" and "slaughter lambs." The effect of these words is apparent enough to suggest to the senses of the readers how bad it is to eat animal food.<sup>2</sup> Then his suggestion against animal food is finally assured also by the word "innocent." Thoreau's definition, however, of man as "a carnivorous animal" is explicitly too extreme a definition to be accepted logically. His definition may be, in fact, partly true, but it is impossible to define man as a carnivorous animal. But his persuasion is started from this mistaken definition, and jumps to a conclusion. Therefore his argument cannot be accepted as a logical argument.

One more example of Thoreau's use of extreme words may be shown in the following statement: "I believe that water is the only drink for a wise man; wine is not so noble a liquor; and think of dashing the hopes of a morning with a cup of warm coffee, or of an evening with a dish of tea! Ah, how I fall when I am tempted by them! Even music may be intoxicating. Such apparently slight causes destroyed Greece and Rome, and will destroy England and America" (217). The effect of his assertiveness accompanied by such extreme words as "low," "fall" and "tempt" is powerful enough to suggest to the senses of the readers. After giving this powerful impact, he makes an illogical jump and concludes that these slight causes destroyed Greece and Rome, and will destroy England and America. Is it logically acceptable that Greece and Rome were destroyed by wine, coffee, tea, or even by music? The success of his argument depends upon how he can conceal his fallacious logic

based on these extreme words. Here again, however, his fallacious logic will be recognized by the careful readers.

Besides, his extreme statements here seem to be unsuitable or even contradictory. Thoreau says: "Even music may be intoxicating." Moreover he seems to count music as one of the causes which "destroyed Greece and Rome, and will destroy England and America." He gives no reason why he thinks that music may be intoxicating and that music is one of the causes of the destruction. But why does he count music as one of the causes? Such a question may be raised because in the last paragraph of this chapter he writes: "John Farmer sat at his door one September evening, after a hard day's work, his mind still running on his labor more or less. Having bathed he sat down to recreate his intellectual man. It was a rather cool evening, and some of his neighbors were apprehending a frost. He had not attended to the train of his thoughts long when he heard some one playing on a flute, and that sound harmonized with his mood" (221-22). It is really impossible to connect this "harmonized sound" with his extreme statement that music may be intoxicating and that it is one of the causes of the destruction of Greece and Rome. His attitude toward music is too ambivalent to be understood clearly. After all here again Thoreau tries to create "impact" toward readers by his rhetorical techniques at the cost of logical consistency.

Thoreau's use of analogy also causes readers to be puzzled in understanding his ideas. The logic in his analogy is far-fetched and fallacious. Thoreau says: "Whatever my own practice may be, I have no doubt that it is a part of destiny of the human race, in its gradual improvement, to leave off eating animals, as surely as the savage tribes have left off eating each other when they came in contact with the more civilized" (216). This analogy of the savage tribes is, in fact, rhetorically skillful to force readers into abstaining from eating animals, because from his point of view or his rhetoric, "eating animal" is equal to "eating human beings." His logic is so tricky and skillful that readers might accept his conclusion to stop eating meat unless they found the trick of his logic.

His logic, however, is fallacious. The fallacy of this analogy will be shown by examining the premise of this enthymeme. His logic will be stated briefly: the concealed major premise is that "all human being belong to the savage tribe," the minor premise is that "the savage tribe left off eating human beings," therefore "all human being should leave off eating animal." It is explicit that his logic is invalid, because he uses in this enthymeme four terms, human race, the savage tribe, eating animal, and eating human race, though in the valid enthymeme only three terms are permitted. Moreover it is doubtless that the concealed major premise that "all the human race belong to the savage tribe" is not only far from the truth, but also absurd. By his tricky logic, he tries to persuade readers to believe that readers are "cannibals" and therefore should stop eating animals. The success of this trick depends upon

how skillfully he could conceal the major premise. His argument, however, is found completely damaged when his tricky logic becomes apparent.

Another example of Thoreau's far-fetched analogy will be shown in the following: "I believe that every man who has ever been earnest so preserve his higher or poetic faculties in the best condition has been particularly inclined to abstain from animal food, and from much food of any kind" (214-15). Then in order to force readers into accepting his belief, he presents this analogy of insects: "...I find it in Kirby and Spence, that 'some insects in their perfect, though furnished with organs of feeding, make no use of them; ' and they lay it down as 'a general rule, that all insects in this state eat much less than in 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" (215). Here again Thoreau uses a trick of an enthymeme to persuade readers. Unless they find out the trick of his argument, they would be easily forced into believing that "all human race in their best condition eat less" because insects do so. His rhetoric is so skillful, pleasing and forcing that the effect on the readers would be great. However, when his logic is examined carefully premise by premise, they will know that this analogy of insects is logically so absurd that it would not be a reasonable proof for his argument.

The tricky logic will be easily seen when the concealed major premise is stated. That is, it is "all the human race is the same as insects." The minor premise is that "almost all insects in their best condition eat much less than in that of larvae." Therefore his conclusion is that "all the human race in their best condition eat less." It is explicit that the concealed major premise is too absurd to be stated seriously. But the logic of his argument here is based on such an absurd premise. As he never shows the major premise here, it would not be easy to see his fallacious logic. The success of his argument here also depends upon not letting the readers see this major premise. From the rhetorical point of view, his argument is in fact very effective, but it will not be read logically because of the fallacy in this analogy.

As is shown above, Thoreau's ideas on the wild and the spiritual "Higher Laws" can not be clearly understood because of the fallacy and inconsistency in his logic. Although his logic in presenting his argument is indeed skilful and powerful, the unity of the chapter "Higher Laws" as a whole is much damaged, which may suggest some defect in *Walden*.

#### Works Cited

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### Notes

1. In *The New Thoreau Handbook* Walter Harding and Michael Meyer also comments on Thoreau's inconsistency, but the tone is different from Bridgman: "Because Thoreau, like Emerson and Whitman, refused to be intimidated by 'foolish' consistencies, he did not worry about inconsistencies in his life or writings" (121). Mary Elkins Moller comments on the cause of Thoreau's inconsistency in *Thoreau in the Human Community*: "What I have come to feel, in the course of this study, is that the contradictions and ambivalences in Thoreau, far from proving his coldness, are instead all traceable to the strength of his emotions, and that ultimately his profound humanism and his need for loving personal relationships were the source....that is, their frustration was the source....of his misanthropic outbursts, as well as of the stoicism and self-sufficiency for which he is famous" (185). Anyway they all agree on Thoreau's inconsistency, which is without doubt the obstacle to understand Thoreau.

2. Bridgman also points out the use of the words in this statement: "The choice of examples is interesting, since rabbits and lambs are particularly attractive and defenceless creatures whose killing any but the callous might acknowledge was a disagreeable task" (116).