

From Self-Reliance to Self-Actualization in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Thoreau's *Walden*

Nadia Hamendi¹

¹ Department of English Language and Literature, MEU University, Amman, Jordan

Correspondence: Nadia Hamendi, Department of English Language and Literature, MEU University, Amman, Jordan.

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Abstract

This study aims at tracing how the concept of self-reliance as found in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Thoreau's *Walden* offer two different paths to achieving self-actualization. It shows that though both believed man starts his journey to self-actualization from the point of self-reliance, Crusoe methodically followed Maslow's five stages of human needs, while Thoreau steps from stage one to stage five directly for he believed that only by depending on nature for one's basic needs can he then develop his higher potentialities. Thus, while for Defoe self-reliance was a means, for Thoreau it was an end in itself.

Keywords: self-reliance, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Defoe, Thoreau

1. Introduction

Man has always been fascinated by the idea of self-reliance, of living alone and relying on the resources of nature and his own ingenuity to survive. Many writers have dealt with this theme as seen in the popularity of stories ranging from people shipwrecked on a deserted island to people leaving society of their own accord and going to live alone.

The term 'self-reliance' was used by Emerson and the transcendentalists to describe a value or state that is admirable in modern man. As described in Emerson's essay of the same title, a self-reliant individual is one who thinks for himself rather than conforms to the opinion of the majority. He is one who follows his own path; and like the child, untainted by social concerns for title, rank or fortune, expresses his opinions freely. A self-reliant individual is also one who does not care for material objects, does not depend on them and does not measure his worth by the amount of objects he has, but rather he is a man who relies on his own ingenuity and lives off the fruit of his own labor (a do it yourselfer).

The concept of self-reliance has been so monopolized by Emerson and the transcendentalists that one is often apt to forget that the concept, though not the term, had existed well before within the cult of individualism that began in the early 18th century. It is also one of the cornerstones of the Romantic Movement, with its emphasis on the creative, emotional part of man. Jean Jack Rousseau, a pioneer in the trend of individualism, offered the concept of the noble savage: man away from society, relying on his own conscience and intuitive moral criteria, is more innocent and good than social man.

In fact, as Ian Watt stated in *The Rise of the Novel*, the trend of individualism that came out of the growing middle class is one of the major factors that led to the rise of the cult of self-reliance and the sense that one can, by his own endeavors and if he apply himself, achieve success.

Thus we see that though Defoe's character of Robinson Crusoe and Thoreau differ in their circumstances, the concept of Self-reliance is found in both. Though one was a Puritan and the other a transcendentalist, one was forced the other by choice, one is fiction, the other autobiographical, yet one cannot deny the same train of thought in the two writers. Today, though Emerson is uncontestedly the father of the 'idea' of self-reliance, and Thoreau is the one who implemented his theories in his own life by taking a year away from society and going to live on his own at Walden Pond; yet this idea had its roots earlier in the work of Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*.

2. Review of Related Studies

Nassr (1981) sees that Defoe's merit as a novelist rests on three main contributions. The first is that his works satisfied a need in the modern reader for a kind of writing to suit the changing needs and outlooks of modern man, with its clarity of style and regard for the pragmatic interests of the masses. Second, is that his works focused on the treatment of private and domestic aspects of life, guiding his readers to a mode of thinking and management of their life in order to attain happiness. Finally, his works read more like conduct manuals on how to govern one's life and daily affairs, focusing mainly on specific and pragmatic solutions to common problems. Thus, he is considered the founder of the realistic novel.

Reichard (2001) investigates the meaning and value of courage in Thoreau's *Walden*. He begins by contrasting it with the old, conventional meaning of the word as being related to battlefields, wars and heroic acts, to its more modern interpretation. Since modern society no longer needs courage in the conventional sense, then does that mean that it no longer values or considers these values as virtuous and has the role of courage subsequently changed? And deciding that courage is still a vital virtue today but as being more related to personal ethics and the cultivation of character, where the deliberate life is seen as a form of courage that is needed to follow one's own path.

Lagergren (2006) researches how Thoreau in *Walden* and Robinson Crusoe in *Robinson Crusoe* view nature and how and in what ways their respective sojourns in nature change them. Though they go for different reasons but since they both face similar challenges the researcher believes that the two narratives are comparable.

Thoreau's preoccupation is not only with the practical challenges of life in nature but rather with the philosophical questions those challenges raise in him. He comes to discover that there is a correlation between man and nature that comes when man is willing to simplify his life and to rid himself of the act of consumerism and really devote himself to attending to one's surroundings.

Crusoe, on the other hand, is terrified by the unknown environment and possible threats it poses to him but decides to survive and does so by making sure his basic needs of shelter and food as well as his dream of becoming a wealthy colonial master are met.

Thus both figures develop throughout the narratives and return to civilization with greater inner abilities. The time they spend in nature allows the protagonists to think about, and perhaps revise their attitudes towards it and find ways to incorporate nature, and what they have learned while living in it in their lives and mindsets.

Rowe (2007) explains that though Emerson moved away from the conventional religious life, yet he saw his ideas on self-reliance as a form of religion and the seeds of self-reliance are rooted in religious doctrine, and in his belief in the infinite capacity of the individual.

Marek Paryz (2012) sees that *Walden* is a microcosm of the American national macrocosm, where the activities of building a house and cultivating the soil, are symbolic of a culture where productivity, free labour and health are the backdrop of its human culture.

3. The Method of the Study

This study takes for its framework Maslow's theory of human needs and Emerson's ideas on self-reliance as the basis for the analysis of the two selected works, showing that while Crusoe followed Maslow's five stages, methodically moving from one stage to the next, Thoreau on the other hand, by following Emerson's views on self-reliance, moves from stage 1 and 2 to stage five directly, considering the stages in between as rather a hindrance to self-actualization.

Maslow hierarchy of human needs is a theory based on the premise that man's needs may be classified into five stages in a pyramid form, where if man ascertain one stage with a certain degree of satisfaction, he then moves to search for higher needs. These needs are:

1. The physiological needs
2. Safety and security
3. Love and belonging
4. Esteem and knowledge
5. Self-actualization

Thus we see that when Crusoe awakens on the island his first impulse is to provide for his immediate physiological needs (food, water, shelter), which are the basic requirements for survival. Once he has ascertained these needs, he then moves on to enlarging and fortifying his cave (home), discovering the island and having

peer recognition in the form of Friday's character, until he finally feels in control and the master of his surroundings.

Thoreau also takes these steps as the planning structure of *Walden*, though Thoreau moves from the base to the top of the pyramid, forgoing all the stages in between and considering them mere distractions from the essence of existence.

Thoreau believed that once you have managed to satisfy your basic needs, then you can move forward directly toward self-realization and transcendence. Through self-reliance, one can provide for oneself without dependence on another's favor or charity, which is also a form of self-realization. To Thoreau it might be the ultimate point of realization. Thus to rely on yourself both physiologically (self-reliance) and socially (to live with your-self only as company) is the gateway to self-realization.

Thoreau based his views on Emerson's Essay "Self-reliance" published in 1841, which extols the importance of self-reliance, promoting it as an ideal and a virtue. Emerson focuses on the importance of the individual and urges resistance to conform to external norms, including those of society (stage 3 and 4 of Maslow's needs), which he believes conspires to defeat self-actualization in its members.

Emerson begins "Self-Reliance" by offering suggestions for individuals who want to achieve self-reliance, while wondering how people can remain confident in their abilities when confronted by the pressure to conform. Finally, Emerson urges the individual to change for this person gains something that others in society do not: namely, knowledge and, by extension, the power of intuition, or inner knowledge provided by Spontaneity or Instinct, which corresponds to self-actualization.

4. Discussion

4.1 Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*

Defoe, who lived during the 18th century, was a self-made man in many aspects of his life. He worked as a journalist, writer, became affluent from his own toils and lost his fortune, much like his hero. *Robinson Crusoe* was Daniel Defoe's first novel, written when he was approaching sixty years and published in 1719. *Robinson Crusoe*, an adventure novel, became instantly popular with the commoners.

Stories of marooned sailors were plenty at the time, and most definitely Defoe was neither the first nor the only writer to take up this theme, yet his story gained instant success and appeared to the public to be very contemporary.

Robinson Crusoe is the epitome of the concept of self-reliance where a man is shipwrecked on a deserted island and forced to live by his own toil. The detailed journal that the character keeps reads like a step by step manual for anyone who wants to follow in the same path. It is a manual on how to rely on your own ingenuity and sagacity to survive.

The novel's first few chapters deal with Crusoe's impatience with life in the city and his longing for adventure and travel reflecting Defoe's own bitterness with society that so much energy has been expended trying to belong where worth is not acknowledged (Ajroud, 2010). However, the tale of *Robinson Crusoe* proper begins at the point in the novel when the hero is stranded on the island for the next quarter century, and has to survive dangerous and challenging situations on his own for the first time in his life.

When Crusoe awakens on the island to discover that he is the sole survivor he immediately starts to plan for his survival. His first thoughts go to trying to secure the essentials, fresh water, food and a shelter to protect him from wild animals. Thus the first things Crusoe thinks about are the necessities of survival, also called by Maslow as the first and second stages of human needs.

The following morning Crusoe catches sight of the ship that has been lifted by the waves and driven closer to shore. Crusoe instantly swims out to the ship to recover whatever he can for he knows that these will help him in his struggle for survival. The writer offers him the means to survive such as tools, weapons, powder, shot, clothes, and bedding, by allowing him to get some basic provisions from the ship that "happened" to be lifted to the shore. Feeling a little more secure of being able to procure his essentials he starts to look for a place to build a shelter for himself. He sets up a makeshift tent from the sail and some poles to store the provisions he retrieved from the ship and to protect them from the rain or sun that might damage them. Crusoe's choice of location for his shelter must fulfill the requirements for safety and security, both from the elements and wild animals that might be found on the island. Thus he chooses a small open plain on the hill that can only be reached by a ladder from one side. Then he builds a tent and cellar next to it, thereby expanding and improving on his dwelling to satisfy the need for more comfort, security and possession.

Once established on the island, Crusoe spends most of his time in exploring his surrounding and becoming familiar with his environment. As the first two stages of his needs are met with a relative degree of confidence, he longs for the third stage which is the feeling of love and belonging. This may be represented by the two cats and dog that he rescued from the ship, for they remain his faithful companions for a long time. The sudden appearance of Friday also serves to satisfy the need for love and belonging for Crusoe as well as the need for esteem, as Friday looks up to him and obeys him. Though Friday is not considered a peer by Crusoe, yet his idolization of Crusoe satisfies in him the need to feel appreciated and valued.

After he has been on the island for a while, he realizes that he could lose track of time unless he keeps some kind of calendar. He also starts a journal in which he documents the measures he takes to survive. He is able to do so for he has brought pens, ink, and paper from the ship. His journal abounds with meticulous details on his activities, all of which are of interest to the modern reader, who valued individual experience and the concerns of the common man away from family status. This journal serves not only as a log of his actions, but also as the actual text of the novel.

Over the months, having become assured of his basic physiological needs, safety needs as well as love and belonging, Crusoe then starts to occupy himself with improvements on his dwelling and the fortress. He starts to enlarge the cave, making more room for moving around and storing things. He builds a makeshift table and chair with the tools he had saved from the ship, and puts up some shelves and hooks in the wall of the cave. He then explains how during his wanderings on the island he discovers and learns new things about his surrounding, which satisfies in him the need for knowledge (stage 4 of Maslow's theory), and how he employs these new discoveries in improving the quality of his stay on the island. He makes use of the animals as well as vegetation he finds on the island to continually provide himself with new and better comforts. He grows barley, breeds pigeons and sews a sack. It is obvious that his enterprising nature is very useful to him on the island, as he makes and fashions many of his needs out of the simple supplies available to him, almost like an engineer.

For the most part, Crusoe has relied mainly on himself to survive and provide for himself. Through his hard work, he has managed to formulate a good existence for himself. This is not surprising for Crusoe for he descends from a class historically called upon to be active and engaged in dynamic action. Thus it would surely be more sensible to anticipate the benefit of such action and to have hopes of a profitable change in the future. (Ajroud, 2010). This disposition that is set to productivity serves Crusoe well as he further explores the island and discovers all kinds of new and useful things that he can use to his advantage. Finally we see Crusoe becoming the explorer, building a "country house," which he calls his "castle" so he can occasionally escape from his cave, establishing a colony, building a fort, and mastering his surroundings, which to Crusoe is tantamount to self-actualization, the fifth stage and pinnacle of human needs. Thus in a sense Crusoe, becomes the "basis for the creation of the myth of the gun wielding, heroically resourceful white man. [for] This was the heroic age of the militant middle class. It is no wonder that we have kept getting variations on the theme since, and that this is what has made *Robinson Crusoe* one of the foundational fictions on which the imperial stance has thrived." (Ajroud, 2010: 116)

For Crusoe, self-reliance, perseverance, ingenuity and sometimes mere dumb luck, all combine to enable him to conquer his fear and prepare for survival. He works methodically and tirelessly in providing for his needs one by one until every need is met.

4.2 Thoreau's *Walden*

Thoreau is the one who took the concept of self-reliance to the extreme and voluntarily stepped out of society and into the wilderness of nature, for he believed that nature nurtures, educates and stimulates man's desire for beauty, and above all it awakens the imagination and emancipates us by introducing us to the more sublime powers of the human mind, thus instigating human creativity, which is our highest faculty (Gravil, 2015).

Emerson's ownership of Walden Pond and the surrounding area gave Thoreau the opportunity he needed to implement his experiment, i.e. to live simply in nature and to devote himself to discovering the true essence of life. In *Walden*, Thoreau writes that "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately... I wanted to live deep, and suck out all the marrow of life," (Thoreau, 2004, p. 88) and he invites us to live within "the light of things," thus *Walden* can be seen and read as a journey of rebirth (Gravil, 2015).

Thoreau lived at Walden for two years, from 1845 to 1847. During that time, he lived self-sufficiently, "and earned my living by the labor of my hands only," (Thoreau, 2004, p. 1) as he states in the opening paragraph of *Walden*. He describes his activities of fishing, growing beans and potatoes, corn and peas. Drake observes that "Walden is a record of practical experiments in building, cooking, planting, keeping warm, and measuring things... Walden is on this level, a compendium or handbook on how to arrange economically the practical details of one's life." (Drake, 1962, p. 76). During his stay in nature, like Crusoe, he also kept a journal documenting all that he faced, but unlike him, because his exile was voluntary and self-inflicted, he measures his challenges and achievements

by a different measuring scale. He focused his time and efforts in securing the essentials only (stage one and two of human needs), and the time that was not necessary for obtaining them he spent on writing his observations on life and the world around him. He tried, through these reflections to look for the higher aspirations and ideals that lie behind our existence. Thoreau sought to know nature as a means of making and understanding his place in it and in the world, so that he would not only develop, but even create his personal identity (stage five) within the context of nature (Tauber, 2001). Thus we can say that though Thoreau could not do without the first and second stages of human needs, for they are vital for human life and existence, he saw that the third and fourth stages were not only dispensable but rather in fact detrimental to achieving the higher goal of self-actualization. Thoreau expressed his stern belief in independence and individuality in *Walden*, saying "If man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer." (Thoreau, 2004, p. 317)

Thus Emerson's ideal of independence and self-reliance can be seen as a redistribution of the human needs set forth by Maslow. For him, achieving the basic necessities for survival paves the way for man to reach spiritual fulfillment and actualization, while the needs for belonging can be seen as being equaled to conformity, which he criticized and detested. Following this dictum, Thoreau went to Walden so that he could strip his life of all inessential things, and spend it in the pursuit of the essentials of reality and in experiencing how he could come closer to these essentials. It allowed him to be his own man, to live as he pleases and in turn achieve greatness in his own way.

Self-reliance as set forth by Emerson is a set of ideals according to which man must live his life. These ideals combine abstract philosophy with everyday practical advice. Among these ideals is having lasting trust in oneself, confidence in one's abilities and always choosing individuality over conformity. Thus the need for social recognition (peer recognition and esteem) is detrimental to a person's pursuit of self-actualization. Furthermore, it may be said of Emerson, and by default of Thoreau, that securing one's basic needs leads to individuality whilst running after the more social needs leads to conformity.

Thoreau stresses the importance of living self-sufficiently, as he builds his own house and lives off his own land. For food, he subsists mostly on what he grows by his own hand on his own land, and for clothing, he has only the fewest and most utilitarian of garments. He sees that this kind of basic living is purifying to the mind and soul and it leaves him with the necessary time and freedom to pursue his true aim, and to pursue his goal in going to Walden, which was to discern the necessities of life, i.e. to reflect on and to document his thoughts in solitude. He stresses the importance of an independent life, in which he relies on no one for his everyday existence, and thus solitude, living in nature, independence and securing only the barest conditions for life allow Thoreau to achieve self-actualization, while, he writes, society's constantly changing tastes is a distraction to personal development.

Thoreau describes an incident with an old hunter who, lying next to an ice-covered Pond, hears a low and strange sound unlike anything he had ever heard, but very grand and impressive. This sound was of the ice melting and drifting in to the shore, having melted with the arrival of spring. Though Thoreau is here describing a simple phenomenon, which is the melting of the ice, yet, it can also be interpreted as an act of the awakening of Nature after having lied dormant beneath the snow and ice, as if it were emerging from hibernation. Thoreau's description of this incident suggests parallels with himself for both he and the pond are awake and "full of hope." (Ray, 2011), that he will be able to define and establish his own unique self, which he saw as an act of will that links every aspect of his intellectual and emotional personality (Tauber, 2001).

5. Conclusion

Both Defoe and Thoreau investigate man's needs and the stages one goes through to fulfill these needs, each in his own way. Both believed that man starts from the point of self-reliance but while for Defoe, self-reliance was a means for Thoreau it was an end in itself.

Crusoe's story on the island follows almost religiously Maslow's five stages of human needs. As seen his first concern was with securing the physiological needs then matters of safety and shelter. From these he moves towards exploring and controlling his surroundings, finding the more he understands about his environment the better he feels about himself, till he can safely say that he has mastered his world, which for him was the ultimate aim of life.

On the other hand, Thoreau's experiment in Walden attempts to discover how far the man's higher faculties and potentials can be developed, if he live according to his own mind in nature, where nature becomes the focus of his existence, as it provides him with his basic human needs of sustenance and shelter, and by doing so allows him to fulfill his other higher need, which is to "follow the bent of [his] genius." Thus man's connection to nature takes

on an almost spiritual form; he is dependent on her for the basic means of keeping himself alive, as only then can one be able to develop his higher potentialities (Drake, 1962).

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