
A Look at How Henry David Thoreau Views Advancement as Illustrated In His Book, Where I Lived, And What I Lived For

Progress for the Sake of Progress

"Progress for the sake of progress must be prohibited". Although this quote is from Dolores Umbridge in Harry Potter, it accurately describes Thoreau's attitude towards progress in *Where I Lived, and What I Lived For*, an excerpt from *Walden*. *Where I Lived and What I Lived For* is Thoreau's narrative about the benefits of living simply and avoiding the evils that have penetrated society, by leaving to live in the woods. Specifically, it is his musings about the true purpose of life. One of the areas of society that he addresses is the idea of progress. Thoreau states that progress always has a cost, even if that cost is not readily visible to the public eye.

The cost of progress can be very serious, even deadly. One way Thoreau describes the deadlier aspect of this cost is through the extended metaphor of the "sleepers". Sleepers are railroad ties, but Thoreau uses them in a different context, as a symbol of those who built the railroads and lost their lives doing so. Many of these people were immigrants, and their deaths were covered up. These people were the "cost" of the railroad. Thoreau uses imagery to convey this, saying that "the rails are laid on them, and they are covered with sand, and the cars run smoothly over them." The sand in this passage is a metaphor for the way that their deaths were "buried" to prevent the general population from finding out about them. The deaths are "sound sleepers", meaning that it would be very difficult to wake them up, or bring awareness to the issue. When it is attempted, the railroad companies "suddenly stop the cars, and make a hue and cry about it, as if this were an exception". In other words, the people who covered up the deaths in the first place would treat any proof of death from building the railroads as something that was a one-time problem, as if it happened so rarely that no one was even aware of it, when the truth was really the opposite. Thoreau is pointing out society's tendency to ignore problems and risks when it comes to progress. This ignorance is a trend that has continued from Thoreau's time up to the present. Thoreau realizes this by saying that "every few years a new lot is laid down and run over". By this quote, he means that there will always be more secrets and more cover ups in the name of progress that society will simply ignore. Through his analysis of the sleepers, Thoreau states that in the eyes of society, progress is more important than safety.

Another cost of progress is individual happiness. Thoreau shows this through a second extended metaphor; the railroad. He states that "if we do not get out sleepers, and forge rails, and devote days and nights to the work, but go to tinkering upon our lives to improve them, who will build railroads?" Individuals are told that their own happiness does not matter, that happiness is a sacrifice they must make for the sake of progress. This continues today. Many people work long, tough hours, neglecting their families and relationships with others, trying to progress in certain areas or to maintain the progress that we have already made. Thoreau follows this point up by asking "if railroads are not built, how will we get to heaven in season?" Through this question, he illustrates that individuals are told that the progress that they make, along with benefiting society, will bring them more happiness in the long run.

The railroads symbolize the idea of progress in this extended metaphor, as the railroads were a huge advancement in during Thoreau's lifetime. The railroad boom was from the 1830's to the 1860's, and Walden was written in 1854. Railroads were revolutionary, enabling people to travel faster and farther than ever before. It seemed almost as if they were taking their passengers to a heavenly destination, and that they would get them there in record time. In the excitement over the railroads, people forgot to think about their present happiness in hopes of their future happiness. Thoreau believed that in doing this, we lost a vital truth of how to live our lives. He believed that we should live deliberately, focusing on the present, rather than on the future, as so many people were doing during his life.

What Thoreau ultimately believes progress has taken away from society is the sense of how to live and enjoy our lives. One way he shows this is through conceit, making the unlikely comparison of civilized life to a "chopping sea... clouds and storms and quicksands". Civilization is generally seen as a positive concept. When something is considered gross or unsavory, it is called uncivilized. Civilization is seen as organized and advanced, progressing in areas that make it easier for people to live. However, Thoreau compares it to a sea during a storm, or to the storm itself. Storms are chaotic and destructive, which is the opposite of how people view civilization. Through this conceit, Thoreau is making the point that what we call progress is actually destroying us. It has destroyed our sense of what is really important, instead filling it with trivial, insignificant detail that does not matter, such as getting a perfect score on a test or worrying about what to wear to school or to work or on a date. Thoreau claims that "life is frittered away by detail", and each that is spent worrying about the detail that progress has filled our heads with is a moment that can never be regained.

Progress always has a cost. The cost comes in many forms; something so abstract that we don't even miss it until it is too late, something that we are told we will regain if it is given up now, or something that costs lives. We sacrifice many things in order to feel that we have accomplished something new, to feel that we have moved forward, when we are actually falling behind in areas that matter, such as our understanding of the world and God. This gives progress, or the idea of it, a great deal of power over our society. As Thoreau says, "we do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us". We do not control progress, progress controls our lives.