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Thoreau's Journey to Cape Cod: A Psychohistorical Perspective

By SHARON TALLEY

ALL OF HENRY DAVID THOREAU'S major works adhere to the same model of form and substance. Considered in their most immediate context, these books are first-person narratives derived from actual journeys that the writer took to explore the material world around him. However, by discerning correspondences between nature and humanity from his personal observations and experiences while traveling, Thoreau simultaneously shaped a philosophy of life that appeased his fears of human mortality by renewing his faith in spiritual immortality—in the salvation that physical death effected through the release of the soul from the earthbound body into eternal life. Thoreau offered his philosophy to his readers because he believed in its universal application; however, in the process of composing his theory, Thoreau often altered actual events to convey what he saw as truths rather than mere facts. Although his works formally are classified as nonfiction, the autobiographical foundation of Thoreau's canon is complicated by this blend of nonfictional and fictional characteristics.¹ As a result, his works invite both historical examination and psychoanalytical interpretation, the former to determine what is fact from what is fiction and the latter to surmise possible reasons for the particular mix that Thoreau uses to relay his philosophy.²

1. See Hayden White's "The Fictions of Factual Representation" for a discussion of "the extent to which the discourse of the historian and that of the imaginative writer overlap, resemble, or correspond with each other." White's "characterization of historiography as a form of fiction-making" is consistent with Thoreau's belief, as stated in *Cape Cod*, that history "for the most part ... is merely a story agreed on by posterity" (White 121, 122; *Cape Cod* 197). See also Joan Burbick's *Thoreau's Alternative History* for an analysis of Thoreau's developing perspective on both conventional history and natural history.

2. Surprisingly few critics and scholars concede this point. Since a synopsis of the first psychological profile of Thoreau was published by David Kalman in 1948, only Raymond D. Gozzi ("A Freudian View of Thoreau") and the unpublished dissertation "Tropes and Figures: A Psychological Study of David Henry Thoreau" and Richard Lebeaux (*Young Thoreau and Thoreau's Seasons*) have made extensive psychoanalytical studies of Thoreau and his canon. In addition, however, Walter Harding and Carl Bode are significant among others who have supported these efforts and made related contributions of their own (e.g., Harding's "Thoreau and Eros" and Bode's "The Half-Hidden Thoreau"). Similarly, attention to Thoreau's fictionalizing of his experiences, though far less controversial, has been largely superficial, focusing on stylistic (rather than substantive) issues related to his compression of time in *Walden* and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and to his consolidation of the number of trips he made to Cape Cod and Maine. One of the few notable exceptions is Thomas R. Carper's 1968 analysis of "Civil Disobedience," which uses the insights of Gozzi as a point of departure in probing discrepancies between Thoreau's cheerful account of his jailing for unpaid poll tax and the recollections of Thoreau's angry reaction by observers such as Julian Hawthorne, the jailer, and the son of the local doctor.

Presented in the form of a single excursion, but based on three trips that the writer made to Cape Cod between 1849 and 1855,³ *Cape Cod* essentially represents Thoreau's interpretation of life as a struggle for survival and a search for salvation in a starkly pictured New England setting. Predominantly darker than the writer's other works, but still consistent with the Thoreauvian model described above, *Cape Cod* embodies Thoreau's greatest test of the goodness of God and nature. As a result, this book provides an apt illustration of the centrality of the subject of death to Thoreau's philosophy of life, as well as the idiosyncrasies inherent in both his relationship with nature and his method of resolving his personal fears about mortality.

In the first chapter of *Cape Cod*, "The Shipwreck," Thoreau establishes the context for the book and frames the work's major concerns for the reader. Setting out with his companion William Ellery Channing on the morning of 9 October 1849, Thoreau took a detour on his first trip to Cape Cod to visit the scene of the recent wreck of the *St. John*, a British brig from Galway, Ireland, that had struck on the Grampus Rocks at Cohasset, Massachusetts, two days earlier, sinking and killing all but twenty of the crew and passengers on board. In "The Shipwreck," Thoreau presents his account of the gruesome aftermath of the disaster, setting the tone, perspective, and thematic concerns for the rest of the book.⁴ Accordingly, an examination of "The Shipwreck" from psychoanalytic and historical perspectives will demonstrate how the book as a whole conforms to the Thoreauvian model, while simultaneously revealing eccentricities within the paradigm. This study will begin with a biographical analysis to establish the intensely personal anxieties that contributed to Thoreau's transcendental impulse to journey to the Cape and will then proceed to an analysis of Thoreau's account of the shipwreck to show how his psychic conflicts may have colored his impressions as he sought to master his fears about human mortality.

Accounts of Thoreau's early days reveal no basis for inferring an obsession with death or unusual anxiety about human mortality. During his youth, in fact, his most shocking experience with death purportedly involved animals rather than humans. Franklin Benjamin Sanborn, in his biography of Thoreau, relates the following family anecdote: "As an example of his [Thoreau's] childish for-

3. Thoreau acknowledges that he made three trips to the Cape (*Cape Cod* 3), but the narrative presents a continuity of experience, reshaped and compressed to present, for the most part, the impression of a single excursion (cf. *The Maine Woods*). In actuality, Thoreau made four trips to the Cape; however, at the time of his death in 1862, he still had not incorporated his *Journal* entries from his final trip of 1857 into the manuscript for *Cape Cod*, which was published posthumously in 1865.

4. Critical opinion generally concurs with this interpretation of the chapter's function in *Cape Cod*. Mitchell Robert Breitwieser, for example, observes that the "inaugural moment at Cohasset ... establishes the tone for the rest of the book" ("Thoreau and the Wrecks on Cape Cod" 6), while Sherman Paul advises that "'The Shipwreck' gives *Cape Cod* its themes" ("From Walden Out" 78). Similarly, John Lowney describes the chapter as "a microcosmic illustration of the techniques Thoreau uses throughout the book," adding that "Thoreau's diversion to Cohasset to see the wreck of the *St. John* introduces us to the array of excursions in *Cape Cod*" ("Thoreau's Cape Cod" 242-43). Also recognizing the central importance of this seeming digression to the overall design of the book, G. Thomas Couser writes that although "Thoreau does not even reach Cape Cod in 'The Shipwreck,' he uses this opening chapter to offer the reader a preview of it and an introduction to the book's concerns" ("Thoreau's Cape Cod Pilgrimage" 32).

titude, it is related that he carried his pet chickens for sale to the tavern-keeper in a basket; whereupon Mr. Wesson told him to 'stop a minute,' and, in order to return the basket promptly, took the darlings out, and wrung their necks, one by one, before the boy's eyes, who wept inwardly, but did not budge" (50). Although this anecdote compellingly indicates Thoreau's early inclination to internalize grief, any attempt to attribute a deep or long-lasting effect seems unwarranted since he reportedly continued to enjoy hunting throughout his boyhood, referring to this activity in *Walden* as "one of the best parts of my education" (212).

Similarly, although Thoreau's early writings incorporate an interest in the subject of death, they reveal, in the words of Stephen Ern Grice, "a young man raised in a society not attempting to shield its youth from direct contact with death, and yet a young man not yet shaken by the first-hand experience of just how unfair death can sometimes be" (21). For instance, his college essay "Musings. April 20th 1835" is a more or less conventional reflection in which Thoreau recollects gazing up into the clouds and imaginatively "searching for flaws in their rich tapestry that I might get a peep at that world awaiting our departure from this one" (*Early Essays and Miscellany* 14-15). Another college essay strikingly anticipates the tumultuous ocean imagery associated with death in "The Shipwreck":

Death itself is sublime. It has all the attributes of sublimity—Mystery, Power, Silence—a sublimity which no one can resist, which may be heightened, but cannot be equalled, by the thunder's roar, or the canon's peal. But yet, though incomparably more awful, this is the same sublimity that we ascribe to the tumult of the troubled ocean, the same in kind, though different in degree, depending for its effect upon the same principle of our nature, though affecting us more powerfully and universally. To attribute the two to different principles, is not only unphilosophical, but manifestly unnecessary. (*Early Essays* 93-94)

As in *Cape Cod*, in this untitled essay dated 31 March 1837, Thoreau identifies death as a natural phenomenon; however, in the 1837 essay he also openly acknowledges that death is "incomparably more awful" and "affect[s] us more powerfully and universally" than nature's sublimity, a perspective that he categorically denies in the later work, where in witnessing the human fatalities from the *St. John*, Thoreau stoically disavows being strongly impressed, claiming he sees no reason to "waste any time in awe or pity" on what is merely an exercise of "the law of Nature" (*Cape Cod* 9).

In the spring of 1836, Thoreau was forced to withdraw temporarily from college because of an illness that Walter Harding speculates was likely the writer's first attack of tuberculosis, or consumption as the disease was then commonly called (*Days* 44). According to J. Arthur Myers, "when records were first kept in Massachusetts in 1842 22% of all deaths were recorded as due to this disease" (236). Further, the cause, communicability, and treatment of tuberculosis were still undetermined when Thoreau died from the disease in 1862 at the age of forty-four, a situation that undoubtedly increased Thoreau's—as well as the general public's—fears of this mortal hazard. However, although Thoreau's physical health inevitably contributed to his

growing preoccupation with mortality, the evidence shows that to all outward appearances, he fully recovered from the 1836 illness, as well as from similar illnesses that occurred in 1841 and 1843. In fact, it was not until the spring of 1855, when he suffered a prolonged illness of some months, that he first became deeply concerned about his health (*Days* 357-58). According to Stephen Adams and Donald Ross Jr., although Thoreau made some additions to *Cape Cod* in 1855, the book “dates substantially from 1849-52” (130), a period in his life when he enjoyed physical vigor and stamina. Thus, while his journey to Cape Cod and his account of the shipwreck of the *St. John* surely reflect anxieties about his own health, one must look elsewhere for a fuller understanding of the issues motivating Thoreau’s preoccupation with death.

Critics and scholars overwhelmingly agree that the most traumatic event in Thoreau’s life was the death of his brother John in 1842, an event that arguably marks a turning point in both Thoreau’s life and writings. Two years older and markedly more extroverted, John, according to Richard Lebeaux, served as an alternative father figure and identity model for Thoreau, supplementing their quiet and reserved father who was dominated by his strong-willed wife (*Young Thoreau* 59). Nevertheless, although the brothers were unquestionably close, their relationship was also marked by rivalry. In the community as a whole, John was more warmly regarded, due in large part to his nature. As Harding observes in his biography of Thoreau, John “had charm and geniality—characteristics possessed by few of the Thoreaus—and an easy gregariousness. Although he displayed some intellectual interest, he lacked the deep seriousness of his younger brother.... Interestingly enough, most of Concord thought John the more promising of the two Thoreau boys” (*Days* 10-11). Teaching together in Concord for over two years, the brothers inevitably competed for their students’ affections, a contest that the younger, more reserved Thoreau seems to have lost. As Harding recounts, “In general the children seemed to favor John over Henry. They thought John the ‘more human’ and ‘loving’” (87).

As in any sibling relationship, the two competed for their mother’s time and affection during their childhood. However, Edward Emerson recollects that the brothers also “slept together in the trundlebed, that obsolete and delightful children’s bed, telescoping on large castors under the parental four-poster,” where, according to Emerson, “John would go to sleep at once, but Henry often lay long awake” (14-15). On the basis of this evidence, Raymond D. Gozzi, who believes Thoreau probably slept in this arrangement for the first five years of his life, argues “it is probable that the child Thoreau many times witnessed ... his parents engaged in intercourse.” Gozzi further theorizes that the emotional trauma of such a repeated experience may have libidinated Thoreau’s psyche to a degree instrumental in arresting his sexual development, resulting in a lifelong “fixation” on mothers that further complicated his relationship with his brother and prevented him from developing mature love relationships with the opposite sex, who represented to his unconscious the forbidden mother (“Tropes and Figures” 11, 158).

However, perhaps the greatest conflict between the two brothers was provoked by their love and courtship of the same woman, Ellen Sewall, who conceivably represented a surrogate for the mother for whose love they also had competed. Although neither was successful in marrying this young woman, whom they courted from mid-1839 to late 1840, Lebeaux examines the psychological implications of this love triangle in detail, hypothesizing that this rivalry "reawakened and aggravated Thoreau's ambivalences, fears, and guilt feelings" related to his earlier rivalries with his brother, pointing to numerous examples in Thoreau's writings to support his theory (*Young Thoreau* 120).

Before the psychic wounds related to this lost love could heal, John died of lockjaw on 11 January 1842, only eleven days after cutting the tip of his finger while shaving. Thoreau nursed his brother continuously during this period and watched John die in his arms, after which he reportedly reacted to this death with a strange calm that evolved into a disturbing passivity. Then, on 22 January, he himself became ill, evidencing all the symptoms of his brother's fatal illness despite no sign of any cut. Although initially it was feared that he would die, Thoreau slowly recovered; however, he was confined to his bedroom for over a month and evidenced a withdrawn and depressed state of mind for some months thereafter.

Gozzi claims that Thoreau's "conversion hysteria, in the form of sympathetic lockjaw ... appears to have been the result of unconscious oedipal feelings, unconscious guilt, identification with his brother, and unconscious hostility towards him" ("Freudian View" 11). Because at a subconscious level he had wished his brother out of the way, when John died, Thoreau's superego was convinced that he had been the cause. As a result, as Lebeaux observes, "His psychosomatic illness could be interpreted as a way of punishing himself and trying to share the fate of John, thereby relieving his guilt" (*Young Thoreau* 175). However, sympathetic lockjaw, as only a short-term punishment, was not sufficient to appease his conscience or dispel his guilt and grief. As a result, Thoreau increasingly turned to nature and his writing to purify himself and absolve his pain and remorse. Paradoxically,

Thoreau could gain emancipation from bondage to the deceased (and emancipation from the guilt and regret accompanying the elder's decease) only by denying the fact of death and by convincing himself that he was closer to John, and more closely identified with him, than ever before.... Rather than acknowledging that the deceased was "missing from the environment," he found it necessary to insist that John was to be discovered in every natural scene. (*Young Thoreau* 182)

Writing in his *Journal* just two months after his brother's death, Thoreau observes:

The sad memory of departed friends is soon incrustated [sic] over with sublime and pleasing thoughts, as their monuments are overgrown with moss. Nature doth thus kindly heal every wound. By the mediation of a thousand little mosses and fungi, the most unsightly objects become radiant of beauty. There seem to be two sides to this world, presented us at different times, as we see things in growth or dissolution, in life or death. For seen with the eye of a poet, as God sees them, all are alive and beautiful; but seen with the historical eye, or the eye of mem-

ory, they are dead and offensive. If we see Nature as pausing, immediately all mortifies and decays; but seen as progressing, she is beautiful. (1: 328)

As Lebeaux infers from this passage, to escape the guilt deriving from his brother's death, "it became all the more imperative to perceive death and life (including his own) with the 'eye of a poet' rather than the 'historical eye'" (*Young Thoreau* 183). Accordingly, when necessary, Thoreau tempers the reality of his observations and experiences about these subjects to present a romantic view more consistent with his spiritual aspirations. Perhaps nowhere is this practice more pronounced—and less recognized—than in his account of his visit to Cohasset in "The Shipwreck."

For several reasons, Thoreau's 1849 trip to Cohasset and Cape Cod inevitably reminded him of his brother and intensified his "painful struggle ... with the idea of death," a preoccupation that Mary Elkins Moller claims remained of central concern to Thoreau after John died (174). Before his death, John had been one of Thoreau's favorite traveling companions, as the writer confirms in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, which he wrote to commemorate a trip they took together in 1839. Moreover, the former Ellen Sewall and her husband Joseph Osgood lived in Cohasset, and while he was there on 9 October, Thoreau "called on the Osgoods, and took a walk along the beach with Ellen's husband" to examine the wreck of the *St. John* (*Days* 103). The ship's very name "John," coupled with the descriptive appellation "Saint," unavoidably would have reminded Thoreau of his brother's goodness while possibly also triggering subconscious anxiety about his own badness. Such forceful reminders of human mortality and the love he competed for with John almost certainly reawakened his repressed guilt over John's death.

Thoreau begins "The Shipwreck" by declaring that the purpose of his journey was to fulfill his wish "to get a better view than I had yet had of the ocean" (*Cape Cod* 3). With such a beginning, Thoreau puts the reader on notice about his lack of familiarity and experience with the ocean, setting this unknown body of water and the context of his adventure in immediate counterpoint with his communion with nature at the well-known, well-loved Walden Pond. For Thoreau, the ocean symbolizes the omnipotent and ultimately unknowable forces of nature, in contrast to the benevolent and essentially predictable nature symbolized by Walden Pond. Viewed traditionally as an ambivalent force that is the source of both life and death, the ocean represents woman or mother in both her benevolent and terrible aspects.⁵ However, although Thoreau recognizes this duality, in *Cape Cod* he consistently uses tranquil lake or pond imagery to describe the ocean's intermittent periods of calm, calling the Atlantic at the end of "The Shipwreck," for example, as "beautiful as a lake"

5. See J. E. Cirlot (230-31). Walt Whitman captures this duality in his depiction of the ocean in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" (*Leaves of Grass* 246-53).

(14). By this means, he maintains a separation between the sublimely terrifying and unknowable aspects of nature and the tame and comprehensible nature that he supremely symbolizes with Walden Pond. Understandably, Thoreau associated the ocean with darkness and death, since it often demonstrated a tumultuous force that splintered ships and strewed corpses in its wake. As a result, his *Cape Cod* journey in general and the detour to Cohasset in particular represent a bold attempt by Thoreau to test his faith in immortality by confronting his anxiety about physical mortality. He sought to conquer his fear of death by immersing himself in the presence of death.

Many aspects of Thoreau's account of the aftermath of the wreck of the *St. John* mirror actual news reports of the disaster, but obvious discrepancies also exist.⁶ Thoreau's interest in the wreck is first aroused in Boston when he sees a handbill with the heading, "Death! 145 lives lost at Cohasset!" (*Cape Cod* 4). Presumably to increase the reader's sense of the magnitude of the tragedy, Thoreau's account of the shipwreck never corrects this inaccurate statistic, which Harding, among others, takes as factual (*Days* 270). However, by the time Thoreau reached Cohasset, the death toll had been revised down to ninety-nine or a hundred, based on a count of the survivors and the captain's statement that 120 people had been on board the vessel when a storm caused it to drag its anchors and strike the rocks.⁷ Further, in relaying a conversation that he claims to have had with an unidentified sailor, Thoreau increases the reader's reliance on this inaccurate death count when he writes, "I asked if the bodies which I saw were all that were drowned. 'Not a quarter of them,' said he" (*Cape Cod* 6). At this time, though, as Thoreau has already acknowledged in his account, twenty-eight bodies—or twenty-eight percent of the victims—had been recovered. Although this discrepancy between Thoreau's narrative and the actual event is arguably of minor importance, it demonstrates the writer's technique of manipulating historical reality to fit his purpose while simultaneously maintaining an effect of historical verisimilitude that seems to have been accepted all too unquestioningly.

Numerous aspects of "The Shipwreck" support the theory that at the same time Thoreau revises reality to increase the drama of the disaster, he also unconsciously distances himself from death and associates himself with life in his interpretation of what he saw at Cohasset. While accurately observing that

6. Although critics and scholars have noted Thoreau's stance of the "detached observer" in "attempting to investigate, understand, and respond to" the calamity (Couser 32), as well as his "morbid fascination" with the stark scene (Grice 5), apparently no one has compared other contemporaneous accounts with Thoreau's version of the shipwreck.

7. A considerable controversy developed between the captain, who maintained the *St. John* carried 106 passengers and fourteen crew members, and some of the survivors, who claimed the vessel also carried thirty or forty passengers not on the ship's manifest. After a formal inquiry, however, the official accounting of the shipwreck reflected the captain's report. The final figures of the disaster reported in the first edition of the *Daily Mail* for 11 October were one hundred killed and twenty saved ("Names"). As Thoreau would take pleasure in pointing out, however, the newspaper reports of the shipwreck are not without minor inconsistencies. Most notably, some accounts reported ninety-nine killed and twenty-one saved. However, since most of the reports reflecting twenty-one survivors were attributed to earlier accounts by the *Daily Mail* and because of the overall consistency of the *Daily Mail*'s final reckoning, this paper's 11 October listing has been taken as the authority for the purposes of this study.

“twenty-seven or eight” bodies had been recovered at the time he arrived (*Cape Cod* 5), he exaggerates the number of children found, which serves both to increase the poignancy of the scene and to separate the writer from the mortalities around him. The 10 October edition of the *New York Daily Tribune*, among others, reports that only three of the twenty-seven bodies recovered by four o’clock on the afternoon of 8 October were children (“The Wreck of the St. John—Further Details”), while the *Daily National Intelligence* of 12 October states that the remains of three children were among the twenty-eight bodies recovered by ten o’clock on the morning of 9 October (“The Wreck of the St. John”). This same account in the *Daily National Intelligence* describes the affecting sight of the coffin holding a woman with a child in her arms that Thoreau mentions in his narrative. However, in describing the line of coffins on the shore that morning, Thoreau also writes, “Sometimes there were two or more children, or a parent and a child in the same box” (*Cape Cod* 6). Since the bodies of only three children had been found at the time, this comment cannot be a factual representation of what he saw. Reporting on the 9 October burial of the victims, the first edition of the *Herald* for 10 October states that only four of the coffins held more than one victim and that the three children’s bodies were placed separately in three of these four coffins (“From Cohasset”). Thus, no more than one child was in any coffin.

Furthermore, even if all of the fifteen to eighteen children on board the *St. John* were killed, Thoreau’s later meditations on the event again embellish the horror of the tragedy in the visual image he evokes with the words, “Infants by the score dashed on the rocks by the enraged Atlantic Ocean!” (*Cape Cod* 10). With his use of the phrase “by the score,” Thoreau shamelessly multiplies the number of the dead children while simultaneously exaggerating the already brutal reality into a surreal image of the senseless destruction of “infants”—traditionally viewed as symbols of life, innocence, and the future—by an ocean empowered with the human passion of rage. All the while, however, the coldly objective tone of the narration implies that Thoreau himself remains emotionally detached from the scene he describes.

Thoreau’s account includes other starkly dispassionate but moving descriptions of the ghastly corpses. In particular, he writes:

I saw many marble feet and matted heads as the cloths were raised, and one livid, swollen and mangled body of a drowned girl—who probably had intended to go out to service in some American family—to which some rags still adhered, with a string, half concealed by the flesh, about its swollen neck; the coiled-up wreck of a human hulk, gashed by the rocks or fishes, so that the bone and muscle were exposed, but quite bloodless—merely red and white—with wide-open and staring eyes, yet lustreless, dead-lights; or, like the cabin windows of a stranded vessel, filled with sand. (*Cape Cod* 5-6)

Significantly, in describing the shipwreck victims, Thoreau avoids any specifically male images. He refers to the dead in terms of girls, women, sisters, children, infants, parents, bodies, corpses, and hulks. He also informs the reader that he was later told that a mother died from the effect of seeing the coffin holding her infant in her sister’s arms (*Cape Cod* 6). At no point in the chapter

does Thoreau refer to a victim of this shipwreck as male.⁸ Even his description of the clothing that had washed ashore includes only one indisputably male referent: "... here or there was a bonnet or a jacket.... A little further along the shore we saw a man's clothes on a rock; further, a woman's scarf, a gown, a straw bonnet ... " (7). And, finally, recollecting the calm sea that he observed on a later visit to Cohasset, as well as the prevalence of shipwrecks in this locale, Thoreau concludes the chapter with what seems to be an unconscious but telling acknowledgment of the psychological implications of his account when he writes, "Not a vestige of a wreck was visible, nor could I believe that the bones of many a shipwrecked man were buried in that pure sand" (14). By ending the chapter with this gendered assertion of wishful thinking, Thoreau inadvertently underscores the anxiety about male mortality—both his own and his brother's—that has caused him to initiate this journey to the ocean.

Moreover, while avoiding male images of death, Thoreau incorporates into his commentary predominantly male imagery of survival. He mentions seeing the captain on the beach; he recounts comments he overheard by the mate; he relays a conversation he had with an unidentified male survivor and "one of the life-boat men" (*Cape Cod* 8). And, although Thoreau includes numerous nongendered allusions to those who were saved from the wreckage, he includes no specific female signifiers in describing anyone who survived. Nevertheless, according to the *Daily National Intelligence* of 12 October, only forty-five of the 120 people on board the *St. John* were adult females ("The Wreck of the *St. John*"), and since, by virtually all accounts, seven women survived the wreck, only thirty-eight of the hundred killed were women. Admittedly, at the time of Thoreau's visit, only three adult male bodies had been recovered. While one conceivably could excuse the lack of male bodies in Thoreau's account on this basis, such an argument loses force in contemplating the other gendered peculiarities of the narrative, as well as in recalling Thoreau's slanted handling of the three children's bodies. As a result, it seems more likely that Thoreau is unconsciously distancing himself from death and associating himself with life in his interpretation of what he saw.⁹

Throughout "The Shipwreck," Thoreau's morbid fascination with violent death seems to battle against his need to hold himself emotionally aloof from the human mortality he beheld at Cohasset. His very decision to revamp his vacation itinerary to incorporate a sidetrip to the scene of the shipwreck bespeaks a shocking, but not necessarily uncommon, insensitivity to human suffering, creating for the reader an image of the site as a ghoulish tourist

8. In chapter eight of *Cape Cod*, Thoreau does mention a man from Truro who claims to have discovered a male body together with a female body two weeks after the shipwreck occurred. This is the only specifically male corpse that Thoreau describes in connection with the shipwreck of the *St. John*, and since he only heard about the body secondhand, he conceivably was able to maintain an emotional distance from this death that was not possible with the bodies that he witnessed personally. Although Thoreau writes about many human corpses in *Cape Cod*, at no time does he refer to a male body that he himself has observed.

9. Feminists argue that this practice is not uncommon, claiming that Western culture has long objectified death by identifying it as female, while granting agency to life through the male subject. In her book *Women and Death*, Beth Ann Bassein develops this feminist assertion in detail.

attraction. Thoreau reinforces this impression of inappropriate festivity in the midst of tragedy, by describing gawkers who jostle with the Irish mourners who have arrived by the same train to identify the dead. He describes the train as containing “many Irish in the cars, going to identify bodies and to sympathize with the survivors, and also to attend the funeral which was to take place in the afternoon,” and then writes, “There were several hundreds of them streaming off over Cohasset common in that direction [toward the beach]—some on foot and some in wagons—and, among them, were some sportsmen in their hunting jackets, with their guns and game-bags and dogs” (*Cape Cod* 5-6).

By labeling both the dead and their mourners as Irish, Thoreau further separates himself from the trauma surrounding him. In reporting on the shipwreck, the 11 October edition of the *Puritan Recorder* notes the tendency of most people to disassociate themselves from these dead and grieving Irish immigrants, observing that “The excitement in this city [Boston] is small indeed, compared to what it would have been, if the lost had been connected with the citizens by ties of affection and blood” (“Dreadful Shipwreck” 163). Thoreau was not exempt from this sentiment. As Henry Seidel Canby writes in his biography of Thoreau, the Irish immigrants who lived in and around Concord at this time were “a society apart, substituting for the Negroes further south” (11). Although at first scornful of the Irish, thinking them “dirty, shiftless, and unconcerned with spiritual values,” Thoreau, according to Harding, changed his opinion when he “became better acquainted with the Irish” and realized “that their poverty was not their own fault but that of their money-pinching Yankee taskmasters” (*Days* 312-13). In *Walden*, Thoreau’s bias against the Irish surfaces most clearly in his portrait of John Field, “an honest, hard-working, but shiftless man,” in whom the writer finds validation for his conviction that “the culture of an Irishman is an enterprise to be understood taken with a sort of moral bog hoe” (204, 205-206). Though sympathetically championing their welfare, Thoreau’s *Journal* indicates that even if his opinion of these immigrants improved over time, he continued to view them essentially as “Other” than himself if only because of their unfortunate lot. On 8 February 1852, for instance, he writes with perhaps a trace of condescension beneath his goodwill: “Carried a new cloak to Johnny Riordan. I found that the shanty was warmed by the simple social relations of the Irish.... These Irish are not succeeding so ill after all ...” (3: 289). As on his visit to the Riordans, at Cohasset Thoreau holds himself separate from “these Irish,” in much the same way he disassociates himself from the gawking tourists. He is not there to die, to mourn, or to ogle but rather to quell his apprehensions of mortality by verifying his belief in immortality. Thus, he must look further for a group with whom he can safely align himself and his carefully fashioned philosophy about death’s inconsequence.

In the midst of his jarring contrast of mourners and sightseers, Thoreau creates just such a psychic equilibrium for himself by overlaying a view of the stalwart Cohasset natives as they prepare the bodies for burial and salvage

items of value that wash ashore. Describing their cool and calm efficiency and emotional detachment, he observes at one point, "I witnessed no signs of grief, but there was a sober despatch [sic] of business that was affecting," while at another point he writes, "This shipwreck had not produced a visible vibration in the fabric of society" (*Cape Cod* 5, 7). By his own dispassionate tone in describing the scene, Thoreau aligns himself with these pragmatic natives, and he stubbornly denies any emotional connection with, or sympathy for, either the dead or those who might grieve for them: "On the whole, it was not so impressive a scene as I might have expected. If I had found one body cast upon the beach in some lonely place, it would have affected me more. I sympathized rather with the winds and waves, as if to toss and mangle these poor human bodies was the order of the day. If this was the law of Nature, why waste any time in awe or pity?" (9). For Thoreau, psychoanalytic identification with *one* body—arguably either his brother's or his own—would be far more frightening than the many bodies at Cohasset, especially when he has already marked them as Other by identifying them as Irish, women, children, hulks, etc.

Throughout *Cape Cod*, Thoreau never wavers from advocating such stoicism in response to death. Further, he never voices any personal reaction to death that contradicts this phlegmatic stance except the comment in "The Shipwreck" that "A man can attend but one funeral in the course of his life, can behold but one corpse" (*Cape Cod* 9), which seems an at least limited acknowledgment of the significance of his own mortality, as well as the lasting effect of his brother's death. In "The Shipwreck," Thoreau proffers an immediate and unyielding acceptance of death that simultaneously denies death's importance to humanity, and he never falters from this position. Rather than progressing through conflicted emotions that recognize the human's natural impulse to deny death but also enable one eventually to synthesize a more convincingly reasoned acceptance of human mortality, Thoreau's obdurate attitude seems unnaturally forced and static.¹⁰ Thus, instead of powerfully resounding, his rigid words echo with a hollow defensiveness that seems to cloak an inability to acknowledge his innermost reactions, and such repression, in turn, points to the possibility of a concealed trauma such as that suggested by the circumstances of his brother's death.

The presentation of death in "The Shipwreck" further supports the view that Thoreau's repressed guilt over his brother's death and his related anxiety about his own mortality motivated his journey to the ocean and influenced his interpretation of events. Throughout his account, Thoreau portrays the inevitability of death by minimizing the powers of human agency that operated in the fate of the *St. John* and its human cargo. While conceding the force of the unexpected gale in which the ship was caught, actual reports of the shipwreck confirm that the brig remained afloat for fifty to sixty minutes after dragging

10. Many studies have been made of attitudes toward death, including the Western impulse to deny death and the stages involved in reaching acceptance of the reality of death. See, for instance, Philippe Aries's *The Hour of Our Death*, Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death*, and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's *On Death and Dying*.

anchor and that the captain and crew, in shocking dereliction of their duty to their passengers, quickly abandoned ship to save their own lives. By these accounts, the captain, second mate, and two of the crew first jumped into the ship's "jolly boat." Then, when this boat was swamped by panicked passengers, the captain, pulled back on board by the first mate, commandeered the *St. John's* "long boat" for himself and the remaining crew, picking up only one passenger on their way to shore and failing even to advise the lifeboat that they passed of the deserted passengers on board the sinking vessel.¹¹ In support of this interpretation of events, a report in the first edition of the 9 October *Daily Mail*, which subsequently appeared in other accounts as well, claims the following:

When Capt. Oliver left the brig, he passed within hailing distance of a life-boat in charge of Capt. Prouty, which had put out to go to the assistance of another vessel at anchor in the Cove, but he did not give information of the peril in which he left his vessel, and the life-boat proceeded on her way, the bold hearts who manned her not knowing that so many human beings in their immediate vicinity were about to be swallowed in the raging waters. It is, we understand, the unanimous opinion of the men in the life-boat that had not Capt. Oliver been criminally negligent, or motivated by selfishness, or fear, a large proportion of the ill-fated passengers would have been saved. ("From Our Own Reporter")

Further, the first edition of the 10 October *Daily Mail* states, "It is most strongly averred by persons that were saved, and also by the people of Cohasset, that the boat in which the Captain and crew were saved would have held nearly twenty more persons" ("The Wreck of the *St. John*").¹²

Nor were some of the residents of Cohasset without alleged culpability in the deaths from the *St. John*. The *Daily Mail* for 13 October includes a letter to the editor from "An Old Shipmaster" which claims that the tragedy could have been averted if "the only efficient [life]boat" had not been stored half a mile from the coast, necessitating a lengthy delay in launching it. According to this writer, the boat was stored offshore because "the house designed for her was too small to contain the boat." In addition, "the gentleman who had charge of her, on seeing the perilous situation of the brig, after giving instruction respecting hauling the boat, thought it was his duty to start immediately for Boston to apprise the underwriters, and thus left those unfortunate people to perish" (Old Shipmaster).

In contrast to this realistic picture of a mortal tragedy involving both natural and human elements, Thoreau's account in "The Shipwreck" focuses only on the role of nature by limiting human commentary to the first mate's assertion "that when they jumped into the [jolly] boat, she filled, and the vessel lurching,

11. According to the evening edition of the 8 October *Boston Journal*, two passengers arrived on shore in the long boat; however, this account is inconsistent in some of its particulars ("Severe Gale").

12. In defense of Captain Oliver, the first edition of the 12 October *Daily Mail* printed an assertion by two of the crew members who escaped with him that the long boat "did not come within hailing distance [of the lifeboat], especially in the terrible hurricane which was then raging." These men further claimed that the captain had unsuccessfully entreated more passengers to jump overboard to be pulled into the long boat, which had fallen overboard while being lowered and was saved from being swamped only by the captain and crew's efforts ("The Loss of the *St. John*").

the weight of the water in the boat caused the painter to break, and so they were separated"; a bystander's observation that this explanation seemed "straight" enough; and the explanation of the lifeboat crew that "the waves prevented their seeing those who were on the vessel, though they might have saved some had they known there were any there" (*Cape Cod* 8). Thoreau includes no mention of the long boat, of how the captain and crew reached shore, of the failure to call out to the lifeboat, or of any delay in launching the lifeboat. Further, he aligns the captain with the passengers by observing, "... in the afternoon we saw the funeral procession at a distance, at the head of which walked the captain with the other survivors." Instead of incorporating the human factor into his formula to explain these deaths at Cohasset, Thoreau unconvincingly equates all powers of causation to "the law of Nature" (9).

Similarly, Thoreau constrains those on shore to actions of relative passivity. The idle tourists have no function at the scene; the dispassionate natives are inscribed in mechanical tasks of practicality; and the survivors seem removed from the activity around them, having lived through the disaster for no explicable reason and through no concerted effort of their own. The one survivor with whom Thoreau speaks "seemed unwilling to talk about it and soon walked away" (*Cape Cod* 8). No heroism is described. No anguish is witnessed. No emotion is recorded. In contrast, the newspapers recount numerous heroic acts and valiant efforts in emotional verbiage far less restrained than Thoreau's narrative. For instance, the *New York Daily Tribune* of 10 October reports:

Great difficulty was experienced in saving those who came ashore on pieces of wreck, on account of the surf which would throw them upon the rocks and then carry them to sea again. The poor creatures would cling with a death-grip to the clothes of those who came to rescue them, and were with difficulty made to release their hold even after having reached a place of safety.... [O]ne passenger, clinging to a piece of the wreck, floated to the rocks, but was so far gone as to be unable to unclench his hand. Finally, some one jumped on to the fragment, made fast a rope to him and he was got ashore. ("The Wreck of the St. John—Further Details")

This same account describes a father who, while swimming in pursuit of the long boat with his youngest child in tow, drowned because "No ear was open to his cries for succor." In addition, it tells of a young boy who "sprang from the wreck into the boiling sea, struck out boldly and manfully in pursuit of the boat containing the Captain and crew, and after swimming for some time in the wake of the boat was picked up and saved!"

While the newspaper accounts balance survival with death, and nature's force with that of humanity, Thoreau's version draws an ostensibly objective portrait that, upon close inspection, subtly manipulates actual events to remove the human element, empowering nature with an omnipotent force over life and death that nullifies both human agency and human pain to a degree incompatible with reality. His interpretation of the shipwreck is disturbingly darker and colder in tone than seems warranted by the facts of what happened, postulating a world in which this lack of human agency, God's seeming indifference to humanity, and the barren emptiness of earthly existence, surmount the comparably banal transcendental faith in immortality to which he resorts for consola-

tion. Near the end of the chapter, after viewing and describing the victims of the *St. John*, Thoreau writes:

Why care for these dead bodies? They really have no friends but the worms or fishes. Their owners were coming to the New World, as Columbus and the Pilgrims did, they were within a mile of its shores; but, before they could reach it, they emigrated to a newer world than ever Columbus dreamed of, yet one of whose existence we believe that there is far more universal and convincing evidence—though it has not been discovered by science—than Columbus had of his.... I saw their empty hulks that came to land; but they themselves, meanwhile, were cast upon some shore yet further west, toward which we are all tending, and which we shall reach at last, it may be through storm and darkness, as they did. No doubt, we have reason to thank God, that they have not been “shipwrecked into life again.” (10)

As Richard J. Schneider claims, although Thoreau “seeks desperately to attach an optimistic spiritual meaning to these dead bodies, his sermon sounds smug and hollow,” a “bit of transcendental metaphysics [that] rings false as very few other passages in his writings ever do.... Thoreau does not even grieve that he cannot grieve. Furthermore, the reader senses that Thoreau does not really believe what his persona says ...” (“Thoreau’s Wilderness” 185-86).

Although these observations are valid, one must keep in mind that in the context of *Cape Cod* as a whole, “The Shipwreck” embodies only Thoreau’s presentation of the problem of human mortality and his hypothesis of a spiritual solution, while he devotes the remainder of the book to the testing and proof of this postulate. However, although critics and scholars disagree as to whether Thoreau succeeds in his experiment overall, no one previously has exposed the contrived basis for the hypothesis itself. While a writer may be justified in consciously slanting historical facts to achieve his artistic aims, the forgoing comparison between Thoreau’s story of the shipwreck of the *St. John* and actual accounts of the disaster reveals peculiarities in the writer’s account that suggest the possible presence of unconscious factors that influenced his presentation of, and attitude toward, death. To attempt to substantiate or refute these impressions, one must consider them in the context of Thoreau’s life and psychoanalytic theory.

As previously suggested, by reading “The Shipwreck” with Thoreau’s biographical context in mind, the enigmatic assertion that “A man can attend but one funeral in the course of his life, can behold but one corpse” (*Cape Cod* 9) seems clearly to refer not only to his own death but also to his brother John’s death, evidencing at least a limited recognition of the lasting effect of this event on his own life. However, since Thoreau apparently remained unable to confront his repressed guilt and anxiety, he was driven to repudiate the pain of death, to deny human agency as a factor of causation in death, and to insist adamantly on immortality despite overwhelming reasons for spiritual doubt. Thus, rather than being merely the reflection of conscious, creative license, Thoreau’s manipulation of historical events in the narrative of “The Shipwreck” may better be understood—at least in part—as his unconscious escape from psychic conflict that can only be appreciated in psychohistorical context. By considering historical discrepancies in Thoreau’s account of the

shipwreck of the *St. John* in the light of psychoanalytical insights into his life, we ultimately gain a fuller appreciation of Thoreau the man and Thoreau the artist that, in turn, leads to a better understanding of his individual literary works and the overall model of form and substance upon which they are based.

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