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The Repercussions of Thoreau’s Categorization

In her essay “Mysteries of Thoreau, Unsolved”, Rebecca Solnit argues against the unfair categorization of Thoreau due to his laundry arrangements and supports his accomplishments and advancements of the morals of mankind. In Solnit’s eyes, Thoreau’s relationship with his family and their activism involving rights for women and slaves had an early influence on him, and spurred him into taking action against mistreatment of people throughout his life. He took actions including hosting “meetings in that tiny cabin that engaged with the laws of the nation and the status of strangers far away”, opposing the “territorial war against Mexico” and slavery, and doing this “at a time when they were a small minority” (362) as a result of his family’s influence. Solnit’s point becomes clear: His one dimensional categorization and attack on his laundry arrangements, as a result, were a terrible misconception of his character. To categorize Thoreau in this way was unfair to him, and diminished what he was able to do for mankind. While making this point throughout her essay, Solnit utilizes a roundabout form, bordering on stream of consciousness, and references her own life almost as much as Thoreau’s. In the closing paragraph of her essay, in fact, Solnit adds a lengthy comparison between Thoreau and his sister and herself and her brother:

It is what we are here to do, and to raise melons and build houses and write books and to free anyone who might possibly need freeing including ourselves and the meanings of our lives in all their uncategorizable complexity (371).

The piece, after one reading, seems to be explicitly in support of Thoreau and all that he accomplished, and so the question must eventually be raised: Why does Solnit choose to include so many personal examples while defending Thoreau?

Even before the catalyst of her facebook conversation over Thoreau’s laundry arrangements, Solnit peppers her essay with personal information, including her use of a “Cuban translator” and distribution of a “booklet about debt resistance” (360). After a few of these references are made, the reader begins to learn about Solnit’s life in parallel with Thoreau’s, and all of their similarities. The reader is able to draw connections between Solnit and Thoreau, and their activist lifestyles. Accentuating the parallel that the reader feels, Solnit transitions into the topic of the facebook post which inspired her essay, concerning an area of modern activism that Solnit seems very familiar with: Modern prisons and America’s perceived lack of concern on the issue. After her reply to her facebook “friend”, where Solnit’s expertise on the subject of prisons rings clear, the reader can feel her passion over the issue, similar to Thoreau choosing to pit himself against the “most horrific injustices and established laws of their society” (362). The reader can feel the parallels between Solnit and Thoreau’s lifestyles, so much so that it must be intentional. Solnit is putting herself in the same category as Thoreau, and is connecting her own life to his. This adds to the offense she took at the defilement of his reputation, and explains the passion she took in defending him. At this point, it can be inferred that the essay means more than just a justification of Thoreau. Solnit often returns to the key term of “categorization” and the negative effect it can have on people. Perhaps, then, a personal purpose is being shown here, the defense of Solnit’s own lifestyle against categorization.

After Solnit’s discussion on Thoreau’s sympathy for servants and immigrants, she states that “The project of Liberation is neverending” (367) before going on to describe her own visit to San Quentin Prison and her attempts to raise awareness for the liberation of prisoners. She even goes as far as to compare the plight of slaves to that of modern day prisoners (370), issues that she and Thoreau, respectively, were passionate about. Seemingly disconnected from the topic of the essay, the description of this visit is connected only to the initial facebook post. The extent to which her prison visit was described is an important insight into the values of Solnit as an author and activist, and a moment in the text where the reader can feel the harmony between what is being written and what is implied. One might argue that this simply entails Solnit’s writing style, and that she is fond of utilizing personal examples to further her point. But a personal break as extensive as this, coming at a significant time in the essay, must point to Solnit trying to explore a personal issue. The reader can infer that the essay means more than just a justification of Thoreau, because the parallel themes of the story of San Quentin and the original facebook post are too strong ignore.

Dealing a more explicit connection, Solnit decides to end her essay with a compelling comparison between her brother and Thoreau’ sister, telling the audience that “Thoreau’s relationship to his sisters reminds me a little of mine to my brother” (370). Solnit explicitly connects herself to Thoreau here, and further puts the idea into the reader’s mind that they lead similar lives. One of the main arguments against Thoreau in the essay is that his family helped him a lot in his daily life at Walden, and he often visited them. By including this personal detail here, Solnit is exploring the idea that by shorting Thoreau of respect only because he received help from his family, a negative light on her own life as well, relying on her brother for a lot in her activist life. If Thoreau is seen as a false idol, with all that he did, then how could Solnit hope for a better reputation?

Solnit’s reason for comparing herself Thoreau could be that she took just as much offense to the facebook comment about American’s not caring about prisoners as she did Thoreau’s laundry accusation. These seemingly off-topic forays into Solnit’s own life serve to prove herself to the audience and her facebook adversary. A major key term throughout the essay is categorization and its improper and unfair use in America. This topic applies to Solnit as well. After being placed into a category of uncaring Americans towards a topic that she so clearly holds dear, Solnit needed to take this action against the “leaky vessels” (360) and stand up for all who have been injured in their use. Instead of tackling this offense directly in her writing however, she crafted two arguments: one explicit, discussing Thoreau and his accomplishments, the other implicit, concerning her own attack on the modern prison system. This puts her constant refrain about Thoreau’s laundry into perspective. When she states she found “people who pretended to care who did Thoreau’s laundry as a way of not having to care about Thoreau” (363), she is deflecting her argument against people who categorize others so they do not have to care about anything themselves. For example, people who complain that Americans do not care about prisoners without actually taking actions to improve the situation themselves. This puts her story about San Quentin into perspective as well. It was placed to show all that Solnit is doing to liberate the modern prison system, and to show that she does not deserve to be unfairly categorized. However, she manages to disguise this argument. By defending Thoreau on this front, she is defending a long line of activists, including herself, who do not receive the respect for the actions they take in trying to improve the world. Solnit’s aim is to defend her life against the categorization that plagues Thoreau.

The issue of categorization, the subject of Solnit’s essay, can now be explored in full. A cursory view of Solnit’s essay results in the assumption that Solnit is talking about Thoreau being categorized as a poor role model, but a deeper view changes that meaning until it becomes about Solnit herself. The reader can feel her passion as she argues over the worship of Thoreau as “false gods” (361) and those who thought he was a “hypocrite” (362) for simply receiving help from his family until it is obvious that the point she is trying to make is larger than even herself. Solnit is facing off against hypocrisy, and those who claim to understand all that someone does, without taking the time to understand their actual purpose. In a way, Thoreau represents all of us, and his laundry represents the wrongful categorization of citizens of America and the world. This idea of categorization is prominent in all phases of life, including politics, education, and society. Categorization can stifle creativity or activism and proliferate racism and sexism. It is behind many of the greatest struggles of mankind, in the past and today. In writing this essay, Solnit is arguing for the future of activists, writers, and mankind as a whole: You must not accept categorization. You can fight for your own freedom much like Thoreau fought for his and Solnit will continue to fight for hers.

Works Cited

Solnit, Rebecca. "Mysteries of Thoreau, Unsolved." (n.d.): n. pag. Web.