



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**A BAKHTINIAN READING OF SELECTED NON-FICTION WORKS BY
HENRY DAVID THOREAU**

**FOROUGH BARANI
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DAVID THOREAU**

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**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, in
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts**

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Abstract of the thesis presented in order to fulfill the requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts

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HENRY DAVID THOREAU**

By

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January 2010

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One of the most provoking questions raised by contemporary literary criticism is whether the “self” is identifiable through the dialogues and monologues of the characters or narrator of a given literary work. This study explores Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854) and *A Week on Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849), as selected descriptive narratives of American Transcendentalism to identify how the persona of the author is revealed through his internal dialogues, inner speeches and meditations. This study adopts the theoretical premises of Mikhail Bakhtin’s “Dialogism” and by a close reading of the chosen texts tries to unravel the dialogical possibilities inherent in the texts between the self and the actual or potential others. With the close study of the narrative voice, its tone, intention and style, two other concepts of Bakhtin’s theory, “polyphony” and “carnavalesque” are also detected.



This study investigates aesthetic and ideological statements of the narrator of *Walden* and *A Week* to illustrate the presence of Nature as another possible addressee and indicates the dialogical communication of the self and Nature. The cultural heritage in the context of American society of Thoreau's time is also examined in order to identify the roots of the broken ties between "self" and the "society," and to shed light on the individual and social "self" of the persona of the narrator and its social concern in criticizing the norms of the society. In this way, different facets of Thoreau's self in representation of his different voices that is depicted in the tone, diction and subject matter would be unraveled and the possibility of "Dialogical Self" within the figure of the author himself is disclosed: Thoreau the Transcendentalist, the Historian, the Naturalist, the Poet, Observer, Recorder and Reporter of Nature and on the other hand, Thoreau the Socialist, Reformist, Satirist, Poet-prophet. This study concludes that the selected non-fiction works are not just monological poetic meditations of their author, but polyphonic contemplation of internal voices carnivalizing the social ideologies of their time.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk Ijazah Master Arts

**ANALISIS HASIL KARYA BUKAN FIKSYEN HENRY DAVID THOREAU
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Salah satu daripada persoalan yang paling merangsangkan minda dikemukakan oleh pengkritik kesusasteraan zaman moden adalah sama ada diri (*self*) dapat dikenalpasti melalui dialog dan monolog watak atau pencerita dalam sesebuah karya sastera. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menyelidik dua hasil karya Henry David Thoreau iaitu *Walden* (1854) dan *A Week on Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849). Karya-karya ini dipilih untuk menghuraikan kaedah penceritaan berkonsep *American Transcendentalism* untuk mengenalpasti bagaimana persona pengkarya didedahkan melalui dialog dalaman dan meditasi. Dalam karya-karya yang dipilih, terdapat perkaitan yang rapat di antara diri dan teks, dengan melihat kedua-duanya sebagai gabungan suara dalaman yang sentiasa berkonflik antara satu sama lain. Untuk mencapai tujuan yang dinyatakan diatas, kajian ini membentuk analisisnya dalam dua pandangan iaitu stailistik (*'Dialogism'* oleh Bakhtin) dan psikologi (*'Dialogical Self'* oleh Hermans)



Kajian ini juga cuba untuk menyiasat pernyataan-pernyataan estetik dan ideologi pencerita *Walden* untuk menghujahkan sejauh mana pengaruh alam semula jadi ke atas dirinya sebagai penulis yang dipulaukan dan mengkaji sejarah budaya dalam konteks masyarakat America pada zaman Thoreau. Ini bertujuan untuk mengenalpasti punca putusnya pertalian yang wujud di antara diri dan masyarakat bagi membuka pandangan tentang individu dan diri dalam masyarakat peribadi pencerita dalam *Walden* dan *A Week on Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Kajian ini menyimpulkan bahawa karya-karya bukan fiksyen yang dipilih bukanlah hanya membentangkan meditasi monolog berpuisi oleh penulisnya tetapi merupakan hasil gabungan suara dalaman yang memeriahkan ideologi social pada zaman mereka.

I would like to dedicate this research to my dear parents,
Ali & Mansoureh
for their great love, care and support.



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APPROVAL

I certify that an Examination Committee has met on 18th of January 2010 to conduct the final examination of **Forough Barani** on her Master of Arts thesis entitled “**A BAKHTINIAN READING OF SELECTED NON-FICTION WORKS BY HENRY DAVID THOREAU**” in accordance with the Universities and University colleges Act 1971 and the Constitution of the Universiti Putra Malaysia [P.U.(A) 106] 15 March 1998. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the Master of Arts.

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DECLARATION

I declare that the project is my original work except for quotations and citations, which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously, and is not concurrently, submitted for any other degree at University Putra Malaysia or any other institutions.

FOROUGH BARANI

Date: 10 January 2010



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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Henry David Thoreau, an American author, poet, naturalist, tax resister, development critic, surveyor, historian, philosopher, and leading transcendentalist, was born in Concord, Massachusetts, July 12, 1817 and died on May 6, 1862. He was the spokesperson of truth during his lifetime and fought for freedom and abolition of slavery in the America of his time. He is best known as one of the leading figures of the American Transcendentalist movement besides Ralph Waldo Emerson. His entire life was a restless effort to seek “Higher Laws” that in his opinion were inherent in Nature. According to his colleague and friend, Emerson, in his article entitled, “Thoreau,”

He was bred to no profession. He never married, he lived alone; he never went to church; he never voted; he refused to pay a tax to the state; he ate no flesh, he drank no wine, he never knew the use of tobacco; and, though a naturalist, he used neither trap nor gun. He chose, wisely, no doubt, for himself, to be the bachelor of thought and nature. He had no talent for wealth, and knew how to be poor without the least hint of squalor or inelegance. [...] When asked at dinner what dish he preferred, he answered, “the nearest” (18).

With such a unique way of life, Thoreau was very distinct from his other townspeople. He deliberately aimed to live a life free from the obligation to man-made conventions. One of his friends says about him, “I love Henry, but I cannot like him, and as taking his arm, I should as soon think of taking the arm of an elm-tree” (qtd. in Emerson 19). He was so in harmony and unity with Nature that his existence had become a part of Nature itself. It is paradoxical that although he chose to be far from the company of other ordinary people, his mind was more often than



not preoccupied with social issues. “Thoreau went to Walden not to escape men, but to prepare himself for them, and as far as he could, for the artificial conventions on which society necessarily rests” (Page 29). Thoreau’s writings are intense with a sense of realism, which is sympathetic towards his close affinity with men in society and their actual life. Living in Nature and experiencing the standards of the life in such surroundings are for him a symbolic representation of a better life that all human beings, free from the intentions of the “others,” can have. One can think of the bulk of his natural writings as a return to the origin, where the salvation of every soul is promised.

Thoreau professes to all humankind to be true to their own selves. He wants all to let the true instinct, which is sent to all souls directly from Nature, to be cherished inside them once more; and then after this catharsis he wants them to come back to the practical and social life, this time safe and immune to free their own selves from the totalitarianism of social norms and self-occupying thoughts. It is also the overall theme of Thoreau’s *A Week on Concord and Merrimack Rivers* - another text discussed in this research besides *Walden* - when the traveler returns after a two-week exploration of the Concord and Merrimack Rivers with the wisdom of both the internal and external world of Nature and his self. The changing of the weather and seasons in the natural world can be metaphorically considered as a changing of mood within our own selves: a precious change, one along with Nature’s “Higher Laws” for better lives, towards spring.

Walden begins its discussion with human beings in society and continues its argument in the natural setting of Walden Pond. In its final chapter it returns to



society but this time invites all to wake up and explore their own selves to finally come to a point when they realize who they are. This preoccupation with human beings and their selves in the context of society and Nature is strongly indicated in Thoreau's writings. All the paradoxical elements - individual and society, Nature and industrialization; and in another scope spring and winter, day and night - lead the reader to the central theme of *Walden* and *A Week on Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, which is, entering a new stage of conscious development, realizing one's self, attaining spirituality in life and enjoying life at its utmost level.

Statement of the Problem

Using Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of "Dialogism," this research explores the selected non-fiction works of Henry David Thoreau to show how different personas of the author are revealed through the dialogical interactions of the multi-voiced narrator and other hidden dialogues during the course of narration, specifically with the reader and Nature. This study attempts to develop an argument which hopefully leads to a point where it could be concluded that the two selected non-fiction works are not just monological poetic meditations of their author but polyphonic contemplation of internal voices carnivalizing the social ideologies of their time.

The central question in this research, however, asks how the "Dialogical Self" is identifiable in the seemingly monological voice of Thoreau in his *Walden* and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. In particular, this study examines two other research questions and asks how the mixture of dialogic and monologic forms of discourse is detectable in the "Mono-Dialogic" voice of Thoreau in his selected non-fiction works, and further poses how the presentation of

heteroglossia of hybrid voices in Thoreau's selected works leads to carnivalization of the socio-political ideology of the society of his time.

Scope and Limitation of the Study

This study is framed within aesthetic qualities and ideological conceptions of two descriptive non-fiction literary pieces focusing on the persona's narrative discourse. This is done by examining Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) and *A Week on Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849), to be referred to as: *A Week*. The main focus will be on the "Dialogical Self" of the narrator and other dialogical possibilities of the chosen texts. To accomplish this purpose, this study adopts the theoretical principles of "Dialogism" established and developed by Russian philosopher and literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin (1895 - 1975). This study makes use of two concepts of "Polyphony" and "Carnavalesque", which are closely related to the theory of "Dialogism" and will help in the study of self and narrative voice in order to unravel the tone and intentions of the author.

Besides the bulk of essays and criticism from the Transcendentalist perspective, the analysis of the present conflicting voices in the society, the internal and external dialogues of the narrative persona in *Walden* and *A Week* and the extent of dialogicality and monologicality of his voice need further study. This research specifically focuses on the self/other relationship in the context of the society of Thoreau's time and aims to fill the gaps in previous studies. In this way, this study hopes to add another dimension to the study of the two selected pieces of Henry David Thoreau's work of non-fiction.

Bakhtin's theory of "Dialogism" is very complex and multi-faceted and has many layers of application, but in this study of non-fiction works, the researcher limits the study to the cultural/social concept of "Carnavalesque" and "Polyphony," or multi-voicedness, implicit in Thoreau's narrative voice. This study only adopts those parts of the study of the self that are specifically related to the study of literary works; and does not go in depth into the psychological aspects of therapy and self-conflicts. The present research goes further to demonstrate the ideology of opposing forces/voices of society and Nature and illustrates the ways that Thoreau authoritatively parodies the social norms and consequently carnivalizes the established standards of society and the beholders of these norms. It is beyond the scope of this study to examine the political context of America of the time and Thoreau's role as a political activist. Instead, this study hints at the norms dictated by the totalitarian and monological authorities of the time and only depicts this other aspect of Thoreau's personality in his mostly known natural writings.

Objectives of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to develop an understanding of the adaptation of Bakhtinian perspectives on the narrative descriptive works of Henry David Thoreau. The factors that are involved in one's psychological spheres and the influence of every individual's ideology in the context of the society and the contrast and harmony between man-made rules and Nature's laws are among the main concerns of this study. The present research intends to investigate aesthetic and ideological statements of Thoreau's narrative voice in his two selected non-fiction works, *Walden* and *A Week* to argue the extent of Nature's influence on him and, thereafter, demonstrate the importance of Nature as a possible addressee in Thoreau's live

“dialogical” discussion. This thesis further, seeks to explain the development of the genre of Mono-Dialogic Narrative and sheds light on two facets of Thoreau’s “self”, individual and social, in referring to the narrator’s natural meditations and social ideologies. By applying Bakhtin’s theory of “Dialogism” and his concepts of “Polyphony” and “Carnavalesque”, the present study intends to detect the individual and the social self of the narrator depicted in the intentional adopted voices of Henry David Thoreau. This study tries to illustrate how the persona of the author is revealed through his “inner speeches” and “internal dialogues.” Part of the aim of this project is to examine the cultural heritage in the context of American society of Thoreau’s time to identify the possible roots of relationship between “self” and “society,” although it may seem that the ties of this relation are broken in the alienation of the artist.

This research examines the discourse of the selected works to point out that Thoreau’s voice is not just a monological poetic meditation of its author, but also a polyphonic contemplation of internal voices carnivalizing the social ideologies of the time. Since there is a dialogical basis in every form of thought and this premise forecloses the existence of “hidden dialogues” in the seemingly monological inner speeches of the narrator, the researcher offers another aspect to the study of Thoreau’s two-year life and meditations in Walden Pond and his two-week journey along the Concord and Merrimack Rivers.

Significance of the Study

One of the most significant current discussions in literature and philosophy is the extent of the interaction between self and other. Self and society are interwoven

concepts since one cannot deny the role of psychological elements and the individual's background in the context of the society and the communication of self with society. In the selected non-fiction works of Thoreau and in the realist context of his growing discussion, the relationship between self and its surrounding, in different levels, is truly depicted.

It is increasingly difficult to ignore the fact that Bakhtinian dialogic principles can also be applicable to genres other than solely the novel. To have a critical outlook on this issue it is quite noteworthy to mention that poetry and non-fiction types of discourse have also typical characteristics of dialogic intercourse, although it seems that only one voice, the authorial voice and that of the author is dominating the whole ideology. While Bakhtin considered his theoretical premises generally applicable to the genre of novel, this research challenges a rather innovative study by applying his theories to the non-fiction literature. Since little attention has been paid to the study of Nature writings and generally non-fiction descriptive works from the Bakhtinian perspective, the present study attempts to fulfill the gaps and extend the scope of previous researches. By analyzing the narrative discourse this research highlights the significance of "Dialogical Criticism" in relation to the chosen works of Thoreau and in this way intends to contribute to the study on "Dialogism" in English and American non-fiction literature beyond the nineteenth century.

Walden and respectively *A Week*, two of the most eminent non-fiction works of Thoreau, have within themselves the qualities to be looked at from the dialogical point of view. While the value of studies on Thoreau's works from the

Transcendentalist perspective is obvious, the inherent dialogicality of his voice in his writings has largely been unexplored. Since the author of these texts has presented hybrid ideologies in the body of diverse voices beholding by the readers, himself and also the natural laws of Nature, the discourse of the named works can be discussed dialogically.

These works are mostly known as the poetic description of the authorized voice of their author, while along with such views the present study goes further and argues that instead of just one supposedly authorized, monologic voice, there are simultaneously different, often opposing, voices in a dialogic interaction within the figure of the author himself - in addition to the hidden question and often responses of the readers and inspirations of Nature and her inhabitants. It is worth mentioning that by this intentional adaptation of diverse voices Thoreau carnivalizes the ideological assumptions of the society of his time and those of his readers who behold such world views. Most of the previous studies on Thoreau's works have focused on the Transcendentalist aspects of his writings and the aesthetics and poetical language of his discourse in his Nature writings. Some researchers also have focused on the political intentions of Thoreau as a social activist and Abolitionist.

Since the past studies are rather old and comparative with the contemporary literature of Thoreau's age, As such, the present research tends to be a renewal and at the same time a comprehensive study of two major works of Thoreau, *Walden* and *A Week*, to focus on Thoreau's artistic life and career and offer a close textual analysis of untouched concepts of Bakhtinian theories and terminologies, while attempting to disclose different facets of the narrator's self and the dialogical interaction within the

self itself. In this way the present research provides a significant study of Thoreau's selected non-fiction works by detecting the inherent dialogical intentions of the narrator and by doing so hopes to contribute to the study of "Dialogism" and touch on the virgin topics of its discussion, filling the gap of previous studies in referring to genres other than the novel.

Conceptual Theory

The framework of this thesis is based on Mikhail Bakhtin's "Dialogical Criticism," while the main focus will be on the dialogical interactions of the voices of the persona and the way it carnivalizes the society. The tone and intentions of the narrator's voice in the two chosen works of Thoreau, *Walden* (1854) and *A Week* (1849), are analyzed in detail to disclose the hidden ideologies and assumptions of the "Self" and its interaction with others.

The mentioned works have two seemingly opposing capacities, monologic and dialogic, that the researcher of this study believes would give further depth and another dimension to these Nature writings. They are mostly considered to be monologic meditations of their author, but the aim of this study is to reveal the inherent dialogicality of these works. After a study by Malini Schueller in her thesis on Mono-Dialogic Narratives, which discusses the monologic and dialogic qualities of discourse in a number of American literary works, this research also sees these two pieces of Nature writings by Thoreau as "Mono-Dialogic."

In dealing with Mono-Dialogic narratives, first and foremost it is essential to have a clear idea of what Bakhtin means by monologic and dialogic features of

discourse. Bakhtin in his *Dialogic Imagination* (1981) sees discourse in the novel as “dialogized.” In any utterance in the novel, languages are crossed and “relate to each other as do rejoinders in a dialogue. There is an argument between languages, an argument between the styles of languages [...], it is a dialogue between points of view, each with its own concrete language that cannot be translated into the others” (76). On the other hand, in discussion of monologic voices, this play of discourse is replaced by the affirmation of totalitarian and fixed standards. Those ideas, which are contrary to those of the author, Bakhtin points out in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, “are either polemically repudiated or else they lose their power to signify directly” (79-80). Consequently, monologic and dialogic are two different and even contradictorily opposed discourses. In this light, the present research specifically aims to claim that these contrary qualities are at the same time present in the chosen texts.

Thoreau at times writes from political and argumentative intentions and specifically chooses prose narrative non-fiction rather than the novel or romance. He is aware of his wide readership and their need of both aesthetic and ideological perspectives, so intentionally aims to present a variety of discourses in his voice and diction that could be in this sense, the main clue to the existence of the polyphonic qualities inherent in the texts. Thoreau’s voice in his works is highly politicized and in many instances shows the necessity of existence of an authorial voice. This is evident when his tone and style seem to bear the monological qualities of discourse. At the same time, he tries to demonstrate that his voice is not that of a totalitarian discourse, therefore, implicitly attempts to create different democratic rhetorical situations to show that his voice is alongside the other voices existing in society and

that diverse ideologies are free to announce their own opinions. Thus, with this intention, he moves toward dialogical qualities and the presentation of multiple voices and ideologies. There is no privilege of one voice over another. These contradictory features in intent and language of Thoreau make his discourse a Mono-Dialogic narrative that beholds in itself both characteristics of monological and dialogical voice.

As Bakhtin's theories mainly stress discourse as a "social phenomenon" and at the same time in many ways question the generic hegemony, it would be a particularly feasible approach in dealing with both aspects of Thoreau's Mono-Dialogic narrative, artistic world and critical/political dimension of his discourse. Thoreau, in his Mono-Dialogic narratives, moves and emphatically stresses the social significance of language so the style, tone and the intentions of his narrative voice need to be analyzed from the ideological point of view.

This thesis proposes that since according to the theory of "Dialogical Self" there are different sub-personalities of Thoreau, namely Social Critic and Poet Artist, that at times come to put forward their own voice and ideology, the hybridity of voices in agreement and disagreement with each other is heard within the figure of the author himself. So at another level, polyphonic intentions of Thoreau can be traced within the diverse voices that the narrator's persona adopts. Thoreau in his narratives generally emphasizes the difference in socially-constructed ideology and encourages every reader to find her/his own unique voice. He constantly parodies the language and hierarchical structure of the ideology of the society of his time. In his artistic experiences he transcends the language and after acknowledging verbal-