2002 Third Place Critical Analysis

Metaphors with Water and Nature

In Norman Maclean's A River Runs Through It, the author recounts the story of his early life growing up in Montana. The narrative revolves around his family and the art of fly fishing. Through the novel, Maclean begins to understand the wisdom of his father, the fierce independence and downfall of his brother, and the divinity and beauty of nature. A similar theme regarding divinity in nature is found in Henry David Thoreau's Walden. Building his own cabin and supplying his own food, Thoreau spends two years living alone beside Walden Pond. Thoreau recognizes nature as the "highest reality" (265) and the intrinsic work of "the Builder of the universe" (348). Thoreau also provides insights into human life and expresses these in indirect metaphors with his natural surroundings. The narratives differ most in their changes in mood and plot progression. In Walden, Thoreau displays a change from beginning to end, expressing pessimism and depression at first and then happiness and fulfillment in the end. A River Runs Through It is largely opposite of this change. Thus, both authors relate similar themes and experiences while significant differences exist in the mood and progression.

One theme common to both narratives relates to how people are similar to bodies of water. Maclean illustrates this as he describes his brother Paul as being "tough" (8) and "very angry" (7) from his youth. Consequently, Paul's favorite river is the Big Blackfoot, which "is the most powerful and . . . runs straight and hard" (13). Maclean describes the river's "glacial origins" (14) and how it was formed overnight in "the biggest flood in the world" (14). Paul's personality is indeed similar to this roaring, canyon river, "a tough place for a trout to live" (14).

Thoreau reflects similar ideas in his description of Walden Pond, which serves as a kind of mirror for Thoreau's life. He determines the depth of Walden in several places and relates this to a man's character. He proposes that one could "draw lines through the aggregate of a man's particular daily behaviors and waves of life into his coves and inlets, and where they intersect will be the height or depth of his character" (319). Thoreau goes as far to say that one can approximate a person's depth of character by simply examining his surroundings. He states that a man with "mountainous circumstances . . . suggests a corresponding depth in him" (320) while "a low and smooth shore proves him shallow" (320). In addition, Thoreau describes "the life in us like the water in the river" (350). He expounds on this idea of water flowing down a river just as men's lives progress and flow. When the water runs its course and life comes to an end, Thoreau implies that a mark and memory remain as "far the inland bank which the stream anciently washed" (350). Maclean's concluding remarks are strikingly similar and exemplify Thoreau's belief. In the end, Maclean has outlived his family and friends but believes he can still hear their voices through the river. He writes, "Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's greatest flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time . . . Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs" (113). As Maclean states, "stories of life are often more like rivers than books" (69). Thus, both Maclean and Thoreau deal with water as a great metaphor for life.

A second theme in both works involves the presence of God in nature. Maclean's father is a Presbyterian minister who instructs his sons in religion but also in fly fishing. Maclean remarks, "In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing" (1). Maclean's father teaches his sons that underneath the river and the rocks is "the Word" (104). Similarly, Thoreau examines the bank of a river and feels as though he "stood in
the laboratory of the Artist who made the world and me"(330). He states that, "Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads"(314), and Maclean adds, "the canyon was glorified by rhythms and colors"(24). Thoreau makes frequent biblical and religious references. He states, "Every man is a builder of a temple, called his body, to the god he worships, after a style purely his own . . . We are all sculptors . . . and our material is our own flesh and blood and bones"(269). An example of this exists in A River Runs Through It. Maclean has a tremendous respect for Paul who has sculpted himself into an incredible fisherman. Maclean writes that, "My brother was only five feet ten, but he had fished so many years his body had become partly shaped by his casting . . . he could put all his body and soul into a four-and-a-half-ounce magic totem pole"(23). Thus, both Thoreau and Maclean convey similar themes about divinity's connection to man and nature.

Although comparable in theme, principal differences exist in the plot line and mood of the two narratives. A River Runs Through It is a story essentially about Maclean's family, especially his brother. Maclean centers on how Paul is a great fisherman and brother but is too quarrelsome and stubborn to ever establish a normal life. Paul's troubles in gambling and alcohol eventually cause his death. Walden, in contrast, is a narrative entirely about Thoreau. Maclean is never alone or completely on his own like Thoreau is. Living in solitude, Thoreau does not mention any family or relationships even though he also had a close brother who died. Another difference is in the time scale of the works. Walden represents two years of living in the woods while Maclean includes experiences from when he is a boy to when he is an old man and widower.

Finally, the two works differ in their changes in mood. Walden begins larger pessimistic and unenthusiastic. Thoreau is concerned with saving money, building his cabin as inexpensively as possible, and identifying the fallacies in society. In the beginning, Thoreau writes, "Most men . . . through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them"(109). This is in stark contrast with the end of his narrative when his views of life are not harsh but rather encouraging and hopeful. Thoreau speaks of an insect that lay dormant as an egg for sixty-years deep in the wood of a table. It then burrowed out "to enjoy its summer life at last"(350). Thoreau asks, "Who does not feel his faith in a resurrection and immortality strengthened by the hearing of this?"(350). Undoubtedly, Thoreau's mood through Walden transforms immensely.

In contrast, Maclean's mood changes from one of youthful happiness and romantic love to sadness in the end. As an adult, Maclean is troubled by his brother's problems yet remains hopeful and enjoys their time fishing together. He clearly admires and loves his brother more than any another. In his boyhood, Maclean believes the words "God Is Love" painted in his father's chapel "were spoken directly to the four of us in our family and had no reference to the world outside"(7). However, in the end, Paul is beat to death and his body is found in a dumpster. This of course devastates Maclean, and he finds that his parents are never quite the same afterwards. Maclean continues with a sorrowful mood as he describes himself as old and alone as he fishes. He closes by saying, "I am haunted by waters"(111). Clearly, differences in tone exist between the two works.

In conclusion, both Maclean and Thoreau create powerful, insightful narratives. Both deal with waters and nature as metaphors for life. The authors also have similar views about God's presence in nature and His impact on human life. Walden begins with a critical view of society and its faults. However, as it progresses, Thoreau's tone changes. Thoreau glories in the beauty of nature and expressed how infinite man's possibilities are. In contrast, Maclean provides a valuable and realistic lesson, as his brother's premature death and his family's sorrow are the final details of his story. Despite, the depressing ending, Maclean expresses his belief in the permanence of one's legacy as he hears the words of his family echoed in the river. Thoreau states, "Yes, we have done great deeds, and song divine songs, which shall never die"(349). Thus, both works display compelling themes of nature and men's lives while differing substantially in their plot progression and mood.