Mary Spindler

English 4996

Professor Cohen

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American Opposition Between the City and the Country: How it Transformed the American Dream

It's a tale as old as time. Country-dweller grows up and moves away to the big city in search of the life they never had; City-dweller grows up and escapes to the fresh and open air of the country, looking for the peace they failed to find in the city. Opposition between the city and the country in American culture is historical and complex; one seems to offer something that the other can't. In this paper, I would like to dig deeper into the American opposition between the city and the country. Literature, poetry, political, and philosophical movements all reveal this historic tension between urbanism and ruralism. From Thomas Jefferson to Carl Sandburg, Americans have reflected on this opposition through writing. As America was, and still is, a relatively young country, I believe this debate in favor and against the city and the country is encouraged by a desire to create a unique national identity.

Before the emergence of the big cities in America, Thomas Jefferson, prophetically wrote about the disadvantages of choosing an urban lifestyle over a rural one. In his essay "Notes on the State of Virginia" Jefferson argues that the U.S. should leave the industrialized city life to Europe. He notes that America was built on ideals that diverged from those of Europe, so our population should not absorb itself into mass overproduction and gluttony like theirs did. Jefferson warned of the sacrifices one makes when they do not live within nature. In fact, he states:

> The loss by the transportation of commodities across the Atlantic will be made up in happiness and permanence of government. The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body. It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigour. A degeneracy in these is a canker which soon eats to the heart of its laws and constitution. (175)

This is no feeble opinion. Jefferson compares the "mobs of great cities" to "sores" and notes that the "degeneracy" of the cities is a "canker" which will eat the "heart of its laws and constitution." Jefferson presents the city as a cancer, a sickness, and a beast. He fears its impact and its repercussions on the state of America.

He doesn't only condemn the city, but also offers the antidote to its evil. Jefferson envisioned America to be an agrarian country, one that upheld the highest virtues of man, nature, and government. He states:

> Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth. (175)

His opinions of choosing a rural life are as strong as his opinions against an urban one. Jefferson actually calls farmers the "chosen people of God" placing them on an almost divine level in comparison to the city dweller. He also touches on a point that transcendentalist authors would profess nearly a century later. Jefferson calls the focus on a rural life that which "keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth." He implies that within man is a burning, or 'sacred fire' which is kept alive through man's interaction with nature. Simultaneously, he alludes that this fire within man can diminish if it is not kept alive by nature.

Meaning the cities - where nature lacks, and consumption prevails - annihilates the inner nature of man.

Jefferson was one of the first Americans to bring a powerful voice to the question of the morality of the city and industrialization. Was he inspired to condemn the city in reaction to his want for an agrarian culture? Or did he view nature as a solution because it is the opposite of the destructive city? It's hard to say which is in reaction to which, but either way Jefferson felt strongly about resisting the temptation to live an urban life. The country, in his view, gave humans something that the city never could. Considering the historical context of the time, Jefferson's version of the American dream was on par with most of his colonial contemporaries. The people of his time were escaping to America from Europe in search of freedom from a suppressive tyrant; freedom to practice religion, own land, and pursue happiness. The country offered space and freedom, the city offered more suppression.

However, despite Jefferson's warning the cities in America continued to prosper and grow due to powerful economic, cultural, and historical factors. An article by KhanAcademy called "America Moves to the City" states that as technology advanced, America saw its first growth of cities in the late 1700's. Technology like, "steam-powered spinning and weaving machines, the cotton gin, steamboats, locomotives, and the telegraph" allowed for faster production and transportation of goods and services. The second growth of the cities came after the civil war, during the second industrial revolution with "the introduction of interchangeable parts, assembly-line production, and new technologies, including the telephone, automobile, electrification of homes and businesses, and more." Businesses and factories, looking to capitalize on human labor and newfound technology began building in cities, turning them into access centers for goods and jobs. As the end of the civil war also meant freedom for slaves, the

cities in the North became an escape and safe haven for the newly-freed black southerners. In fact, “Eleven million Americans migrated from the countryside to cities in the fifty years between 1870 and 1920. During these same years an additional 25 million immigrants, most from Europe, moved to the United States—one of the largest mass migrations in human history—and while some settled on farms, most moved into the nation’s growing towns and cities.” Unlike the country, the city now held readily available resources and so they became an access point for opportunity. Especially for incoming immigrants with nothing more than a need for a new life and determination to work hard to get it. Economics favored the production the city yielded, so businesses settled there. Immigration and migration brought in millions of workers for those businesses. And as the city grew with inhabitants from different backgrounds from around the world, it became a diverse hub that cultivated cultural growth and change. All three factors in combination with one another led to the growth of the city and its alluring reputation. Where the country was previously an escape, the American city suddenly became the center of the American dream and the escape from its antithesis.

In the aftermath of the emergence of industrialization, immigration and therefore the mega-city (places like New York City, Chicago, and St. Louis) followed a cultural push towards anti-urbanism/pro-country lifestyles. The 19th century welcomed in movements and literature, like transcendentalism, that encouraged the individual to find their subjective intuition through a closer relationship with nature. Transcendentalism was a literary, political, and philosophical movement inspired by romanticism and formed in rejection of the Calvinist predestination mindset. The forerunners of this movements were Ralph Waldo Emerson, a Unitarian minister and famous writer, and authors Margaret Fuller and Henry David Thoreau. Emerson wrote numerous essays on the philosophy of transcendentalism. His essays “Self-Reliance” and

"Nature" are famous for their points on the ideology and its promotion of what we know as the 'American Dream' today. Emerson encouraged Americans to find within themselves the originality that existed and leave behind the imitations of our European ancestors. He pushes the idea that society and conformity is a poison to man's true, inner self and in order to center one's soul in the universe they must understand that nature is the antidote. His American dream, much like Jefferson's, was one of self-sufficiency, independence, and meritocracy. He states in "Self-Reliance":

> The civilized man has built a coach, but has lost the use of his feet. He is supported on crutches, but lacks so much support of muscle. He has a fine Geneva watch, but he fails of the skill to tell the hour by the sun. A Greenwich nautical almanac he has, and so being sure of the information when he wants it, the man in the street does not know a star in the sky. The solstice he does not observe; the equinox he knows as little; and the whole bright calendar of the year is without a dial in his mind. His note-books impair his memory; his libraries overload his wit; the insurance-office increases the number of accidents; and it may be a question whether machinery does not encumber; whether we have not lost by refinement some energy, by a Christianity entrenched in establishments and forms, some vigor of wild virtue. (36)

Here, Emerson ruminates on what has been lost because of civilization. He critiques the civilized man and notes that though he has all these gadgets and technology, he has no basis in understanding the natural roots from which both he and this technologically advanced culture have stemmed from. He connotes that we lose "some energy" and "some vigor of wild virtue" when we are absorbed into the institutions of society. To consider a 21st century parallel, it's the

same critique that follows GPS on the smartphone. Those of us who grew up with it can use the GPS technology easily, but if we were to only have a physical map, which the idea of GPS originally stemmed from, we would most likely become lost.

Emerson had a desire for Americans to shed the skin of European forefathers and establish a unique national identity based of off self-reliance. He believed within all of us it existed there already, one must simply use nature to access it. This is an example of the American opposition between the city and the country being encouraged by the American dream. The institutions of society enable self-reliance, and society to Emerson is:

> In conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs. (21)

He both critiques society, stating that it annihilates the ability to stay true to our inner-selves, and promotes self-reliance by presenting it as the solvent to absorption into societal thought and conformity. The Library of Congress states on their website, that "U.S. cities grew by about 15 million people in the two decades before 1900" ("City Life in the Late 19th Century", LOC). Therefore, since most of civilization and society were living in American cities at the time, this can also be seen as a critique of the city - the location least in touch with ruralism and nature. However, Emerson himself lived in big cities like Boston, and smaller ones like Concord. If he preaches promotion of nature and opposition of the city, why would he continue to live in them and contribute his work against them to their literary history? Does the city give something that

the country cannot? These questions are worth considering when the preacher does not practice what he preaches.

Henry David Thoreau is most famous for his work on *Walden,* in which he puts into practice the philosophy that Emerson has continuously preached. Thoreau heads out to the Walden woods in Concord, Massachusetts - away from all society and neighbors. He builds a small, janky hut and proceeds to live in it and off the land around him for two years. His reasoning for going is as follows:

> I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.

I think that Thoreau accurately sums up the philosophical brickwork that outlines transcendentalism here. Both his commentary in *Walden* about conformity and civilization and the physical act of going to live in Walden for two years, excretes anti-urbanism and promotes living, instead, in nature. His statement specifically, “I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life,” shows this. He alludes back to the “Spartan-like” existence, a time when society was far less civilized than it was in the 19th century. The Spartans lived a brute existence, running around without

clothes in order to toughen their bodies and surviving off the tough Greek landscape. Thoreau wants to "suck the marrow of life" and hopes to accomplish this by living alone in Walden, implying that the marrow of life resides directly in the combination of solitude and self-reliance within nature.

In this first excerpt his transcendental philosophy is heavily pro-country and pro-nature. He provides another statement in *Walden* that is far more focused on anti-urbanism than pro-country, however. He states about the cities, "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats" (Walden, 329). What I love most from this excerpt is the phrase "console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats." This is when Thoreau gives readers a concrete example of how nature heals us. He implies that one who takes the time to notice the minks and the muskrats in nature can't fail to see their bravery. Though that bravery may seem small scale to us, it is a refreshing step back from our own plaguing anxieties and is only accessible to the quiet observer. The mink and the muskrat are a reminder of the bravery that all of God's creatures must face, and in the "desperate" city you can't come across that kind of knowledge about life.

Transcendentalism was a large movement, and its influence is prevalent in literary works of the 19th and 20th century. John Williams' novel *Butcher's Crossing,* written in 1960 about the 19th century, heavily pulls in and engages with the philosophy of transcendentalism. A surface read of this novel may lead one to believe that it is a text in support of transcendentalist ideology. The main character, William Andrews, a Harvard college student, departs from the bustling city of Boston, Massachusetts and heads west towards a miniscule town in Kansas named Butcher's Crossing. Inspired by lectures from Ralph Waldo Emerson himself and his own positive

experience of escaping to nature in Boston, Andrew's journeys west in search of his true-inner self. He believes that in the untamed wild nature of the west he will find what is missing within himself. Andrew's gets in contact with three men that reside in Butcher's Crossing as buffalo hunters that are willing to head out on an excursion west. Miller, the man who claims he knows where a large pack of Buffalo resides, has been waiting for funding and Andrew's, who just inherited a lump sum from a dead ancestor, is looking for adventure. The two come to an agreement and Andrews fronts the money while Miller prepares the excursion along with his other two colleagues, Charley Hogue and Schneider. The months that Andrew's spends roughing it along the western plains with only a few oxen, food, little water, and the company of three men in search of buffalo, does not provide him with the transcendence of self that he expects it to - the one Mr. Emerson said it would. Instead, Andrews finds himself returning to civilization as an emptier version of his old self.

This story revolves around a man escaping to nature in order to find himself, which aligns with transcendentalism in theory. Though, what nature ends up doing to Andrew's shows the relationship this novel has with transcendental ideology is complex and not necessarily in agreeance. For reference, at the beginning of the novel:

> He believed - and had believed for a long time - that there was a subtle magnetism in nature, which, if he unconsciously yielded to it, would direct him aright, not indifferent to the way he walked. But he felt that only during the few days that he had been in Butcher's Crossing had nature been so purely presented to him that its power of compulsion was sufficiently strong to strike through his will, his habit, and his idea. (48)

As Andrews arrives in Butcher's Crossing he begins to feel shards of this renewal that transcendentalism promises. The further he creeps away from bustling civilization, the better he

feels. Butcher's Crossing is a place of transition in the novel, as it is between where Andrews left (Boston) and where he is to go (west). In it, he is not quite who he was in Boston (his 'habit' has been 'strike[d]' by nature), but not yet who he will apparently be once he discovers the west. So, if Butcher's Crossing acts as a middle ground between the bustling city and the wild west, it can be seen as a 'civilized nature.' The civilized nature is outside of the city but not entirely remote from civilization and is the kind of nature that Emerson and Thoreau find promise in. Once he leaves the comfort of it for an uncivilized nature, his commentary reveals his descent into emptiness. Shortly after they head out west, he felt that:

> Day by day the numbness crept upon him until at last the numbness seemed to be himself. He felt himself to be like the land, without identity or shape; sometimes one of the men would look at him, look through him, as if he did not exist; and he had to shake his head sharply and move and arm or a leg and glance at it to assure himself that he was visible (78).

This is where author John Williams instigates a more complex relationship with the idea of transcendentalism. If this novel was to promote the country, nature, and transcendentalism, Andrews would have felt even more refreshed and invigorated than he felt in Butcher's Crossing. He would have become more in touch with his true inner self, instead of reporting that he no longer felt like he even had a self. John Williams challenges Emerson and Thoreau's ideology, and brings to light that the healing 'nature' they speak of is a civilized one used to briefly escape the chaos of the city, not the uncivilized one which welcomes a far more demising escape.

Jack Brenner provides an insightful analysis of John William's novel via a transcendental lens. In his journal article "Butcher's Crossing: The Husks and Shells of Exploitation" Brenner reveals the ways in which *Butcher's Crossing* weaves in transcendental commentary. He claims

that his critique is not to say that the novel is anti-transcendentalist but is filled with motifs that suggest that the philosophy behind this movement may not be as promising as it appears and there is more to consider about the terrifying awe of solitude in nature versus the sublime one. Brenner says, "Andrews' experience of emptiness puts a silent question to the Transcendental reliance on awe" and that perhaps Emerson and Thoreau failed "to consider the ways in which awe can shade into terror" (87). Andrews' awe shaded into terror because he "begins to experience a more extravagant freedom than Thoreau ever imagined, the freedom of the void" (88). By creating this void in Andrews in response to space, Brenner brilliantly notes, John Williams "does ask his reader to consider why Space has so easily been renamed Goodness and Freedom" (88). Brenner presents a very interesting argument here about why Andrews fails to experience the transcendence of self that he expects. Williams questions the transcendentalist definition of nature and presents a darker side of it. Brenner brings to light that, in this novel, John Williams asks the question which has failed to surface in the movement of transcendentalism and anti-urbanism. The novel may not be pro-urbanism, but it certainly critiques the idea of anti-urbanism.

During the 19th century, while some authors considered the impact of the environment on people outside of the city, others, like Stephen Crane, wrote about the impact of the environment on people within the city. Stephen Crane wrote *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, a little under a century before John Williams published his novel, *Butcher's Crossing.* Crane addressed the living conditions of the tenements in New York City during the height of industrialization and immigration at the end of the 19th century. He writes an intriguing story about a lower-class immigrant family, and specifically, about the young daughter's descent into prostitution and eventual death. Maggie, the girl in the novel, falls in love with one of her brothers' witty friends.

Or rather, as Crane presents it, she falls in love with the idea of love and a hero that will save her from the slums of the city and place her into high society. The dream dies and shrivels up as Maggie is used by the boy she loves and forced to descend into prostitution as a means of survival; a nod to the constant death of the ever-promising American dream.

Writing through the lens of realism/naturalism, Crane presents strong imagery surrounding the environment with which these characters live. The tenements are described as a "dark region" where "a dozen gruesome doorways gave up loads of babies to the street and the gutter" (Crane 39). Using these specific adjectives forces the reader to picture a dirty and unlivable condition. Crane does this purposely in order to instill the very real image of what tenement living is really like for those who could not see it. His novella is sprinkled with gruesome and specific details of the environment in which Maggie lives, the experiences that led her to falsely hope for a better life, and the ways in which those two things led to her death. Through naturalist/impressionism, Crane critiques the American dream and gives readers the aesthetic details and imagery which they can then use them to come to their own conclusions, heightening the ownership of empathy that is felt and ultimately resulting in a more solid impact on the reader.

Crane witnessed these issues of poverty and environment growing up and was "significantly influenced" by the work of activist and journalist Jacob Riis, who was the first to use flash photography to capture the condition of the slums (8). Showing the upper class in pictures what they could not see in person completely changed the game. In fact, "Crane recognized that a good writer could do in prose what Riis had done in visual images," (8). Riis actively fought for New York City's poor by trying to expose to the upper-classes how awful life was for the lower class and how little opportunity presented itself for them to better their lives.

He fought hard against the false meritocracy of the American dream, which convinced those with privilege that the poor were just lazy drunks not willing to work hard to create the life they want. He exposed the long work hours, little pay, and crowded home life that hindered their ability to rise up against poverty.

Because of work from activists like Riis and authors like Crane, Americans were forced to reconsider the American dream and the impact of the crowded city environment. It was evident, the city left on its own would be the cancer it has been claimed to be. This led to more governmental policies on assisting those in need and eventually reform within the cities. New Urbanism, a more recent movement, has emerged due to this need. The movement has an official website and congress dedicated to it. On the website they state:

> is the most important planning movement this century, and is about creating a better future for us all. It is an international movement to reform the design of the built environment, and is about raising our quality of life and standard of living by creating better places to live. New Urbanism is the revival of our lost art of place-making, and is essentially a re-ordering of the built environment into the form of complete cities, towns, villages, and neighborhoods - the way communities have been built for centuries around the world.

This movement is setting out to recreate the idea of the city. It emerged in 1993, as a result of righteous frustration from city-planners and architects who were watching the decline of the city and destruction of our cultural historical roots. They want to *save* the city from itself and preserve its cultural touchstones. There has been a "disinvestment in central cities, the spread of placeless sprawl, increasing separation by race and income, environmental deterioration, loss of agricultural lands and wilderness, and the erosion of society's built heritage" within the cities.

The idea behind this movement, essentially, is to recreate the city so that it can maintain its status as a cultural and historical center yet hold a similar quality of life to the rural/suburban. It's bringing nature *into* the city.

The Charter for New Urbanism acknowledge both the importance and the disadvantage of the city. They recognized that in its current state, the city is diving classes even further and destroying the environment. The city holds the capability to bring down its people and the nature surrounding it. However, they also recognize that it holds "society's built heritage" within it. The existence of this movement alone enforces the idea that the city seems to hold something the country cannot. It cultivates art, culture, fashion, creation, and opportunity. It is a concrete jungle, an industrialized version of a forest. The buildings are the trees and urban society its inhabitants.

Pro-Urbanism finds support in literature and poetry, too. In 1914, Carl Sandburg published the poem "Chicago" in which he speaks to the big city itself. He confronts the bad of the city in the first three stanzas. Sandburg states that he has been told that the city is "wicked," "crooked," and "brutal" and that he agrees it is all of those things. The city is full of violence and hunger and seduction. But, he goes on to argue in favor of the city anyways. He states, "Come and show me another city with lifted head singing/so proud to be alive and coarse and strong and cunning" (lines 19-20). Sandburg describes the cities in positive adjectives that juxtapose the negative one's stated earlier. He even goes on to call the city "the heart of the people" (line 38). In this poem he uses a 'despite' tactic to portray why the city is so wonderful. He first notes all of the bad and agrees with it. But, proves that even *despite* the bad, the city is still awe-inspiring.

In fact, Sandburg may be on to a larger idea here in consideration of the American opposition between the city and the country. The country and nature, as shown through the

writings of founding father, Thomas Jefferson, and the literary, political, and philosophical movement transcendentalism, is healing. It is a gift, given to mankind and deserving of respect. But, as John Williams shows in *Butcher's Crossing*, questions of what that kind of space and solitude can result in are important to consider. The countryside can heal, solitude can heal, but it can also destroy. Humans are social creatures and need to connect, create, and progress and cities offer this opportunity. The environment of the city can be just as detrimental as the country. Stephen Crane shows the destruction of morality and of life, in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets.* However, movements like New Urbanism and poetry like Carl Sandburg's "Chicago" act as a reminder that the city is the heart of cultural heritage. The country heals us *despite* its threat of wildness. The city cultivates and progresses us *despite* its destructiveness. Americans both favor the city in spite of the country and favor the country in spite of the city. The opposition of the city and the country has been used as a tool in the creation of an American dream. For Jefferson and revolution-era Americans, the country was an escape from the grips of tyranny. For immigrants and African American's, the city was a hub of opportunity and escape from the idleness of the country. The relationship between country and city in America will forever remain in the cycle of opposition because of what one can offer when the other can't. The feedback loop is invigorated by a great 'despite.'

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