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Undergraduate

# An Unexpected Experience Gained From an Excursion Exploring the West

By Alexandria Curtis

Emily Dickinson so precisely described how the natural world has an uncanny way of connecting to the human mind and spirit by writing, “Nature is what we know--/Yet have no art to say--/So impotent Our Wisdom is/To her Simplicity.” This notion is one that many others have felt themselves and one that has also influenced others to convey their own experiences through written expression. Mark Twain, noted as the father of American literature, wrote the book *Roughing It*, a semi-autobiographical work that tells of his experiences in the western part of the United States, from the Nevada to California territories, during the years 1861 to 1867. John Muir, an advocate for wilderness preservation and founder of the Sierra Club, published his own diary entries in the book, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, recounting the sensations nature brought to him and the specific findings he discovered as a naturalist during 1869. Each of these renowned pieces of literature not only gives a description of the landscape and the authors’ time living in it, but also a reflection on the discoveries and emotions that accompany it. Through the works of Twain and Muir that describe their adventures pioneering the Sierra Nevada mountain range during the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, the compelling descriptions toward an unfamiliar place promoted the concepts of the adventurous spirit of pioneering, the development of a relationship

with nature, and the American character. The power of nature emerged from the narration of these two authors and convinced readers to venture to the lands of California themselves.

The lands of California were curiously intriguing during the second half of the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century because of the gold recently found in nature, which led to a large migration of people to the west in search of instantaneous wealth. It soon became a free state, in 1950, and developed an image as a marvelous place to start a new life, with hopes of having more opportunity for success. Whatever the reason, to have the courage to journey to a foreign land described in an unreal way that brings about uncertainty is the epitome of the adventurous spirit and pioneer.

Muir's daring personality revealed itself in his book, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, when he described his thought process in deciding whether to come to California. His thinking was a representation of both the hesitancy and indescribable urge people had towards this area of the country. Having debated on the offer to explore the Yosemite region that a sheep owner proposed to him, Muir thinks to himself, "I was in no way the right man for the place...unacquainted with the topography...feared that half or more of [the] flock would be lost" (Muir). He immediately reevaluates by reasoning, "I could study plants and rocks and scenery as much as I liked...[knowing that] under its spell one's body seems to go where it likes with a will over which we seem to have scarce any control." Muir was uncertain that his participation in the trip would be beneficial and put forward excuses as to why he was unfit for the job. After some encouragement from the sheep owner, however, Muir consciously succumbed to his desires to research this foreign land because he knew that the power of nature would overtake him in a positive way. It would allow him to experience a connection to the world around him. He found that his, "sense of self as a mountaineer is present" (Gifford 105) and that he had to surrender to his desires. Muir's dispute and resolution with himself truly expressed the adventurous spirit because rather than having listened to his personal justification for omittance, he decided to take

advantage of an opportunity offered to travel and study the Yosemite region like the naturalist he was.

The adventurous spirit was also evident in Twain's, *Roughing It*, when he decided that the continuous talk about the beauty of Lake Tahoe and his unsettled desire to see it finally urged him to set out toward the Sierras. Once he arrived, he found the land to be breathtakingly beautiful and filled with delight. It was something he read and heard about, but was unsure of its reality. After having settled in a camp on the lakeside, Twain ponders to himself, "If there is any life that is happier than the life we led on our timber ranch for the next two or three weeks, it must be a sort of life which I have not read of in books or experienced in person." Without spontaneously setting out for the land, Twain would have never encountered the appeal and pleasure that came with living off the land in the Tahoe region. He pioneered this unsettled land and discovered the truths that could never be expressed in written text about the serenity in nature and the confidence one gains from discovering a place entirely new. He exemplified the idea that, "going westward in the right psychological trim means being ready for anything" (Michelson 46). Twain ultimately expressed the adventurous spirit because of his willingness to impulsively travel to a place that he had only heard of and from the fact that he gained so much more from the experience than he ever intended. He revealed to his readers the appealing part of adventure and how new experiences could enlighten and thrill a person's soul. Although being in the wilderness could be thrilling, there is also a peaceful, calming sensation when residing in the outdoors. To be in solitude in nature would surely bring about a developed relationship with the outside world because of the things one discovers personally through silence and looking at greenery. Muir not only gave an accurate description of the land surrounding him, including the trees, plants, and animals, but also gave an insight into the self-reflection of what he saw and how it affected him. The Yosemite wilderness enabled Muir to become acquainted with his

surroundings through the personification of the things he surveyed and the spiritual connection with them (Miller and Morrison 107). With South Dome in the distance, Muir reflects to himself that it was, “a most noble rock...full of thought, clothed with living light, no sense of dead stone about it, all spiritualized, neither heavy looking nor light, steadfast in serene strength like a God” (Muir). Muir was alone when he made these self-reflections on the rock, and found that it had much more than just a granite surface; for him to look at a giant rock and declare that it looked alive with thought, clothed, and powerful, clearly demonstrated how he developed a relationship with nature. He also saw the rock as being spiritual and god-like, and recognized the fact that the rock possessed some sort of supernatural force, which made it divine and moved him to feel in awe of what stood before him. Through silence, nature became connected to Muir and his soul and taught him that there are more senses involved in his relationship than just the act of seeing. This outlook on the outdoors appealed to readers because it drew them more toward California and the laidback lifestyle it presented.

Twain’s adventure was just as enlightening, for he also developed an understanding of the world around him through self-reflection, accompanied by silence in nature. As he eased himself into the life outdoors, he grew into a habit of sitting and observing what took place in front of him and descriptively illustrated it through writing. He reports what he and his fellow pioneers watched one morning after breakfast and comments,

“we watched the sentinel peaks put on the glory of the sun, and followed the conquering light as it swept down among the shadows, and set the captive crags and forests free. We watched the tinted pictures grow and brighten upon the water till every little detail of forest, precipice and pinnacle was wrought in and finished, and the miracle of the enchanter complete” (Twain).

It was clear that he did not care to do anything else but enjoy what stimulates his eyes as it seizes his soul for a moment in time. Nature called Twain to her attention and captivated every part of his body to watch the sun rise above the mountain tops and reflect images on the lake. A sense of carelessness and peace came with enjoying the beauty of the wilderness, which Twain clearly reflected because he chose to sit and observe, rather than work or be productive. “By embracing nature and its liberating ethics,” (Coulumbe 113), he developed a relationship with the wilderness through his preference to watch the sun’s rays, the mountains peaks and the water instead of talking to the people around him. He showed readers that there was nothing better than taking a whole day to relax, gaze at the nature, and reflect on their life in the most tranquil place.

A frugal life would have certainly promoted a peaceful existence, but Twain and Muir’s showed readers that exploring California was patriotic and a delight. These two American writers deeply expressed feelings that came from pioneering the outdoors of the Sierra Nevada mountain range and ultimately demonstrated the American Dream through the prosperity they found on their adventures. Throughout Muir’s journal entries, it was clear that his reflections about nature and the wonderment that occurs while observing it began to grow into an understanding of a new wealth. In the presence of a small patch of flowers, he found it unbelievable that they were able to grow so high upon the mountaintop. After having seen this small marvel, Muir ponders to himself, “in our timid ignorance and unbelief...I drifted enchanted...on my knees...one’s body is all one tingling palate. Who wouldn’t be a mountaineer! Up here all the world’s prizes seem nothing.” Muir succumbed to nature’s beauty as the sight of the landscape took over his body and made him feel alive but stunned, breathless but full of emotion, and invigorated yet humbled. The terrain that he was admiring captivated him so much, he could not stand on his feet because of the overwhelming shocking sensation that the earth is full of far more riches than any material item. The exquisite scenery humbled Muir and brought him to the realization that he wanted

nothing more than to remain on his knees, reveling in the magnificence of a small patch of flowers. This was only a minute's example of Muir's "initial awakening to the power of a particular landscape" (Browne 22) that he seemed to feel with each step he took in the Sierra. Muir promoted the American Dream to others in his writing and revealed that there was wealth in finding a new sense of self through the landscape California offers, not just in the material gold recently discovered.

Twain promoted a similar idea of the American Dream and how people could rediscover themselves and their happiness. *Roughing It* also conveyed the idea of the American Dream, but in a different way because of Twain's different style of writing. The novel, being semi-autobiographical, flowed like a story, meaning that Twain wrote it in a way that would sell to the reader because of the emphasis on excitement, marvels, and ease in California. Twain expressed the idea that to start a life in the forest was effortless when he boldly states, "we were land owner now...on our own domain and enjoy[ing] that large sense of independence which only such an experience can bring." To have found a piece of land and made it one's own was as simple as walking to the spot and marking the boundary of the new property. Having found a home this way, Twain felt a sense of pride and accomplishment for he was able to make it to California, establish a place of residence, and enjoy the lifestyle he began to make for himself. The American Dream, in essence, was to be able to claim something as one's own and to take advantage of the opportunities for prosperity and success. Twain made the reader believe that if they only took the chance to adventure out into an unknown place, it was possible that they could also start a new life with hopes of complete happiness. His story appealed to readers, presenting to them the success and pleasure they were constantly searching for.

John Muir and Mark Twain were two extraordinary American writers who fascinated their readers with stories of excitement. Through their books *My First Summer in the Sierra* and

*Roughing It*, the authors eloquently described their excursions exploring the Sierra Nevada mountain range and the positive experiences gained from traveling to a place foreign to them. Each of the books clearly expressed the ideas and ambitions toward an unfamiliar place and promoted them to the reader; they advocated the concepts of the adventurous, pioneering spirit, the development of a relationship with nature, and the American Dream in their own distinctive ways. Muir and Twain's works were important to comprehend because they gave insight to what California was really like during the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century and the emotions that arose when seeing it for the first time. They revealed to readers the glory and happiness of starting a new life in California, the golden state.



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Alexandria Curtis is a senior English Major at the University of California, Merced. Her favorite types of literature are old British literature and African American literature. Her writing style shows influence from her favorite authors Paulo Coelho and Shakespeare. She conveys her ideas through poetic, yet simplistic portrayals that stimulate the reader's interest and imagination for the topic at hand. Other than focusing on her studies or working at the gym on campus, Alexandria enjoys playing on the collegiate volleyball team and running cross country for UC Merced, earning the Female Athlete of the Year Award in 2012. After receiving her Bachelor's Degree in 2014, she plans to attend graduate school to further her studies in English.