Sample #2, response to Thoreau’s *Walden*

When reading this excerpt from Thoreau’s Walden, one particular section caught my mind as being particularly confusing. After looking at it in a lot more detail I began to see it in a different light and how it connects to the larger whole. The section is on page twenty-one and goes like this,

“We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us. Did you ever think what those sleepers are that underlie the railroad? Each one is a man, an Irishman, or a Yankee man. The rails are laid on them. They are sound sleepers, I assure you. And every few years a new lot is laid down and run over; so that, if some have the pleasure or riding on a rail, others have the misfortune to be ridden upon. And when they run over a man that is walking in his sleep, a supernumerary sleeper in the wrong position, and wake him up, they suddenly stop the cars, and make a hue and cry about it, as if this were an exception. I am glad to know that it takes a gang of men for every five miles to keep the sleepers down and level in their beds as it is, for this is a sign that they may sometime get up again” (21).

        As I read this passage, I came to see this little section as an allegory of how Thoreau believed society functioned. The railroad is the dividing line between those who do the work and those who benefit from the work. The people who ride the railroad are the ones who benefit from work; they are the people at the top of society. The “sleepers” are the working class people. They are the ones who hold the fabric of society together, just like how the sleepers are holding the railroads together. Without these working class people, the people on top would not be able to “ride the railroads” as they currently do. This is why the “train riders” constantly ride the train, for if a “sleeper” out of place and wakes up, the train riders must stop and put him “back into place”. They work hard to keep the oppressed down so that they can continue riding on top of them. At the end of this section, Thoreau responds to this with some hope. Since it takes so much work to keep the sleepers or oppressed in their place, some day these people will rise up against it. This passage connects to the large whole of the passage in that many times people do this busy work without thinking. They have just conformed to the rest of what society has told him. Thoreau encourages us to “live deliberately” and not live our lives doing busy work under the guise that we are working for ourselves. We need to “wake up” and see how to live a life “deliberately as Nature” (24), and not stuck in the story like that of the Hindoo book that Thoreau talks about where we simply believe the misconception about ourselves. We need to be woken up, enlightened and released from “their daily life of routine and habit everywhere, which is still built on purely illusory foundations” (23). We need to break the illusion!

Sample #2, response to Elizabeth Kolbert’s book *Field Notes from a Catastrophe*

It is really interesting how much influence America has on the rest of the world. What really caught me was when Kolbert rebutted the argument of “What’s the point of going to a lot of trouble if, in the end, your efforts won’t make a difference” (181). I’ve seen this side of an argument many times before and even used it myself before. Before I read what she had to say, I didn’t really think that there was any way to rebut this claim. America is so influential. Many developing countries seem to look up to us as what they want to become. That is almost in essence the American Dream for countries, to do what America does so that they can become like them. This means that America needs to stand up and be a good example and not be a cry baby saying that it’s not fair that we have to do the hard work. America does have the resources to do it, and we need to start so that the world can follow. I think Kolbert also did a good job employing emotions in the last chapters. She made me feel that currently humans are lucky to have not destroyed the Earth earlier. She also made me feel that we need to act desperately now, or all were going to have left is a plea for luck. She also really makes us feel angry at Bush and Crichton for being seemly ignorant and stupid. Kolbert really uses a lot emotion in the end to help sway us to her side. It is a good way to end her book as it helps us really feel the argument as opposed to just hearing the facts. I just wasn’t too sure about how she ended the book. Leading up to the end, it seemed like she was pushing us on to take action and rebut the stupid politicians who were stopping the environmental movement, but the she ends with a quote that said, “Can any defense ultimately protect a city that is perpetually sinking?” (198). This quote felt like it was saying, we are doomed, there isn’t anything left that we can do but prolong the inevitable. That confused me a little bit.