



## Henry David Thoreau: *Walden*

(1854)

- [Richard Schneider \(Wartburg College, Iowa\)](#)

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On July 4, 1845, Henry David Thoreau moved into a cabin that he had built himself on land owned by Ralph Waldo Emerson at Walden Pond near the town of Concord, Massachusetts. His initial goal in moving to the cabin was to have privacy and time away from his father's pencil factory to write a book about a trip up the Concord and Merrimack rivers that he and his brother John had taken in 1839, three years before his brother's untimely death from lockjaw in 1842. He would spend a little over two years living at Walden Pond; during the first year he spent much of his time writing *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, which would be published in 1849.

The idea for his book *Walden* would come somewhat later during his stay at the pond because of the curiosity of his fellow townsmen: whenever he walked into town people would ask him why he was living out there, how he lived, and if he got lonely living by himself. Eventually he concluded that the best way to answer these questions was to write a lecture to give to the town in its Concord Lyceum lecture series. This lecture would grow into the first draft of the book *Walden* by the time he left the pond in August of 1847. When *A Week* proved to be both a financial and a popular failure, however, Thoreau was determined that *Walden* would reach a wider audience, so he expanded and revised it diligently for seven more years before it was finally published by Ticknor and Fields in 1854. Sales were modest but significantly better than those for *A Week*. In the first year 1744 copies out of a first printing of 2000 were sold, but it would take five more years to sell out the rest of the first printing.

Today *Walden* is one of the most well known and most often taught of American writings. It is a rich text which includes a variety of literary genres: autobiography, familiar essay, social satire, pastoral, nature calendar, and spiritual self-help book, to name but a few. Thoreau combines these diverse elements through several different structural devices.

One structure might best be described by a medical metaphor of diagnosis, prescribed cure, and prognosis. The first chapter, "Economy", offers a detailed diagnosis of a spiritual and social disease: materialism. The cure which Thoreau prescribes in the body of the book is a reassessing of priorities through a new spiritual self-awareness aided by re-connection to the natural world. The prognosis offered in the last chapter, "Conclusion", is an optimistic one which affirms that by preserving a true spiritual course unburdened by material economic distractions an individual can achieve a "success unexpected in common hours" (323).

The most obvious structure, however, is a chronological one following Thoreau's experiences through the four

seasons of the year. This structure is not strictly accurate, of course, because Thoreau squeezes the two years of his actual experience at the pond into a one-year narrative. However, the seasonal organization allows him to take advantage of the readily recognizable symbolic associations with the various seasons: summer for growth, autumn for maturity, winter for death and retreat, and spring for resurrection and renewal.

Within the seasonal structure is embedded a dialectic organization. "Economy" establishes the conflict between our material and our spiritual concerns, and the second chapter, "Where I Lived, and What I Live For", establishes both spiritually and geographically Thoreau's own personal position regarding this conflict. The body of the book then proceeds by pairs, alternating between chapters that emphasize the symbolic and the ideal and chapters that emphasize the facts of nature and the materialistic concerns of his townsmen. For instance, Thoreau's symbolic account of his agricultural experiment in "The Bean-Field" contrasts with his description of mundane town life in "The Village". His description of both physical and symbolic purity in nature in "The Ponds" is juxtaposed to his critique of the misguided priorities and dirty house of John Field's family in "Baker Farm". "Higher Laws" and "Brute Neighbors" also illustrate the conflict between our spiritual and our animal instincts. The final two chapters, "Spring" and "Conclusion", offer visions of redemption, first for Thoreau personally and then for humanity in general. The reader should notice, however, that Thoreau does not oversimplify these contrasts. They are not mutually exclusive, because predominantly symbolic chapters are based on natural facts, and even the most factual chapters contain hints of further levels of meaning.

This dialectical structure reflects the essential issue of *Walden*: the conflict between our physical and our spiritual needs. Thoreau's goal was to reduce the time devoted to physical concerns in order to devote more time to spiritual enlightenment. As a Transcendentalist, Thoreau, like Emerson, viewed the physical world as symbolic of a higher spiritual reality. However, Thoreau was more inclined than Emerson to see physical objects as having an essential reality in addition to their spiritual significance. In *Walden* he views nature as both physically and spiritually meaningful.

The essential question of his first chapter, "Economy", focuses on our physical needs: what are the absolute physical necessities of life? His answer is that there are very few necessities indeed. The problem is that most people are so sure that accumulating material possessions is the goal of a successful life that they fail to consider any other option. Thus "The greater part of what my neighbors call good", he says, "I believe in my soul to be bad, and if I repent of any thing, it is very likely to be my good behavior" (10). He then examines in detail what most people would consider necessities, starting with a list that includes four essentials: food, shelter, clothing, and fuel. He eventually reduces these four to only one: heat. Food gives us internal fuel that creates "animal heat" (13), and the other three provide external ways to maintain that heat.

Thoreau saw that most people would not settle for necessities but insisted on converting them into luxuries. The rich, he complains, use so much fuel that they "are not simply kept comfortably warm, but unnaturally hot" (14). Clothing becomes a fashion statement so that "there is greater anxiety, commonly, to have fashionable, or at least clean and unpatched clothes, than to have a sound conscience" (22). A serviceable house, he argues, could be made at little or no cost from a wooden box such as the shipping crates found by the railroad tracks. "Every man who was hard pushed", he says, "might get into such a one for a dollar, and, having bored a few auger holes in it, to admit the air at least, get into it when it rained and at night, and hook down the lid, and so have freedom in his love, and in his soul be free" (29). As for food, he says, "a man may use as simple a diet as the animals, and yet retain health and strength" (61). His own diet he describes as consisting mostly of "rye and Indian meal without yeast, potatoes, rice, a very little salt pork, molasses, and salt, and my drink water" (61). Although he generally preferred not to eat much meat, he was not a strict vegetarian. In short, all of our necessities could be achieved much more simply if we merely thought about the difference between what we want and what we truly need.

One of Thoreau's main goals was thus to achieve true simplicity, so that, as he suggested, a person might need

to work only one day a week and have the remaining six to pursue a higher goal, rather than the reverse. “Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!” he says, “let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand.” (91). True physical simplicity is, however, only a means to the even higher goal of spiritual enlightenment. In “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For” and “Sounds” he emphasizes the need to see both physical and spiritual reality. “Will you be a reader, a student merely”, he asks, “or a seer?” (111). The difficulty in taking a spiritual view of things is that “we inhabitants of New England live this mean life that we do because our vision does not penetrate the surface of things. We think that *is* which *appears* to be” (96).

The prerequisite to seeing truly is to be fully awake. In the second chapter, “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For”, Thoreau equates being “awake” to achieving full consciousness, a rare accomplishment: “The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred millions to a poetic or divine life. To be awake is to be alive” (90). To live such a wakeful life is, as he states in his famous credo in the same chapter, “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” (90).

Being a seer requires that our vision must be double, one that sees both the factual significance and the symbolic significance of our experience and is able to balance both dimensions of meaning. Thoreau's depiction of animals, for instance, alternates between explicitly symbolic descriptions and simply factual ones. The eyes of young partridges, for instance, suggest “the purity of infancy”, but they also express “a wisdom clarified by experience” (227). His famous set piece on the war between red and black ants contains accurate scientific observation but also social commentary on bravery and tragedy in human war.

The central symbolic fact of the book is, of course, Walden Pond itself. Thoreau associates the pond with the act of seeing by describing it as “earth's eye” (186) whose “crystalline purity” suggests the moral purity of nature against which we can measure our own moral (im)purity. He also describes it as a mirror which reflects the sky and thus “becomes a lower heaven itself”, both literally and figuratively bringing heaven down to earth. It is “a mirror which no stone can crack” and which “betrays the spirit that is in the air” (188). But it also reflects the surrounding shore, thus illustrating the physical connection between the sky (“heaven”) and earth. Thoreau's map of the depths of Walden Pond provides a visual element to the pond's symbolism. It demonstrates that the pond has “a remarkable depth for so small an area” (287). The pond, he says, must have been “made deep and pure for a symbol. While men believe in the infinite some ponds will be found to be bottomless” (287).

*Walden* must thus be read symbolically, but it must also be read with a tolerance for ambiguity. On the one hand, Thoreau is looking for answers and offers some to the reader. He is searching, he says, for “hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call *reality*, and say, This is, and no mistake” (98). Simplicity, attention to nature, spiritual introspection, are all parts of that reality. At times a particular natural phenomenon seems to offer him an answer, as when he sees the thawing sand on the hill along the railroad tracks at the Deep Cut. The thawing sand seems to follow the same pattern as the shape of a leaf or of the fingers on a human hand. “Thus it seemed”, he says, “that this one hillside illustrated the principle of all the operations of Nature” (308). It proves to him that “The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history . . . but living poetry like the leaves of a tree” (309).

On the other hand, the reader must resist the temptation to find absolutes in *Walden*. Thoreau himself warns us that “At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable” (317-18). Even if Thoreau can indeed find the depth of Walden Pond, he does not presume to think that such a truth is sufficient to explain the spiritual significance of the pond. We need factual and spiritual truth, but we also need the mystery that represents our potential for even deeper meaning. The loon

swimming on Walden Pond reminds Thoreau of our human limitations, of how much we have still to learn. He plays a game with the loon: each time the loon dives, Thoreau tries to guess and row swiftly to where he thinks the loon will resurface — “a pretty game, played on the smooth surface of the pond, a man against a loon” (235). The loon, of course, always outsmarts him, reminding Thoreau that the bird is easily able to visit an underwater reality that he himself is unlikely to ever see fully.

The chapter that perhaps best illustrates Thoreau's own ambivalence is the chapter on “Higher Laws”, where he declares that “I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both. I love the wild not less than the good” (210). In this chapter he admits his own attraction at times to such “primitive” activities as hunting, fishing, and eating animal flesh, while at the same time insisting that “Nature is hard to be overcome, but she must be overcome” (221). Although he comments in this chapter on ways to cope with the temptations of Nature, he never fully resolves the tension between the wild and the good.

The final chapter of *Walden* does, however, offer a kind of positive resolution to the tensions explored in the rest of the book. We must remember, he reminds us, that “The universe is wider than our views of it” (320). While we should indeed pay close attention to the world of Nature, the ultimate goal should be to “Explore thyself” (322), regardless of where that exploration leads one. It might not lead one to the same priorities as those of one's neighbors, but, as he famously puts it, “If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer” (326). There is finally, he concludes, “solid bottom everywhere” (330). As his parable of the traveler and the swamp illustrates, that bottom simply might not yet be available to us:

The traveller asked the boy if the swamp before before him had a hard bottom. The boy replied that it had. But presently the traveller's horse sank in up to the girths, and he observed to the boy, “I thought you said that this bog had a hard bottom.” “So it has,” answered the latter, “but you have not got half way to it yet.” (330)

Like Thoreau himself, then, we too have “several more lives to live” (323), ongoing opportunities to seek further for the truth. “The sun”, as he concludes, “is but a morning star” (333). Even if, like the traveler in the swamp, we might first have to die to get to it, the truth is still out there waiting for us.

It is precisely Thoreau's search for this essential individual truth that appeals most strongly to most readers. One must remember, however, that *Walden* is a multi-layered text. It is, indeed, about individual moral and spiritual development; it is also, however, an environmental statement about the importance of the human relation to nature: “Why do precisely these objects which we behold make a world?”, he asks, “Why has man just these species of animals for his neighbors?” (225). It is about social reform both locally and nationally: Thoreau warns his fellow Americans of the dangers of materialism and of an over-dependence on technology, and, thinking of the former inhabitants of the Walden Woods, he wonders: “this small village, germ of something more, why did it fail while Concord keeps its ground?” (264). His concern with social progress also has a global dimension. He begins his book by comparing his neighbors to the “Chinese and Sandwich Islanders” (4), and he connects the water of Walden Pond to “the sacred water of the Ganges” (298). At the end of *Walden* there is more day to dawn not only for individuals and for America, but he reminds us that “these may be but the spring months in the life of the race” (331-32).

Thoreau's vision of a better world is thus not one in which the individual is simply allowed to retreat from society and sit alone by a pond. It is a vision in which each reader plays a significant part in the progress of civilization by actively bettering himself or herself as an individual. To read *Walden* is to be confronted with the need to change one's own life. Thoreau's challenge to himself and to the reader is “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” (91). *Walden* is a

call to action which begins with individual self-improvement but which ends by sending ripples throughout the world like the ripples on Walden Pond.

All quotations are from Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*. Edited by J. Lyndon Shanley. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971.

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