

Walden; or, Life in the Woods (1854) by Henry David Thoreau

Study Guide (1992) for *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau

Written by David Barber, Associate Professor of English, University of Idaho

About the time that Huck Finn and Jim were floating down the Mississippi in search of a home, Henry David Thoreau build a cabin on the shore of a small lake and lived there alone for two years. *Walden* describes the experiment and explains its motives.

Thoreau is certainly a "character," the kind that will never win a popularity contest. His faults and the thorny aspects of his personality leave him vulnerable to criticism by those who dislike his character, ideas, or life-style. He has been called hypocrite, egomaniac, sponger, snob, fraud, misogynist, prig, and woods-burner, accused of "sneaking" back from his cabin at Walden Pond to Concord for dinner, and condemned for leaving jail, when protesting the poll-tax, because some one paid the tax. However valid or invalid these charges are, the main point is that people still care about Thoreau and his influence. (For example, in a *Chicago Tribune*) column in late 1991, Jon Margolis writes that "Thoreau was a snob, a fraud, something of a fool and a pernicious influence on the life of the mind in America." But Margolis also admits that "Thoreau was a decent, educated, hard-working person, and no one who writes can be anything but awed by the way he did it.")

Walden is a difficult book. It is full of outrageous exaggerations and teasing paradoxes. Thoreau loves words, uses them beautifully, but at times loves their twists and turns excessively and uses too many of them, in paragraphs that threaten never to end. His philosophical reflections often begin clearly but end in unresolved complexity; and a little later he may turn around and express an opposing view. ("A foolish consistency," wrote his friend and mentor Emerson, "is the hobgoblin of little minds.") Thoreau's descriptions of ponds and woods, beans and woodchucks, ice and rain, winter and spring, are vivid but may go on too long and lose some of their effect.

Add to these qualities Thoreau's controversial opinions and ways of living, and it's easy to see why readers so often get furious with him. He challenges our ways of living, so of course he makes us mad. But because he confronts us at the core of our lives—our goals and our relations to others, society, nature, and God—people keep reading him. We don't ignore him because he highlights certain areas of our lives whose importance has only increased since he died in 1862.

A lifelong bachelor, Thoreau is the father, or at least uncle, of several modern ways of thinking and acting (and therefore, of course, the fierce enemy of some other ways). These are some major areas of Thoreau's importance:

Civil rights: Thoreau's ideas influenced Mahatma Gandhi in India and found American applications in the work of Martin Luther King, Jr. In his own time he supported John Brown. During the Vietnam War a pamphlet circulated which quoted parts of his famous essay, "Civil Disobedience" (or "Resistance to Civil Government"), substituting the Vietnamese for the Mexican war; Thoreau's protest of 1848 applied aptly in 1968.

Conservation and concern for the environment: Thoreau's amazing sensitivity to the details of physical world and to the whole world as a living organism has taught many how to observe nature and how to value it. No one could observe the natural world more perceptively than Thoreau. He knew that we need nature ("In wildness is the preservation of the world:), and he knew that we could destroy it.

Social and political criticism: In his critique of the social and economic values which doom so many to "lives of quiet desperation," and of the silly, destructive ways in which society acts, Thoreau is a major critic of American life. He tries to get us to reconsider the nature of democracy, the effects of technological change, and, most of all, our communal goals and values.

The philosophy of individualism: Thoreau's firm faith in the individual's ability to find a meaningful life, if only one looks independently and self-

reliantly, has inspired generations. Thoreau is nowhere so "American" as when he affirms the power and autonomy of the single person.

At its worst (or ours) *Walden* may put us to sleep, but at its best it wakes us up—and for Thoreau, being fully awake is what living means. E. B. White made the ultimate comment on *Walden*, as far as 20th-century readers are concerned. *Walden*, he wrote, "gains a little each year as the world loses ground." The reason, of course, is that *Walden* tells us how the world, or individuals in it, might recover some of that lost ground. The vehicle of Thoreau's advice is his account of living at the lake, from which vantage point he could see the world more clearly.

He chose a place away from neighbors but within a couple of miles of his hometown, Concord, Massachusetts. Becoming a hermit was clearly not his intent; he relished visitors (up to a point) and often walked into town. He wanted to test his idea that the key to living a full life was to simplify it.

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.

(Evidently it worked, for Thoreau's state of mind through the months of his dying, fifteen years after he left Walden, was peaceful, contented, and accepting.)

Walden is also a book about America. Thoreau wrote about himself because, as he said, he knew no one else so well; but he wrote to his countrymen, about their way of living and "whether it is necessary that it be as bad as it is." It was probably not accidental, though he says it was, that he moved into his cabin on the Fourth of July. The experiment itself was not just a commentary on American life; it was a new version of the whole American experiment, a new kind of Declaration of Independence.

Suggested Chapters: Because reading all of *Walden* might be too much in a two-week period, here is a plan for reading some of *Walden*. The capitalized chapters are the ones on which the group discussion may wish to focus.

"ECONOMY" By far the longest (and most difficult) section in the book, this chapter is essential to read, despite its difficulty, because it explains Thoreau's basic beliefs about how to live, and because he tells us the story of how he got started at Walden.

"WHERE I LIVED, AND WHAT I LIVED FOR" Thoreau describes the setting of his cabin; then he reflects on the ideas of possession, work, wakeful living, and reality, all in relation to the purpose of his experiment.

"READING" This chapter begins by defending the classics, starting with Homer, and ends with an appeal for the American village to take on the role of patron of the arts and liberal education.

"SOUNDS" Reading is an indoor activity; this chapter balances it by pointing outside the cabin to the sounds of nature and of humans: the railroad, for instance, which leads Thoreau to some unexpectedly positive comments about commerce.

"SOLITUDE" This chapter discusses the delights of being alone; solitude, Thoreau says, is his best companion.

"VISITORS" Nevertheless, Thoreau was no hermit, kept three chairs in his cabin, and claims to have had together under his roof "25 or 30 souls, with their bodies." This chapter discusses notable visitors.

"THE BEAN-FIELD" This delightful chapter is a discourse on farming, on using the land, on hearing the town's silly military displays from afar (with special reference to the Mexican War); but mainly it is about beans, their cultivation and care. "I was determined to know beans," he says (reversing the expression: "You don't know beans!").

"THE VILLAGE" This short chapter makes it clear that Thoreau went often into Concord, though he is equally as interested in how dark it could be coming home at night. He also refers to his famous night in jail, offering a brief explanation of why he refused to pay the poll-tax and of why he did not make a more extensive protest. (But to get a full discussion of this well known event you have to read the essay "Civil Disobedience," also known as "Resistance to Civil Government.")

"THE PONDS" Thoreau may have placed this chapter in the middle of *Walden* in order to emphasize the pond's symbolic centrality in the book. In any case, you can see why he chose to live there from his loving description of Walden and other lakes in the area. How much more beautiful than our lives . . . are they!"

"BAKER FARM" This chapter meditates on the immigrant family who live at Baker farm, who came to America, Thoreau believes, because they wanted the coffee, tea, and meat that they could get here. Thoreau feels, however, that "the only true America is that country where you are at liberty to pursue such a mode of life as may enable you to do without these (coffee, tea, and meat)."

"HIGHER LAWS" You will enjoy, perhaps even agree with, Thoreau's comments on fishing, hunting, vegetarianism, and eating generally. He is exploring a tension between "an animal in us" and a "higher nature" which is pure and therefore at odds with "this slimy beastly life, eating and drinking."

"BRUTE NEIGHBORS" Forget the "hermit/poet" dialogue and concentrate on the glorious descriptions of animals. Thoreau is not worried about slime vs. purity in this chapter, and the descriptions themselves have the purity and clarity of crystal.

"HOUSE WARMING" You will like this chapter if you are interested in Thoreau's cabin and how he got it ready for the winter. Though he spent two years at the lake, Thoreau presents his experience as the cycle of a single year. We are now in late autumn and into winter.

"FORMER INHABITANTS; AND WINTER VISITORS" The title explains the chapter well enough.

"WINTER ANIMALS" This chapter describes Thoreau's "brute neighbors" almost as memorably as the chapter "Brute Neighbors."

"THE POND IN WINTER" Thoreau describes the winter qualities of Walden and its ice. He also develops his concern about the bottom of Walden. Walden's bottom seems to symbolize for Thoreau the hard foundation of reality, the ultimate truth about life. Most readers agree that Thoreau believes there is such a symbolic bottom, even though it was "long lost" before he fathomed it.

"SPRING" Thoreau exults: "Walden was dead and is alive again." This chapter offers us much to think about, notably in the section where he meditates on "the forms which thawing sand and clay assume in flowing down the sides of a deep cut on the railroad." His observations of the thawing sand lead him to the conclusion that "this one hillside illustrated the principle of all the operations of Nature." It is a striking example of Thoreau's faith in universal wholeness.

"CONCLUSION" Thoreau sums up: he tells why he left the lake and what he gained from his experience there. He also has much to say about the individual and society (this chapter contains the famous "different drummer: statement), about living well, about finding the truth. And he ends with the wonderful story, one of his "wake up!" pitches, of "the strong and beautiful bug." We too can enjoy a "beautiful and winged life." But we have to be alert to the possibilities: "Only that day dawns to which we are awake."

For Further Reading

By Henry David Thoreau (Dates are original publication date.)

Journal (1906, 1992)

The Maine Woods (1864)

"Resistance to Civil Government" (1849)

"Life Without Principle" (1863)

"Slavery in Massachusetts" (1854)

About Henry David Thoreau

Lawrence Buell, *New England Literary Culture: From Revolution to Renaissance* (Cambridge, 1986)

Harding, Walter. *The Days of Henry Thoreau: A Biography* (Knopf, 1965)

Myerson, Joel, ed., *Critical Essays on Thoreau's "Walden"* (Hall, 1988)

Paul, Sherman. *The Shores of America: Thoreau's Inward Exploration* (Univ. of Illinois, 1958)

The Writings of Henry David Thoreau (Princeton, 1971–; ongoing project, the standard edition of Thoreau; volumes completed to date include *Walden* and most of the journals)

Discussion Questions

1. What "American characters" -- in both the individual and the cultural senses -- do you find in *Walden*?

2. Consider what you knew and thought about Thoreau and his Walden experiment before starting your reading. What were your ideas, attitudes, and images relating to Thoreau and *Walden*?

3. And now, after your reading, how have these ideas, attitudes, and images changed?

4. What is Thoreau saying, in "Economy," about the "necessaries" of life, those things that we need to have? What are those necessary things? And what happens after one gets them? What is the next step?

5. Thoreau is a very funny writer, although you have to be alert to his humor to get it. He loves word play, such as using the same word in different contexts, which change the meaning. (For example, "It makes but little difference whether you are *committed* to a farm or to the county jail". He also loves humorous comparisons, of animals to people, for example, or of his life to the lives of others. Thoreau enjoys making fun of people and social groups; nor does he spare himself. Of course, there is always a serious point lurking somewhere nearby; for example, his playful account of his "enterprises" and "business" is also a satire on the business goals that drive most Americans. His playful description in "The Bean-Field" of the sounds of the Concord guns, sharp attacks of the Mexican war. What other examples of word play, satire, humorous description, or other forms of humor, do you find?

6. What do you think of Thoreau's economics? For one thing, he regrets the division of labor which makes specialists of people and narrows their abilities and sense of life's wholeness. For another, he says, "the cost of thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it." Acting on this principle, he decides that it is cheaper for him to walk 30 miles than to

spend the time to earn the money to buy a ticket to take the train the same distance. He also considers that buying a house is a waste. Is such thinking applicable in our time?

7. Do you think Thoreau misrepresents his situation at Walden Pond by not mentioning that he built his cabin, with Ralph Waldo Emerson's permission, on Emerson's land?

8. Why does Thoreau make so much of the images of dawn, sunrise, and morning? What attitudes do they carry?

9. There are many, many passages that we could profitably examine in detail, though we might not agree on what they mean. One such rather notorious passage occurs at the end of "Spring" Thoreau's reflections on a dead horse. What do you make of this passage? What is Thoreau trying to say? Do you agree with him?

10. Find a similar passage of your own, and interesting one, preferably controversial or unclear to you. Find out if the other members of the discussion group interpret it the same way you do.

11. Imagine that you met Henry Thoreau some time after the publication of *Walden*. What would you want to ask him? What would you want to tell him? If you want, bring him into the 21st century and tell him how the world has and has not changed since his time.

12. In your own words, how does Thoreau explain his reasons for going to Walden, and for leaving it? How does he justify his experiment? He seems to think it was successful enough. Do you agree?