

ANALYSIS OF THOREAU'S WALDEN IN OUR TIME IN THE LIGHT OF TRANSCENDENTALISM

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Abstract:

While Thoreau lived at Walden (July 4, 1845–September 6, 1847), he wrote journal entries and prepared lyceum lectures on his experiment in living at the pond. By 1847, he had begun to set his first draft of *Walden* down on paper. After leaving Walden, he expanded and reworked his material repeatedly until the spring of 1854, producing a total of eight versions of the book. James Munroe, publisher of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849), originally intended to publish *Walden* as well. However, with the failure of *A Week*, Munroe backed out of the agreement. In 1852, two parts of what would be *Walden* were published in *Sartain's Union Magazine* ("The Iron Horse" in July, "A Poet Buys A Farm" in August). Six selections from the book (under the title "A Massachusetts Hermit") appeared in advance of publication in the March 29, 1854 issue of the *New York Daily Tribune*. Ticknor and Fields published *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* in Boston in an edition of 2,000 copies on August 9, 1854. A second printing was issued in 1862, with multiple printings from the same stereotyped plates issued between that time and 1890. A second American edition (from a new setting of type) was published in 1889 by Houghton, Mifflin, in two volumes, the first English edition in 1886. In 1894, *Walden* was included as the second volume of the Riverside Edition of Thoreau's collected writings, in 1906 as the second volume of the Walden and Manuscript Editions. In 1971, it was issued as the first volume of the Princeton Edition.

Keywords: Thoreau, Walden, Transcendentalist principle

Introduction

Since the nineteenth century, *Walden* has been reprinted many times, in a variety of formats. It has been issued in its entirety and in abridged or selected form, by itself and in combination with other writings by Thoreau, in English and in many European and some Asian languages, in popular and scholarly versions, in inexpensive printings, and in limited fine press editions. A number of editions have been illustrated with artwork or photographs. Some individual chapters have been published separately.

Some of the well-known twentieth century editions of or including *Walden* are: the 1937 Modern Library Edition, edited by Brooks Atkinson; the 1939 Penguin Books edition; the 1946 edition with photographs, introduction, and commentary by Edwin Way Teale; the 1946 edition of selections, with photographs, by Henry Bugbee Kane; the 1947 *Portable Thoreau*, edited by Carl Bode; the 1962 *Variorum Walden*, edited by Walter Harding; and the 1970 *Annotated Walden* (a facsimile reprint of the first edition, with illustrations and notes), edited by Philip Van Doren Stern.

Although Thoreau actually lived at Walden for two years, *Walden* is a narrative of his life at the pond compressed into the cycle of a single year, from spring to spring. The book is presented in eighteen chapters.

Thoreau opens with the chapter "Economy." He sets forth the basic principles that guided his experiment in living, and urges his reader to aim higher than the values of society, to spiritualize. He explains that he writes in response to the curiosity of his townsmen, and draws attention to the fact that *Walden* is a first-person account. He writes of himself, the subject he knows best. Through his story, he hopes to tell his readers something of their own condition and how to improve it. Perceiving widespread anxiety and dissatisfaction with modern civilized life, he writes for the discontented, the mass of men who "lead lives of quiet desperation." Distinguishing between the outer and the inner man, he emphasizes the corrosiveness of materialism and constant labor to the individual's humanity and spiritual development. Thoreau encourages his readers to seek the divinity within, to throw off resignation to the status quo, to be satisfied with less materially, to embrace independence, self-reliance, and simplicity of life. In identifying necessities — food, shelter, clothing, and fuel — and detailing specifically the costs of his experiment, he points out that many so-called necessities are, in fact, luxuries that contribute to spiritual stagnation. Technological progress, moreover, has not truly enhanced quality of life or the condition of mankind. Comparing civilized and primitive man, Thoreau observes that civilization has institutionalized life and absorbed the individual. He writes of living fully in the present. He stresses that going to Walden was not a statement of economic protest, but an attempt to overcome society's obstacles to transacting his "private business." He does not suggest that anyone else should follow his particular course of action. Each man must find and follow his own path in understanding reality and seeking higher truth. Discussing philanthropy and reform, Thoreau highlights the importance of individual self-realization. Society will be reformed through reform of the individual, not through the development and refinement of institutions.

In "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For," Thoreau recounts his near-purchase of the Hollowell farm in Concord, which he ultimately did not buy. He remains unencumbered, able to enjoy all the benefits of the landscape without the burdens of property ownership. He becomes a homeowner instead at Walden, moving in, significantly, on July 4, 1845 — his personal Independence Day, as well as the nation's. He casts himself as a chanticler — a rooster — and *Walden* — his account of his experience — as the lusty crowing that wakes men

up in the morning. More than the details of his situation at the pond, he relates the spiritual exhilaration of his going there, an experience surpassing the limitations of place and time. He writes of the morning hours as a daily opportunity to reaffirm his life in nature, a time of heightened awareness. To be awake — to be intellectually and spiritually alert — is to be alive. He states his purpose in going to Walden: to live deliberately, to confront the essentials, and to extract the meaning of life as it is, good or bad. He exhorts his readers to simplify, and points out our reluctance to alter the course of our lives. He again disputes the value of modern improvements, the railroad in particular. Our proper business is to seek the reality — the absolute — beyond what we think we know. This higher truth may be sought in the here and now — in the world we inhabit. Our existence forms a part of time, which flows into eternity, and affords access to the universal.

In the chapter "Reading," Thoreau discusses literature and books — a valuable inheritance from the past, useful to the individual in his quest for higher understanding. True works of literature convey significant, universal meaning to all generations. Such classics must be read as deliberately as they were written. He complains of current taste, and of the prevailing inability to read in a "high sense." Instead of reading the best, we choose the mediocre, which dulls our perception. Good books help us to throw off narrowness and ignorance, and serve as powerful catalysts to provoke change within.

In "Sounds," Thoreau turns from books to reality. He advises alertness to all that can be observed, coupled with an Oriental contemplation that allows assimilation of experience. As he describes what he hears and sees of nature through his window, his reverie is interrupted by the noise of the passing train. At first, he responds to the train — symbol of nineteenth century commerce and progress — with admiration for its almost mythical power. He then focuses on its inexorability and on the fact that as some things thrive, so others decline — the trees around the pond, for instance, which are cut and transported by train, or animals carried in the railroad cars. His comments on the railroad end on a note of disgust and dismissal, and he returns to his solitude and the sounds of the woods and the nearby community — church bells on Sundays, echoes, the call of the whippoorwill, the scream of the screech owl (indicative of the dark side of nature) and the cry of the hoot owl. The noise of the owls suggests a "vast and undeveloped nature which men have not recognized . . . the stark twilight and unsatisfied thoughts which all have." Sounds, in other words, express the reality of nature in its full complexity, and our longing to connect with it. He builds on his earlier image of himself as a crowing rooster through playful discussion of an imagined wild rooster in the woods, and closes the chapter with reference to the lack of domestic sounds at his Walden home. Nature, not the incidental noise of living, fills his senses.

Thoreau opens "Solitude" with a lyrical expression of his pleasure in and sympathy with nature. When he returns to his house after walking in the evening, he finds that visitors have stopped by, which prompts him to comment both on his literal distance from others while at the pond and on the figurative space between men.

There is intimacy in his connection with nature, which provides sufficient companionship and precludes the possibility of loneliness. The vastness of the universe puts the space between men in perspective. Thoreau points out that if we attain a greater closeness to nature and the divine, we will not require physical proximity to others in the "depot, the post-office, the bar-room, the meeting-house, the school-house" — places that offer the kind of company that distracts and dissipates. He comments on man's dual nature as a physical entity and as an intellectual spectator within his own body, which separates a person from himself and adds further perspective to his distance from others. Moreover, a man is always alone when thinking and working. He concludes the chapter by referring to metaphorical visitors who represent God and nature, to his own oneness with nature, and to the health and vitality that nature imparts.

Thoreau asserts in "Visitors" that he is no hermit and that he enjoys the society of worthwhile people as much as any man does. He comments on the difficulty of maintaining sufficient space between himself and others to discuss significant subjects, and suggests that meaningful intimacy — intellectual communion — allows and requires silence (the opportunity to ponder and absorb what has been said) and distance (a suspension of interest in temporal and trivial personal matters). True companionship has nothing to do with the trappings of conventional hospitality. He writes at length of one of his favorite visitors, a French Canadian woodchopper, a simple, natural, direct man, skillful, quiet, solitary, humble, and contented, possessed of a well-developed animal nature but a spiritual nature only rudimentary, at best. As much as Thoreau appreciates the woodchopper's character and perceives that he has some ability to think for himself, he recognizes that the man accepts the human situation as it is and has no desire to improve himself. Thoreau mentions other visitors — half-wits, runaway slaves, and those who do not recognize when they have worn out their welcome. Visiting girls, boys, and young women seem able to respond to nature, whereas men of business, farmers, and others cannot leave their preoccupations behind. Reformers — "the greatest bores of all" — are most unwelcome guests, but Thoreau enjoys the company of children, railroad men taking a holiday, fishermen, poets, philosophers — all of whom can leave the village temporarily behind and immerse themselves in the woods.

In "The Bean-Field," Thoreau describes his experience of farming while living at Walden. His bean-field offers reality in the forms of physical labor and closeness to nature. He writes of turning up Indian arrowheads as he hoes and plants, suggesting that his use of the land is only one phase in the history of man's relation to the natural world. His bean-field is real enough, but it also metaphorically represents the field of inner self that must be carefully tended to produce a crop. Thoreau comments on the position of his bean-field between the wild and the cultivated — a position not unlike that which he himself occupies at the pond. He recalls the sights and sounds encountered while hoeing, focusing on the noise of town celebrations and military training, and cannot resist satirically underscoring the vainglory of the participants. He notes that he tends his beans while his

contemporaries study art in Boston and Rome, or engage in contemplation and trade in faraway places, but in no way suggests that his efforts are inferior. Thoreau has no interest in beans per se, but rather in their symbolic meaning, which he as a writer will later be able to draw upon. He vows that in the future he will not sow beans but rather the seeds of "sincerity, truth, simplicity, faith, innocence, and the like." He expands upon seed imagery in referring to planting the seeds of new men. Lamenting a decline in farming from ancient times, he points out that agriculture is now a commercial enterprise, that the farmer has lost his integral relationship with nature. The true husbandman will cease to worry about the size of the crop and the gain to be had from it and will pay attention only to the work that is particularly his in making the land fruitful.

Thoreau begins "The Village" by remarking that he visits town every day or two to catch up on the news and to observe the villagers in their habitat as he does birds and squirrels in nature. But the town, full of idle curiosity and materialism, threatens independence and simplicity of life. He resists the shops on Concord's Mill Dam and makes his escape from the beckoning houses, and returns to the woods. He writes of going back to Walden at night and discusses the value of occasionally becoming lost in the dark or in a snowstorm. Sometimes a person lost is so disoriented that he begins to appreciate nature anew. Fresh perception of the familiar offers a different perspective, allowing us "to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations." He refers to his overnight jailing in 1846 for refusal to pay his poll tax in protest against slavery and the Mexican War, and comments on the insistent intrusion of institutions upon men's lives.

Turning from his experience in town, Thoreau refers in the opening of "The Ponds" to his occasional ramblings "farther westward . . . into yet more unfrequented parts of the town." Throughout his writings, the west represents the unexplored in the wild and in the inner regions of man. In *Walden*, these regions are explored by the author through the pond. He writes of fishing on the pond by moonlight, his mind wandering into philosophical and universal realms, and of feeling the jerk of a fish on his line, which links him again to the reality of nature. He thus presents concrete reality and the spiritual element as opposing forces. He goes on to suggest that through his life at the pond, he has found a means of reconciling these forces.

Walden is presented in a variety of metaphorical ways in this chapter. Believed by many to be bottomless, it is emblematic of the mystery of the universe. As the "earth's eye," through which the "beholder measures the depth of his own nature," it reflects aspects of the narrator himself. As "a perfect forest mirror" on a September or October day, Walden is a "field of water" that "betrays the spirit that is in the air . . . continually receiving new life and motion from above" — a direct conduit between the divine and the beholder, embodying the workings of God and stimulating the narrator's receptivity and faculties. Walden is ancient, having existed perhaps from before the fall of man in the Garden of Eden. At the same time, it is perennially young. It

possesses and imparts innocence. Its waters, remarkably transparent and pure, serve as a catalyst to revelation, understanding, and vision. Thoreau refers to talk of piping water from Walden into town and to the fact that the railroad and woodcutters have affected the surrounding area. And yet, the pond is eternal. It endures despite all of man's activities on and around it. In this chapter, Thoreau also writes of the other bodies of water that form his "lake country" (an indirect reference to English Romantic poets Coleridge and Wordsworth) — Goose Pond, Flint's Pond, Fair Haven Bay on the Sudbury River, and White Pond (Walden's "lesser twin"). He concludes "The Ponds" reproachfully, commenting that man does not sufficiently appreciate nature. Like Walden, she flourishes alone, away from the towns of men.

CONCLUSION

In his "Conclusion," Thoreau again exhorts his reader to begin a new, higher life. He points out that we restrict ourselves and our view of the universe by accepting externally imposed limits, and urges us to make life's journey deliberately, to look inward and to make the interior voyage of discovery. Evoking the great explorers Mungo Park, Lewis and Clark, Frobisher, and Columbus, he presents inner exploration as comparable to the exploration of the North American continent. Thoreau explains that he left the woods for the same reason that he went there, and that he must move on to new endeavors. There is danger even in a new enterprise of falling into a pattern of tradition and conformity. One must move forward optimistically toward his dream, leaving some things behind and gaining awareness of others. A man will replace his former thoughts and conventional common sense with a new, broader understanding, thereby putting a solid foundation under his aspirations. Thoreau expresses unqualified confidence that man's dreams are achievable, and that his experiment at Walden successfully demonstrates this. The experience and truth to which a man attains cannot be adequately conveyed in ordinary language, must be "translated" through a more expressive, suggestive, figurative language. Thoreau entreats his readers to accept and make the most of what we are, to "mind our business," not somebody else's idea of what our business should be. He presents the parable of the artist of Kouroo, who strove for perfection and whose singleness of purpose endowed him with perennial youth. Transcending time and the decay of civilization, the artist endures, creates true art, and achieves perfection. This parable demonstrates the endurance of truth. Thoreau again urges us to face life as it is, to reject materialism, to embrace simplicity, serenely to cultivate self, and to understand the difference between the temporal and the permanent. He ends *Walden* with an affirmation of resurrection and immortality through the quest for higher truth. One last time, he uses the morning imagery that throughout the book signifies new beginnings and heightened perception: "Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star."

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