



## Beacon Press Teachers' Guide

### *Walden* *Introduction and Annotations* by Bill McKibben Henry David Thoreau

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Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* is one of those rare books that yields new insights no matter how many times one reads it. A book remarkably rich in ideas and images, it can be approached through a wide variety of reading strategies. Bill McKibben, in his introduction and annotations to this edition of *Walden*, attempts to guide the reader to a coherent view of the book as a "practical environmentalist's volume," a book that can help the reader to cope with real problems of life as we enter the twenty-first century.

This teacher's guide attempts to extend McKibben's approach to *Walden* into specific activities and questions that will help students to grasp the practical implications of Thoreau's ideas.

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## BEFORE READING *WALDEN*

In preparing students to read *Walden* the teacher will want to give them some basic historical and biographical background about Thoreau. Here are a few of the essential facts.

### Thoreau's America

Henry David Thoreau (**born 1817, died 1862**) lived during a time in America's history when business and technology were beginning to dominate American life. Thoreau lived nearly all his life in **Concord, Massachusetts**, a small town about twenty miles west of Boston which showed this shift from an agrarian to an industrial America in ways that made him worry.

Technology in the form of the Fitchburg railroad, which reached Concord in 1844, was already turning Concord into a suburb of Boston. The railroad chugged past then, as it does today, only a few feet from the shores of **Walden Pond**. The railroad meant that Concord merchants could extend their buying and selling more easily beyond the bounds of the town and that farmers could shift from growing subsistence crops to growing cash crops to be sold to distant markets. It also meant that farmers could make extra money by selling off their woodlots for firewood to keep Bostonians warm, an enterprise in which Thoreau assisted them through his abilities as a surveyor.

Thoreau's family participated in the "**quiet desperation**" of commerce and industry through the pencil factory owned and managed by his father. Thoreau family pencils, produced behind the family house on Main Street, were generally recognized as America's best pencils, largely because of Henry's research into German pencil-making techniques.

Thoreau understood early in America's history how dependent **industrialization** was on the exploitation of cheap labor. This **exploitation** was most obvious in the use of slavery to pick cotton in the South. Thoreau had some experience with runaway slaves, because the Thoreau family house was sometimes used by the "underground railroad" to hide slaves; Thoreau himself put at least one slave on the train to freedom in Canada. He also witnessed and read about the exploitation of Irish and Chinese laborers to build the railroads. He himself experienced it, though more benignly, working in his father's pencil factory.

In short, the business of America was rapidly becoming business, and through the westward movement and the inevitable destruction of natural resources and native cultures that accompanied it, America sought ever-expanding room for that business.

## Thoreau's Life

During Thoreau's childhood, however, the railroad had not yet arrived, and Concord must have seemed a delightfully peaceful place. Thoreau's parents would take their four children on picnics in the wooded areas around Concord, one of young Henry's favorite picnic spots being Walden Pond.

Thoreau received his education at the public school in Concord and at the private Concord Academy. Proving to be a better scholar than his more fun-loving and popular elder brother John, he was sent to Harvard. He did well there and, despite having to drop out for several months for financial and health reasons, was graduated in the top half of his class in 1837.

Thoreau's graduation came at an inauspicious time. In 1837 America was experiencing an economic depression and jobs were not plentiful. Furthermore, Thoreau found himself temperamentally unsuited for three of the four usual professions open to Harvard graduates: the ministry, the law, and medicine. The fourth, teaching, was one he felt comfortable with, since both of his elder siblings, Helen and John, were already teachers. He was hired as the teacher of the Concord public school, but resigned after only two weeks because of a dispute with his superintendent over how to discipline the children. He applied for other teaching jobs as far away as Kentucky but could find none. For a while he and John considered seeking their fortunes in California, but at last he fell back onto working in his father's pencil factory.

In 1838 he decided to start his own school in Concord, eventually asking John to help him. The two brothers worked well together and vacationed together during holidays. In September 1839 they spent a memorable week together on a boating trip up the Concord and Merrimack rivers to Mt. Washington in New Hampshire. About the same time both brothers became romantically interested in Ellen Sewall, a frequent visitor to Concord from Cape Cod. In the fall of the next year, both brothers—first John and then Henry—proposed marriage to her. But because of her father's objections to the Thoreaus' liberal religious views, Ellen rejected both proposals.

When John endured a lengthy illness in 1841, the school became too much for Henry to handle alone, so he closed it. He returned to work in the pencil factory but was soon invited to work as a live-in handyman in the home of his mentor, neighbor, and friend,

### *Ralph Waldo Emerson*

Emerson was by then already one of the most famous American philosophers and men of letters. Since Thoreau's graduation from Harvard, he had become a protege of his famous neighbor and an informal student of Emerson's **Transcendental** ideas.

Transcendentalism was an American version of Romantic Idealism, a dualistic Neoplatonic view of the world divided into the material and the spiritual. For Emerson, "Mind is the only reality, of which all other natures are better or worse reflectors. Nature, literature, history, are only subjective phenomena." For the Transcendentalist, the secret

of successful living was to hold oneself above material concerns as much as possible and focus on the spiritual.

Thoreau must have imbibed Transcendental-ism through almost every pore during his two years living with Emerson, though he would modify it to suit his own temperament by granting nature more reality than Emerson did. During this period, the two men shared tragedy as well as philosophy. Within just a few weeks in February 1842, Emerson's young son Waldo died of scarlatina, and Thoreau's brother died an excruciating death from tetanus. John's death affected Thoreau so strongly that he himself developed psychosomatic symptoms of lockjaw.

During his stay with Emerson, Thoreau had ambitions to become a writer and had received help from Emerson in getting some poems and essays published in the Transcendental journal, *The Dial*. But by 1843 he and Emerson decided that it might be good for him to establish contacts with publishers in New York, so Emerson arranged a job for him as tutor to the children of his brother William Emerson on Staten Island. Thoreau, however, quickly found both the teaching situation and the urban environment intolerable and returned again to his parents' home in Concord to work in the pencil factory.

But life in his parents' home held problems for the budding writer. Work in the pencil factory was tedious and tiring, and, since his mother took in boarders, there was little quiet or privacy in the house. Remembering a summer visit to the retreat cabin of a college friend, Charles Stearns Wheeler, he developed a plan to build such a cabin for himself where he could find privacy to write.

In 1845 he received permission from Emerson to use a piece of land that Emerson owned on the shore of Walden Pond. He bought building supplies and a chicken coop (for the boards), and built himself a small cabin there, moving in on the Fourth of July. His main purposes in moving to the pond were to write his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, as a tribute to his brother John, and to conduct an economic experiment to see if it were possible to live by working one day and devoting the other six to more Transcendental concerns, thus reversing the Yankee habit of working six days and resting one. His nature study and the writing of *Walden* would develop later during his stay at the pond. He began writing *Walden* in 1846 as a lecture in response to the questions of townspeople who were curious about what he was doing out at the pond, but it soon grew into his second book.

Thoreau stayed in the cabin at Walden Pond for two years, from July 1845 to September 1847. *Walden* condenses the experiences of those two years into one year for artistic unity, and there is no need to expand here on what Thoreau himself says of them. However, students may be interested to know what Thoreau leaves out of his description of those years. He leaves out (or rather alludes to only briefly), for instance, his famous night in jail, which occurred in 1846, and a trip to Maine that same year to climb Mt. Katahdin, a place with a much wilder nature than he could find around Concord. For details about these experiences, see the biographies listed in the bibliography.

Thoreau would live only fifteen years after leaving Walden Pond. During that time he published two books, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849) and *Walden* (1854). *A Week* sold poorly, leading Thoreau to hold off publication of *Walden*, so that he could revise it extensively to avoid the problems, such as looseness of structure and a preaching tone unalleviated by humor, that had put readers off in the first book. *Walden*, which appeared five years later, was a modest success: it brought Thoreau good reviews, satisfactory sales, and a small following of fans.

After the Walden Pond years, Thoreau lived again in the Emerson home from 1847 to 1849 while Emerson was on a lecture tour in Europe, and then rented a room in his parents' home on Main Street. He made his living by working in the pencil factory, by doing surveying, by lecturing occasionally, and by publishing essays in newspapers and journals. His income, however, was always very modest, and his main concerns were his daily afternoon walks in the Concord woods, the keeping of a private journal of his nature observations and ideas, and the writing and revision of essays for publication.

He also took a series of trips to the Maine woods and to Cape Cod, which provided material for travel essays published first in journals and eventually collected into posthumous books, *The Maine Woods* and *Cape Cod*. Other excursions took him to Canada and, near the end of his life, to Minnesota.

Thoreau died in his parents' home in 1862 of the tuberculosis with which he had been periodically plagued since his college years. He left behind large unfinished projects--a comprehensive record of natural phenomena around Concord and extensive notes on American Indians--but these promised neither the artistic unity nor the intensity of *Walden*.

## Pre-Readings Questions and Activities

1. Ask students what they know about Henry David Thoreau. Be prepared to address some of the following common misconceptions:
  - a. Thoreau was a hermit. (He never intended to isolate himself from others. He went into town regularly, dined with family and friends, and received visits from them at the pond.)
  - b. Thoreau was a frontiersman, like Daniel Boone, living in the wilderness. (Walden Pond is an easy 25-minute walk from Concord's main street. Even in Thoreau's day, it was a popular picnic and swimming spot, and there were no dangerous wild animals.)
  - c. Thoreau was essentially a loafer. (Thoreau raised beans, did odd jobs, and did surveying to support himself. At the pond he also pursued an active schedule of nature study. When he lived with his parents he paid rent and worked in the pencil factory.)
2. Have students discuss in small groups whether or not it would be possible today to live by working only one or two days a week. Could it be done? If not, why? If so, how? (The trick here is for them to focus on reducing needs rather than increasing income.)

3. Have students write briefly about a special place where they find peace and refuge.
4. An ability to recognize symbolism is crucial to reading *Walden*. To prepare students for symbolic reading of Thoreau's description of nature, ask them to list things in nature to which we often attach symbolic meaning (e.g. owl=wisdom, lily=purity, etc.).
5. To help students to identify with Thoreau's intense observation of nature, ask each student to choose a small plot of land--e.g. part of a garden, a yard, a park--and to keep a journal of changes that they see in this place over a period of time.

## READING *WALDEN*

Reading *Walden* can present problems to both high school and college students because of Thoreau's nineteenth-century vocabulary and rhetoric, his allusions both classical and contemporary, his dry Yankee humor, his wordplay, and his brash persona. Therefore, it is probably wise to read through the first few paragraphs of *Walden* when you first assign it, explicating the ideas, wordplay, and humor as you go. Here are a few places on which to focus:

1. Because parts of *Walden* began as a lecture, the book's meaning sometimes depends on the reader's ability to sense shifts in emphasis, which in a lecture would be signalled by the speaker's tone of voice. Try, for instance, the first sentence of the third paragraph (p. 2), focusing on the clause "who are said to live in New England." What happens to the meaning if you emphasize the words "are said"? (The readers' lives are perhaps illusory, just a rumor.) If you emphasize the word "live"? (Is what people do in New England really living?) If you emphasize the word "New"? (Is it really new, or just the same as in "old" England?)
2. One critic has found sixteen examples of wordplay (double meanings, puns, irony) in just the first three paragraphs of *Walden*. See how many your students can find.
3. To introduce students to Thoreau's dry ironic humor, read and discuss with them the hilarious story of Thoreau, the vegetarian, talking to the farmer with his ox (p7, last paragraph).
4. Thoreau's puns are a frequent source of humor in *Walden*. Let students identify a few of these. See, for instance, his use of the words "impertinent" and "pertinent" in the second paragraph (have students look up their meanings in the dictionary), his variation on the cliché "when a man dies he kicks the dust" (p. 63, first paragraph), or the outrageous pun on the ancient word "Coenobites" to mean "see-no-bites" (p. 164, second paragraph).
5. Some students will find Thoreau's persona obnoxious or pompously preachy. This issue can be raised by discussing with students Thoreau's comments on his use of the first person and of egotism on pages one and two. The dialogue between the "Hermit" (Thoreau) and the "Poet" (his friend William Ellery Channing) at the beginning of the "Brute Neighbors" chapter (pp. 210-212) counteracts the accusation of egotism by showing Thoreau making fun of his own seriousness.

## Materialism vs. Economy

What unifies the structure of *Walden* has been much debated. Two of the most frequently noted structural devices are the seasonal structure (one year from summer to spring) and a dialectical structure in which pairs of chapters present thematic counterpoints to each other (e.g. "Reading" vs. "Sounds," "Solitude" vs. "Visitors").

Bill McKibben's focus on Thoreau's practical advice for living, however, calls our attention to another structure in which the long opening chapter, "Economy," provides a diagnosis of what is wrong with American life: materialism. The body of the book then presents a cure for the disease of materialism: striving for purity and simplicity as exemplified by Thoreau's own experience and by the symbolic purity of Walden Pond. The final chapter presents Thoreau's optimistic prognosis that each individual reader has the potential to vastly improve his or her life by shifting priorities.

McKibben's introduction aptly raises the issue of priorities through the two crucial questions that he finds Thoreau raising in *Walden*: How much is enough? and How do I know what I want? The following discussion questions focus on this.

The questions are grouped under McKibben's two headings, but also by chapter, though not every chapter is listed under both headings. No teacher will have time to use all these questions, but there is enough variety to allow you to select what is most appropriate to your teaching needs. The questions could be used as a teacher's guide for discussion, as a written study guide for students to complete, or as assignments for brief journal or essay writing. (Some teachers might wish to reverse the order of the two main questions, since one could argue that we need to know what we want before we can determine how much of it we need.)

### How much is enough?

#### *"Economy"*

1. At the top of p. 10 Thoreau begins a long assessment of what, and how much of it, a person really needs to live. What are the four necessities of life? Eventually he reduces this list to one basic necessity (p. 11). What is it, and how do the other three contribute to it?
2. How much of each of these necessities does Thoreau think we need? How much is too much? Give examples from the text and from your own life to support your answer.
  - a. Clothing (pp. 1924)
  - b. Shelter (pp. 2437)
3. On pp. 3745 Thoreau describes how he built his own cabin. Does it conform to his own advice on how much shelter we need? Give examples.
  - c. Food (pp. 5060)
  - d. Furniture (pp. 6064)

4. When a person has more than enough of something, our culture considers it a good thing to share that abundance with others through philanthropy (charity). What does Thoreau think about philanthropy (pp. 6773), and why? Do you agree or disagree, and why?
5. Give modern examples of these Thoreavian criticisms of materialistic excess:
  - c. "The head monkey in Paris puts on a traveller's cap, and all the monkeys in America do the same" (p. 22).
  - d. "And when the farmer has got his house, he may not be the richer but the poorer for it, and it be the house that has got him" (p. 30).
  - e. "The consequence is, that while he [the college student] is reading Adam Smith, Ricardo, and Say [economists studied in college], he runs his father in debt irretrievably" (p. 48).
6. Thoreau says, "the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run" (p. 28, first paragraph).
  - . One example of this idea is Thoreau's argument that he could travel faster by foot than by railroad (pp. 4849). Would Thoreau's argument work today for railroad travel? For automobile travel (if you had to buy a new car first)? For airplane travel? Do some math and explain.
  - a. A *Consumer Reports* article (June 1992, pp. 39293) entitled "Has Our Living Standard Stalled?" lists the cost of various modern items in terms of how many hours one would have to work to obtain them. Find this article and compute how many work days or weeks would be necessary to purchase some of your favorite items. Do you think that each item is worth the amount of time in your life that you would have to "spend" for it? Why or why not?

### ***"Where I Lived, and What I Lived For"***

1. On p. 86 Thoreau complains, "Our life is frittered away by detail." What do you think he means by this? Give examples from your life.
2. Thoreau advises us to "Simplify, simplify" (p. 86). What modern inventions, new in Thoreau's day, does he question the value of? What inventions new in your day would you question the value of? (See McKibben's discussions of television on pp. xii and xviii for comparison.)

### ***"Reading"***

How much and what kind of reading do most people consider enough? How much and what kind would Thoreau think is enough, and why? Give examples.

### ***"Sounds"***

1. According to the description of Thoreau's life at the pond at the beginning of this chapter (pp. 105108), how much and what kind of entertainment does a person need to be content? Do you agree? Why or why not?



2. The sound of the railroad whistle leads Thoreau to write at length (pp. 108-116) on the benefits and problems brought by the railroad. List these benefits and problems. Does Thoreau think that the benefits outweigh the problems? Why or why not?

### ***"Solitude"***

How much socializing with other people does Thoreau think is good? Give examples from this chapter. Discuss your opinion on this matter.

### ***"Visitors"***

1. In this chapter Thoreau says that "I had three chairs in my house; one of solitude, two for friendship, three for society" (p. 132). What does this say about how much company and how big a house Thoreau felt was necessary?
2. In his note at the bottom of p. 132, McKibben suggests that Thoreau might have been distressed to find today that seventy-five percent of Americans do not know their next-door neighbors. Do you think that this would indeed have bothered him? Why or why not?

### ***"The Village"***

1. Thoreau describes the village of Concord as "a great news room" (p. 158). Given his comments on the next couple of pages, how much news does Thoreau seem to think we need? Compare Thoreau's comments on news to McKibben's on pp. xvi-xvii.
2. In the last paragraph of this chapter Thoreau comments on his relation to government through a brief mention of his famous night in jail and through his loss of a book apparently stolen from his cabin (he later discovered that the Canadian woodchopper had it). What do these two incidents seem to suggest about how much government is necessary? Based on his comments, which (if any) political party do you think Thoreau would favor today? Explain why.

### ***"Baker Farm"***

This chapter reminds the reader that how much one needs depends on an ability to recognize what one has.

Explain why the quality of life of John Field, the Irishman, and his family is so much poorer than Thoreau's, though Thoreau works less. What is Thoreau's suggested solution to Field's dilemma (pp. 192-96)?

### ***"Higher Laws"***

Food and sex are two basic human needs that Thoreau discusses in this chapter. But his views on these subjects might seem unusual to most readers and should spark spirited discussion among students.

1. What types of food and how much does Thoreau prefer, and why (pp. 2015)?
2. What role does Thoreau think that sex should play in a person's life? (pp. 2058)

### ***"Housewarming"***

1. In this chapter Thoreau describes how he built his chimney and plastered his walls before winter set in. What benefit, both personal and economic, is there in building something yourself as he did, rather than having someone else do it?
2. Thoreau describes his ideal of what a house should be like (pp. 229-30). What qualities would such a house have? Which of these qualities would you want in your ideal house, and which would you not want?
3. Pages 235-39 contain Thoreau's essay on firewood. Why does every man look at his woodpile "with a kind of affection" (p. 236)? In what way does Thoreau consider a fireplace a genuine improvement in a person's quality of life (pp. 238-39)? In what way does he find a cookstove not an improvement (p. 239)?

### ***"Former Inhabitants; and Winter Visitors"***

In the last half of this chapter, Thoreau mentions three friends who visited him during the winter: William Ellery Channing (the poet), Bronson Alcott ("the last of the philosophers" and father of Louisa May), and Ralph Waldo Emerson (with whom he had "solid seasons"). Why are the personal qualities of these few visitors more important to him than the number of visitors?

### ***"Winter Animals"***

This chapter renews the discussion of animals begun in the "Brute Neighbors" chapter, but on a more literal level. Why does Thoreau think common animals such as bluejays, rabbits, and foxes are an important part of our world? (See especially p. 264.)

### ***"Spring"***

Most of us feel guilty about our past errors, and we also worry about preparing for the future. But Thoreau says, "We should be blessed if we lived in the present always" (p. 294). Explain why Thoreau thinks that we should focus more on the present.

## ***"Conclusion"***

1. How much traveling does Thoreau think we need to do? What kind of travelling does he think is more important than physical travelling (pp. 299-301)?
2. On pp. 307-8 Thoreau argues that poverty can be a blessing and that "Money is not required to buy one necessary of the soul." Explain what you think he means and whether you agree.

## **How do I know what I want?**

### ***"Economy"***

1. On pp. 23 Thoreau compares his neighbors in New England to "Chinese and Sandwich Islanders" (Hawaiians) and to Brahmins in India. Why does he think that his neighbors' lives are as strange and exotic as what he has read of the people in those distant lands?
2. On p. 3 Thoreau says that some of his young fellow townsmen have had the misfortune to inherit a farm, a house, or other livestock and equipment. Most people would think that inheriting such things would be good. Why does Thoreau think that it is bad? Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. Americans have always valued hard work as a virtue. Thoreau, however, argues on pp. 46 that too much work can lead to a kind of self-imposed slavery and to a life of "quiet desperation" (p. 6). What kinds of slavery does he think are worse than "Negro slavery" and why? What is "quiet desperation"? Give examples from your own life or from people you know.
4. On pp. 81-11 Thoreau complains that most people live a life of hard work without questioning it. Why do they do this?
5. At the top of p. 9 Thoreau attempts to shock the reader into reassessing his or her priorities by saying, "The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad, and if I repent of any thing, it is very likely to be my good behavior." What kinds of things that his neighbors consider to be good would Thoreau think were bad? Why? To what extent do you agree with him?
6. On pp. 46-47 Thoreau raises the issue of what we should expect to get from an education. He argues that students should not "play life, or study it merely," but "live it." What does he mean by this? Are there any courses in your school that allow you to do this? What could you suggest to the administrators and teachers at your school that would allow you better to apply your studies to practical living situations?

### ***"Where I Lived, and What I Lived For"***

1. At the beginning of this chapter (pp. 77-79) Thoreau tells the story of how he almost bought the Hollowell Farm. Many of the qualities that made this farm attractive to Thoreau would have made it very unattractive to most real estate buyers. What were some of those qualities? What does Thoreau's preference for

- these qualities say about the difference between his priorities and those of most people?
2. We are often advised to make a commitment to relationships or to goals that are important to us. Yet Thoreau advises us at the bottom of p. 78, "As long as possible live free and uncommitted. It makes but little difference whether you are committed to a farm or the county jail." What problems does Thoreau see in such commitment? Do you agree that such problems are good cause to be cautious about commitment? Why or why not?
  3. Compare Thoreau's description of the location of his cabin (pp. 79-83) to the opening paragraphs of McKibben's introduction (pp. vii & #173;viii). Why do people seek such places of quiet retreat? What do they hope to find? How might experiencing such places alter our priorities? What do Thoreau and McKibben say about this?
  4. On pp. 84-85 Thoreau discusses the importance of being truly "awake." How does his definition of being awake differ from the usual definition? How often are you and your friends awake, by Thoreau's definition?
  5. On the bottom of p. 85 Thoreau gives us his famous statement of his purpose in going to live by the pond. How is it possible "to live what was not life"? Give examples from people you know or have read about.
  6. A main theme of this chapter is misplaced priorities: Americans' preference for material rather than spiritual reality. What does Thoreau mean by the following:
    - a. "As for *work*, we haven't any of any consequence" (p. 87).
    - b. "Shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truths, while reality is fabulous" (p. 90). Or again on p. 91, "We think that that *is* which *appears* to be."

### **"Reading"**

On pp. 103-104 Thoreau accuses village governments of misplacing their spending priorities. What does Thoreau think villages should spend less on? More on? Does your town or city seem to share Thoreau's priorities? Give examples.

### **"Sounds"**

Most people take what they see and hear literally, but Thoreau often finds symbolic value in such things in addition to the literal value. In the last section of this chapter (pp. 116-21) he describes hearing the sounds of various animals. Which sounds does he value simply for the quality of the sound, and to which does he attach symbolic value? Give examples.

### **"Solitude"**

1. According to his comments in this chapter, was Thoreau lonely at the pond? Why or why not?
2. What does Thoreau mean by the following comments:

- a. "I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude" (p. 128).
- b. "I have a great deal of company in my house; especially in the morning, when nobody calls" (p. 129).
3. Who are the "old settler" and "elderly dame" (p. 130) whom Thoreau describes as being among his favorite visitors at the pond?

### ***"Visitors"***

1. Thoreau spends much of this chapter (pp. 136-42) describing his encounters with a Canadian woodchopper (Alek Therien). What qualities does Thoreau admire in the woodchopper, and why (see especially pp. 141-42)? What limitations does the woodchopper have? To what extent does Thoreau see his life as a model for others to emulate?
2. At the end of this chapter (pp. 143-45) Thoreau comments briefly on other kinds of people who came to the Walden woods. Who was he glad to see and why? Which people gave him cause to worry, and why?

### ***"The BeanField"***

1. What does Thoreau mean by his famous pun, "I was determined to know beans" (p. 152)? What was the practical value of his experience growing beans as a cash crop? (He sold them to get rice.) What was the symbolic value?
2. What lesson in "ecology" (the word had not yet been invented in Thoreau's day) does the bean field teach Thoreau (pp. 156-57)?

### ***"The Village"***

In contrast to the busy-ness of the village, Thoreau recounts the dreamy peacefulness of feeling his way to the cabin at night in the dark. He also tells of how less experienced townsmen who found themselves in the woods at night might easily get lost. To Thoreau, however, getting lost was not a bad thing, because "Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves" (p. 162). What shift in our usual priorities does this comment suggest? Give examples.

### ***"The Ponds"***

This is one of the most symbol-laden chapters in *Walden*; it presents the pond as having human character. Thoreau introduces the symbolic mode at the end of his opening to the chapter, as he talks about fishing at night, when, he says, "I caught two fishes as it were with one hook" (p. 166), a literal fish and a "symbolic" fish (e.g. an idea).

1. In what ways are the following qualities of Walden Pond symbolic of human qualities for which Thoreau thinks we should strive?
  - a. Its depth and the purity of its water (p. 166, 182, 188)

- b. Its colors, blue and green (p. 167), and its position between land and sky (p. 178)
  - c. Its role as "earth's eye" (p. 176)
  - d. The pond as a mirror (p. 178)
2. What undesirable human qualities are symbolized by Flint's Pond (pp. 183-86)?

### ***"Baker Farm"***

What is the moral of Thoreau's story about his fishing with John Field (p. 196)?

### ***"Higher Laws"***

Throughout *Walden* Thoreau expresses affection for and delight in the physical details of nature. In this chapter, however, he seems to reject the value of physical nature: "Nature is hard to be overcome, but she must be overcome" (p. 207). The conflict between physical and spiritual priorities is a main theme of this chapter.

1. What value does Thoreau think that physical activities such as hunting and fishing have (pp. 197-201; see also pp. 266-67)?
2. What does Thoreau think is the danger of sensuality, and what solution to that problem does he suggest (pp. 205-9)? How convincing do you find his solution to be, and why?

### ***"Brute Neighbors"***

This chapter to some extent reverses the emphasis of the previous chapter: Thoreau the Hermit in the introduction to the chapter chooses to go "a-fishing" rather than continue his spiritual meditation. But he also says that animals are all "beasts of burden" (p. 212) in carrying symbolic meaning.

1. What purpose or implied symbolic meaning do you think some of the animals that Thoreau describes (mice, birds, otters) might have in the larger scheme of things?
2. What lessons seem to be contained in Thoreau's description of the following encounters with animals?
  - a. The ant war (pp. 215-18)
  - b. The game of "checkers" with the loon on the pond (pp. 219-22)

### ***"Former Inhabitants; and Winter Visitors"***

How do the descriptions of the lives of former inhabitants of the Walden woods call into question the value that we put on houses and material possessions?

### ***"The Pond in Winter"***

This chapter on the pond, like the earlier one, must be read symbolically to be fully appreciated. Again the pond is presented as an analog to the human condition.

1. On pp. 268-70 Thoreau describes his search for the bottom of Walden Pond, which many considered to be bottomless. He does find the depth of the pond but seems to have mixed feelings about this factual evidence. What is the value of being able to prove something as a fact? What, on the other hand, is the value of letting some things remain mysterious (p. 270, first paragraph; see also his comments on the "mysterious and unexplorable" on p. 297)? What do such questions have to do with our individual religious beliefs?
2. Thoreau compares his measurements of the depth of Walden Pond to a way by which we might evaluate human ethical behavior (pp. 271-73). What does this comparison suggest about how we should judge ourselves, as well as other people?
3. The last part of this chapter concerns the practice of cutting blocks of ice on the pond to sell for refrigeration. (See if any students have grandparents who remember actual "ice box" refrigerators from earlier in this century.) But the ice also has symbolic meaning for Thoreau. Examine the last several paragraphs of the chapter and discuss what that symbolic meaning might be.

### ***"Spring"***

1. A major theme of this chapter is resurrection, the potential for each person to change his or her priorities and start life anew. Explain how the following serve as symbols of resurrection:
  - a. The thawing sand bank (pp. 285-89)
  - b. The melting ice on Walden Pond (p. 291)
  - c. The influx of light (p. 291, bottom)
  - d. Wildness (p. 297)
  - e. The dead horse by the path (p. 297, bottom)

### ***"Conclusion"***

1. This last chapter returns to the theme of finding a solid bottom, something to believe in as being essentially true (see, for instance, earlier passages on p. 92 and p. 268-70). To what extent does the story of the traveller in the swamp (p. 309) suggest that it is possible to find such essential truth?
2. This chapter can also be viewed as Thoreau's prognosis for the reader's spiritual recovery, based on Thoreau's own experience living by the pond. Discuss how the following passages suggest the possibility of a favorable future:
  - a. "I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one" (p. 302).
  - b. "If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them" (p. 303).
  - c. "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer" (p. 305).
  - d. "Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth" (p. 309).

- e. "Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star" (p. 312).

## **AFTER READING *WALDEN***

To sum up, it might be useful have students wrestle with one or more of the following questions:

1. Does Thoreau expect us all to go live by a pond and reject all modern conveniences? Before answering, consider the following passages from *Walden*:
  2. pp. 1314, p. 66, p. 155.
3. Do you think it would be possible to do today what Thoreau did at Walden Pond? Why or why not?
4. Both Thoreau in *Walden* and McKibben in his Introduction use specific technological innovations as examples of supposed improvements in life that might not be improvements at all. Thoreau, for instance, discusses the railroad in the "Sounds" chapter, and McKibben focusses on television. Choose a twentiethcentury invention other than television and discuss how it has both improved our lives and how it might in fact have made our lives worse.
5. After reading *Walden*, what ideas in it impressed you enough to make you want to change your life, and why? What parts do you still disagree with, and why?
6. Find a newspaper or magazine article that relates to an idea in *Walden*. Explain the connection to your classmates.
7. Have students identify ecological issues or projects around your school and town and encourage them to participate in discussing these issues or completing these projects (recycling and conservation efforts are obvious options here).

## **RESOURCES**

There are a number of useful audio and video supplements available for teaching *Walden*. There is a background video entitled *Concord, Massachusetts* (available from The Thoreau Society Shop at Walden Pond, 915 Walden Street, Concord, MA 01742-4511), which gives useful information on literary and historical sites. The best video on Thoreau is *Thoreau's Walden: A Video Portrait* (available from Photovision, 7 Minola Rd., Lexington, MA 02173, or from The Shop at Walden Pond); it effectively combines video scenes of Walden Pond with well chosen quotations from *Walden*. Relatively recent popular movies with Thoreauvian themes include *Amazing Grace and Chuck*, *Dead Poets Society*, and *Awakenings*. A PBS documentary titled "Affluenza" examines the modern malady of having more and enjoying it less; it also features Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin, two advocates of simpler living mentioned in McKibben's introduction. For a fuller list of supplements, see pp. 2021 of Richard Schneider, *Approaches to Teaching Thoreau's Walden and Other Works* (listed in the bibliography).

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**



The following books may be useful to teachers desiring more factual or critical background. For basic facts about Thoreau's life, see Walter Harding's *The Days of Henry Thoreau*. Richard Lebeaux probes Thoreau's psychology in two useful volumes, *Young Man Thoreau* and *Thoreau's Seasons*. Robert Richardson offers a fascinating exploration of Thoreau's intellectual growth through a history of his eclectic reading in *Henry David Thoreau: A Life of the Mind*. For a brief general critical biography, try Richard Schneider's *Henry David Thoreau*.

The best critical studies of *Walden* for beginning students are F. O. Matthiessen's chapters on *Walden* in *The American Renaissance*, Charles Anderson's *The Magic Circle of Walden*, and Martin Bickman's *Volatile Truths*. Three good recent collections of critical essays are Joel Myerson's *Critical Essays on Henry David Thoreau's Walden*, Robert Sayre's *New Essays on Walden*, and William Rossi's gathering in the *Norton Critical Edition of Walden*.

One other unusual collection that could be useful is Henley and Marsh's *Heaven Is Under Our Feet*, a collection of brief tributes to Thoreau by not only authors and scholars, but also public figures and entertainers such as Jimmy Carter, Ted Kennedy, Jack Nicholson, and Whoopi Goldberg.

Those needing more extensive biographical or critical sources can go to one of these three bibliographical sources: Walter Harding and Michael Meyer's *The New Thoreau Handbook*, the chapter on Thoreau in Joel Myerson's *The Transcendentalists: A Review of Research and Criticism*, or the "Materials" section of *Approaches to Teaching Thoreau's Walden and Other Works*, by Richard J. Schneider.

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