Henry David Thoreau
1817–1862

During his senior year at Harvard College, some time after reading Emerson’s *Nature*, Thoreau announced a lifelong theme. “The end of life,” he wrote, “is education.” If the words were conventional, the intent was not. Thoreau insisted upon treating his life as an experiment in self-education, sometimes in ways that scandalized his Concord neighbors, distressed the relatives who had scrimped to send him to college, and seemed to outsiders mere selfishness or egotism. When he found he could not make his living as a writer, he did not seek a career considered appropriate to a Harvard graduate. Instead, he sharply reduced his needs and earned his livelihood working at temporary jobs. By earning a year’s living for six weeks’ work, he left himself free for the communion with nature that was the basis of both his life and his writing.

To many, Thoreau’s life style appeared idle. Even Emerson, speaking at Thoreau’s funeral, lamented the lack of “ambition” that he felt had kept the younger man from a position of leadership. But Emerson was mistaken. Although Thoreau’s life was socially obscure, it was extravagantly ambitious on the personal level. He had set himself to realize Emerson’s most revolutionary ideas in practice, to test transcendentalist philosophy in experience. Like Emerson, Thoreau believed that nature is a reflection of an inner spiritual reality. His life was spent in the pursuit of the essentials of reality and of experiences that would bring him close to these essentials. He went to live in a hut he built at Walden Pond so that he could strip his life of inessential things. By the end of this two-year stay, he had learned that “if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary . . . .” In pursuit of his dreams—that is, of an inner reality—he was the self-reliant non-conformist that Emerson urged all people to be. “If a man does not keep pace with his companions,” Thoreau wrote, “perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him keep step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.”

In the years after college, Thoreau served his literary apprenticeship by writing essays and poems and helping to edit the transcendentalist journal, *The Dial*. Meanwhile, he supported himself by a brief period of schoolteaching, by serving as handyman in the Emerson household, and by working in his father’s small business of manufacturing pencils. While living at Walden Pond, he completed his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849), and filled his journals with the material for his masterwork, *Walden*. Unfortunately, the literary recognition he hoped for did not follow. Nor was he successful as a lecturer, a profession that gave Emerson and many other writers a source of income. Even so, Thoreau remained dedicated to his program of “education” through intimacy with nature and to the writing that would express this experience.

During his stay at Walden Pond, Thoreau had one striking clash with society. To show his disapproval of the Mexican War and slavery, he refused to pay taxes and, as a result, he spent a night in jail. Out of this incident came the essay “Civil Disobedience.” It has since become famous as a statement of the individual’s moral responsibility to resist immoral acts of government.

It was his life in nature, however, that was Thoreau’s great theme. His knowledge of the woods and fields, of the rivers, ponds, and swamps, of every plant and animal, was astounding. “His power of observation seemed to in-
dictate additional senses,” Emerson said. “He saw as with a microscope, heard as with ear-trumpet, and his memory was a photographic register of everything he saw and heard.” No fact of nature seemed to escape him. “And yet,” as Emerson pointed out, “none knew better than he that it is not the fact which imports, but the impression or effect of the fact on your mind. Every fact lay in glory in his mind, a type of the order and beauty of the whole.”

The relation of the order and beauty of nature to the human mind and spirit is the subject of *Walden* (1854), the supreme work in transcendentalist writing. It is the record of Thoreau’s life at the pond, but condensed into a single year. In *Walden*, he attributes spiritual significance to each fact of his life. He achieves this through his use of the seasons. In summer, he could live most directly in nature; his unfinished hut was little more than a roof against the rain. In autumn, Thoreau finished his house, plastering the walls and building the fireplace. This was a period of reflection, of storing up the experiences of summer for winter use as a squirrel stores nuts. In winter, Thoreau especially valued signs of life: the animals that do not hibernate, the pickerel that still swim beneath the ice of the pond. But winter was primarily the season of reading, meditation, and self-discipline, of transforming experience into wisdom. Thoreau compared spring, the time of rebirth, to the Creation, repeated each year.

This seasonal framework closely related Thoreau’s inner life to nature, but he was not recommending that others follow in his footsteps. *Walden* can be read in many ways—as social criticism, as inspiration to self-reform, as brilliant observations of nature—but above all, it is a hymn to the possibilities of life. Thoreau had proved from the most direct experience that it is possible to transcend our circumstances and to feel our individual being in relation to all being, to feel the spirit in ourselves which is also the spirit of the universe. He died of tuberculosis before his forty-fifth birthday, his work largely unrecognized by the world. But few lives have known so much inner success.

Walden Pond, near Concord, Massachusetts.
George Dineen/Photo Researchers, Inc.
When first I took up my abode in the woods, that is, began to spend my nights as well as days there, which, by accident, was on Independence day, or the fourth of July, 1845, my house was not finished for winter, but was merely a defense against the rain, without plastering or chimney, the walls being of rough weatherstained boards, with wide chinks, which made it cool at night. The upright white hewn studs and freshly planed door and window casings gave it a clean and airy look, especially in the morning, when its timbers were saturated with dew, so that I fancied that by noon some sweet gum would exude from them. To my imagination it retained throughout the day more or less of this auroral\(^1\) character, reminding me of a certain house on a mountain which I had visited the year before. This was an airy and unplastered cabin, fit to entertain a traveling god, and where a goddess might trail her garments. The winds which passed over my dwelling were such as sweep over the ridges of mountains, bearing the broken strains, or celestial parts only, of terrestrial music. The morning wind forever blows, the poem of creation is uninterrupted; but few are the ears that hear it. Olympus\(^2\) is but the outside of the earth everywhere.

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. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartanlike\(^3\) as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God, and have somewhat hastily concluded that it is the chief end of man here to “glorify God and enjoy him forever.”\(^4\)

Still we live meanly, like ants; though the fable tells us that we were long ago changed into men; like pygmies we fight with cranes;\(^5\) it is error upon error, and clout upon clout, and our best virtue has for its occasion a superfluous and evitable\(^6\) wretchedness. Our life is frittered away by detail. An honest man has hardly need to count more than his ten fingers, or in extreme cases he may add his ten toes, and lump the rest. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep

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1. auroral (ō-rŏr’əl): Aurora was the Greek mythological goddess of the dawn.
2. Olympus: in Greek mythology, the mountain where the gods lived.
3. Spartanlike: The citizens of Sparta, an ancient Greek state, were known for their rigorous, deliberately simple lives.
4. “glorify . . . forever”: the answer to the first question (“What is the chief end of man?”) in the Westminster (Presbyterian) catechism.
5. like . . . cranes: In the Iliad, Homer tells of pygmies so small that they were threatened by flights of cranes.
6. evitable: avoidable.

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Henry David Thoreau  203
from The Pond in Winter

After a still winter night I woke with the impression that some question had been put to me, which I had been endeavoring in vain to answer in my sleep, as what—how—when—where? But there was dawning Nature, in whom all creatures live, looking in at my broad windows with serene and satisfied face, and no question on her lips. I awoke to an answered question, to Nature and daylight. The snow lying deep on the earth dotted with young pines, and the very slope of the hill on which my house is placed, seemed to say, Forward! Nature puts no question and answers none which we mortals ask. She has long ago taken her resolution. "O Prince, our eyes contemplate with admiration and transmit to the soul the wonderful and varied spectacle of this universe. The night veils without doubt a part of this glorious creation; but day comes to reveal to us this great work, which extends from earth even into the plains of the ether."

Then to my morning work. First I take an ax and pail and go in search of water, if that be not a dream. After a cold and snowy night it needed a divining rod to find it. Every winter the liquid and trembling surface of the pond, which was so sensitive to every breath, and reflected every light and shadow, becomes solid to the depth of a foot or a foot and a half, so that it will support the heaviest teams, and perchance the snow covers it to an equal depth, and it is not to be distinguished from any level field. Like the marmots in the surrounding hills, it closes its eyelids and becomes dormant for three months or more. Standing on the snow-covered plain, as if in a pasture amid the hills, I cut my way first through a foot of snow, and then a foot of ice, and open a window under my feet, where, kneeling to drink, I look down into the quiet parlor of the fishes, pervaded by a softened light as through a window of ground glass, with its bright sanded floor the same as in summer; there a perennial waveless serenity

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7. dead reckoning: a system of navigating without aid of the stars.
8. German Confederacy: From 1815 to 1866, Germany was a loose union of thirty-eight independent states with no king, no capital, and no common government.
9. sleepers: railway ties.
regains as in the amber twilight sky, corresponding to the cool and even temperament of the inhabitants. Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads.

Early in the morning, while all things are crisp with frost, men come with fishing reels and slender lunch, and let down their fine lines through the snowy field to take pickerel and perch; wild men, who instinctively follow other fashions and trust other authorities than their townsmen, and by their goings and comings stitch towns together in parts where else they would be ripped. They sit and eat their luncheon in stout fear-naughts¹⁰ on the dry oak leaves on the shore, as wise in natural lore as the citizen is in artificial. They never consulted with books, and know and can tell much less than they have done. The things which they practice are said not yet to be known. Here is one fishing for pickerel with grown perch for bait. You look into his pail with wonder as into a summer pond, as if he

¹⁰. fear-naughts: heavy woolen coats.

Henry David Thoreau 205
kept summer locked up at home, or knew where she had retreated. How, pray, did he get these in midwinter? O, he got worms out of rotten logs since the ground froze, and so he caught them. His life itself passes deeper in Nature than the studies of the naturalist penetrate; himself a subject for the naturalist. The latter raises the moss and bark gently with his knife in search of insects; the former lays open logs to their core with his ax, and moss and bark fly far and wide. He gets his living by barking trees. Such a man has some right to fish, and I love to see Nature carried out in him. The perch swallows the grub worm, the pickerel swallows the perch, and the fisherman swallows the pickerel; and so all the chinks in the scale of being are filled.

Spring

Walden is melting apace. There is a canal two rods wide along the northerly and westerly sides, and wider still at the east end. A great field of ice has cracked off from the main body. I hear a song sparrow singing from the bushes on the shore,—olit, olit, olit,—chip, chip, chip, che char,—che wiss, wiss, wiss. He too is helping to crack it. How handsome the great sweeping curves in the edge of the ice, answering something to those of the shore, but more regular! It is unusually hard, owing to the recent severe but transient cold, and all watered or waved like a palace floor. But the wind slides eastward over its opaque surface in vain, till it reaches the living surface beyond. It is glorious to behold this ribbon of water sparkling in the sun, the bare face of the pond full of glee and youth, as if it spoke the joy of the fishes within it, and of the sands on its shore,—a silvery sheen as from the scales of a leuciscus,11 as it were all one active fish. Such is the contrast between winter and spring. Walden was dead and is alive again. But this spring it broke up more steadily, as I have said.

The change from storm and winter to serene and mild weather, from dark and sluggish hours to bright and elastic ones, is a memorable crisis which all things proclaim. It is seemingly instantaneous at last. Suddenly an influx of light filled my house, though the evening was at hand; and the clouds of winter still overhung it, and the caves were dripping with sleety rain. I looked out the window, and lo! where yesterday was cold gray ice there lay the transparent pond already calm and full of hope as in a summer evening, reflecting a summer evening sky in its bosom, though none was visible overhead, as if it had intelligence with some remote horizon. I heard a robin in the distance, the first I had heard for many a thousand years, me-thought, whose note I shall not forget for many a thousand more—the same sweet and powerful song as of yore. Oh the evening robin, at the end of a New England summer day! If I could ever find the twig he sits upon! I mean he; I mean the twig. This at least is not the Turdus migratorius.12 The pitch pines and shrub oaks about my house, which had so long drooped, suddenly resumed their several characters, looked brighter, greener, and more erect and alive, as if effectually cleansed and restored by the rain. I knew that it would not rain any more. You may tell by looking at any twig of the forest, aye, at your very woodpile, whether its winter is past or not. As it grew darker, I was startled by the honking of geese flying low over the woods, like weary travelers getting in late from southern lakes, and indulging at last in unrestrained complaint and mutual consolation. Standing at my door, I could hear the rush of their wings; when, driving toward my house, they suddenly spied my

11. *leuciscus* [lʊsɪsˈkʌs]: a small, freshwater fish.

light, and with hushed clamor wheeled and settled in the pond. So I came in, and shut the door, and passed my first spring night in the woods.

In the morning I watched the geese from the door through the mist, sailing in the middle of the pond, fifty rods off, so large and tumultuous that Walden appeared like an artificial pond for their amusement. But when I stood on the shore they at once rose up with a great flapping of wings at the signal of their commander, and when they had got into rank circled about over my head, twenty-nine of them, and then steered straight to Canada, with a regular honk from the leader at intervals, trusting to break their fast in muddier pools. A "plump" of ducks rose at the same time and took the route to the north in the wake of their noisier cousins.

For a week I heard the circling grooping clangor of some solitary goose in the foggy mornings, seeking its companion, and still peopling the woods with the sound of a larger life than they could sustain. In April the pigeons were seen again flying express in small flocks, and in due time I heard the martins twittering over my clearing, though it had not seemed that the township contained so many that it could afford me any, and I fancied that they were peculiarly of the ancient race that dwelt in hollow trees ere white men came. In almost all climes the tortoise and the frog are among the precursors and heralds of this season, and birds fly with song and glancing plumage, and plants spring and bloom, and winds blow, to correct this slight oscillation of the poles and preserve the equilibrium of Nature.

As every season seems best to us in its turn, so the coming in of spring is like the creation of Cosmos out of Chaos and the realization of the Golden Age.13—

from the Conclusion

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. It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves. I had not lived there a week before my feet wore a path from my door to the pond side; and though it is five or six years since I trod it, it is still quite distinct. It is true, I fear that others may have fallen into it, and so helped to keep it open. The surface of the earth is soft and impressionable by the feet of men; and so with the paths which the mind travels. How worn and dusty, then, must be the highways of the world, how deep the ruts of tradition and conformity! I did not wish to take a cabin passage, but rather to go before the mast and on the deck of the world, for there I could best see the moonlight amid the mountains. I do not wish to go below now.

I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and interpreted in his favor in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings. In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness. 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.

Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed, and in such desperate enterprises? If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a dif—

13. creation ... Age: According to Greek and Roman mythology, the creation was followed by the Golden Age, a time of perfect peace, happiness, and innocence.

Henry David Thoreau  207
ferent drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away. It is not important that he should mature as soon as an apple tree or an oak. Shall he turn his spring into summer? If the condition of things which we were made for is not yet, what were any reality which we can substitute? We will not be shipwrecked on a vain reality. Shall we with pains erect a heaven of blue glass over ourselves, though when it is done we shall be sure to gaze still at the true ethereal heaven far above, as if the former were not? . . .

However mean your life is, meet it and live it; do not shun it and call it hard names. It is not so bad as you are. It looks poorest when you are richest. The faultfinder will find faults even in paradise. Love your life, poor as it is. You may perhaps have some pleasant, thrilling, glorious hours, even in a poorhouse. The setting sun is reflected from the windows of the almshouse as bright a as from the rich man's abode; the snow melts before its door as early in the spring. I do not see but a quiet

14. almshouse: poorhouse.
mind may live as contentedly there, and have as cheering thoughts, as in a palace. The town's poor seem to me often to live the most independent lives of any. Maybe they are simply great enough to receive without misgiving. Most think that they are above being supported by the town; but it often happens that they are not above supporting themselves by dishonest means, which should be more disreputable. Cultivate poverty like a garden herb, like sage. Do not trouble yourself much to get new things, whether clothes or friends. Turn the old; return to them. Things do not change; we change. Sell your clothes and keep your thoughts. God will see that you do not want society. If I were confined to a corner of a garret all my days, like a spider, the world would be just as large to me while I had my thoughts about me. The philosopher said: "From an army of three divisions one can take away its general, and put it in disorder; from the man the most abject and vulgar one cannot take away his thought." Do not seek so anxiously to be developed, to subject yourself to many influences to be played on; it is all dissipation. Humility like darkness reveals the heavenly lights. The shadows of poverty and meanness gather around us, "and lo! creation widens to our view." We are often reminded that if there were bestowed on us the wealth of Croesus, our aims must still be the same, and our means essentially the same. Moreover, if you are restricted in your range by poverty, if you cannot buy books and newspapers, for instance, you are but confined to the most significant and vital experiences; you are compelled to deal with the material which yields the most sugar and the most starch. It is life near the bone where it is sweetest. You are defended from being a trifler. No man loses ever on a lower level by magnanimity on a higher. Superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only.

Money is not required to buy one necessary of the soul. . . .

The life in us is like the water in the river. It may rise this year higher than man has ever known it, and flood the parched uplands; even this may be the eventful year, which will drown out all our muskrats. It was not always dry land where we dwell. I see far inland the banks which the stream anciently washed, before science began to record its freshets. Every one has heard the story which has gone the rounds of New England, of a strong and beautiful bug which came out of the dry leaf of an old table of apple-tree wood, which had stood in a farmer's kitchen for sixty years, first in Connecticut, and afterward in Massachusetts, -- from an egg deposited in the living tree many years earlier still, as appeared by counting the annual layers beyond it; which was heard gnawing out for several weeks, hatched perchance by the heat of an urn. Who does not feel his faith in a resurrection and immortality strengthened by hearing of this? Who knows what beautiful and winged life, whose egg has been buried for ages under many concentric layers of wood-

neness in the dead dry life of society, deposited at first in the albumen of the green and living tree, which has been gradually converted into the semblance of its well-seasoned tomb, -- heard perchance gnawing out now for years by the astonished family of man, as they sat round the festive board, -- many unexpectedly come forth from amidst society's most trivial and handselled furniture, to enjoy its perfect summer life at last!

I do not say that John or Jonathan will realize all this; but such is the character of that morrow which mere lapse of time can never make to dawn. The light which puts out our eyes is darkness to us. Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star.

15. "and . . . view": a reference to a sonnet by the poet Joseph Blanco White (1775–1841).
17. albumen: the soft wood underneath the bark of a tree, where water is conducted; also known as sapwood.

Henry David Thoreau 209
FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

Where I Lived, and What I Lived For

1. Thoreau’s method as a writer is often to move from the small fact to the larger truth. In the first sentence, he tells the reader that his unfinished house allowed the air to blow through. How does this simple fact become important in the discussion of “winds” in the last part of the paragraph?  
2. The theme of the next paragraphs is the effort to “live deliberately” in order to “live deep.” In what way did living in the woods enable Thoreau to improve the quality of his life?  
3. The final paragraph asserts that “we live meanly, like ants.” What explanation does Thoreau give for this way of life? Why does he place so much emphasis on simplicity?  
4. What paradox is expressed in the final sentence of this passage? [For a discussion of paradox, see page 199.]

The Pond in Winter

1. Thoreau says he “awoke to an answered question, to Nature and daylight.” What makes him see that nature transcends all questions and doubts about existence?  
2. At the end of the second paragraph, Thoreau says, “Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads.” What details in the paragraph support this statement?  
3. The final paragraph focuses upon the fishermen who came to Walden Pond from the town. In what way are the fishermen “as wise in natural lore as the citizen is in artificial”? What evidence proves that these “wild men” have penetrated more deeply into nature than the trained naturalist?

Spring

1. This selection gives a sense of the awakening and rebirth that accompanies spring. Beginning with the ribbon of water along the shore, the first paragraph develops an impression of movement until the “living surface” of the pond seems itself “all one active fish.” What images create this impression?  
2. Introduced in the second paragraph is the idea that spring is “a memorable crisis,” in part because it is at once gradual and sudden. What changes in nature mark that mysterious point at which winter turns into spring?  
3. The concluding sentence compares the coming of spring to “the creation of Cosmos out of Chaos and the realization of the Golden Age.” What sense impressions, especially of sound and sight, prepare for this statement?

Conclusion

1. In his conclusion Thoreau again applies the lessons of his experiment to broader experiences. In the first paragraph, what general lesson about conformity is to be drawn from the path he wore between his house and the pond?  
2. The example in the third paragraph of the man who “hears a different drummer” is one of the most quoted passages from Walden. How does this passage support the earlier criticism of conformity?  
3. The powerful fifth paragraph centers upon the rebirth that is possible once we have opened ourselves to nature and to our true inner being. Within this context, what is the “moral” of the story of the beautiful bug that hatched after being buried many years in an old wooden table?  
4. In some respects the final sentences of “Conclusion” sum up all of Walden. Thoreau reminds us that finding our “perfect summer life,” as did the beautiful bug, is not merely a matter of waiting. According to Thoreau, in what way may any of us prepare to experience spiritual awakening?

FOR COMPOSITION

1. Write a composition in which you discuss Thoreau’s relevance to our time. Consider the following points: Is Thoreau’s general point of view a good one for our age? Has the growth of an industrial society made his point of view outmoded? How much of what he specifically says is important to people living today? How much is irrelevant?  
2. In both his actions and his writings, Thoreau was much influenced by Emerson’s Nature. Reread the selection from Nature on page 186. Then show how Thoreau applied one or more of Emerson’s ideas to his own experiment in living at Walden Pond. Use specific passages from Nature and from Thoreau’s statement of purpose, “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For,” to support your conclusions.