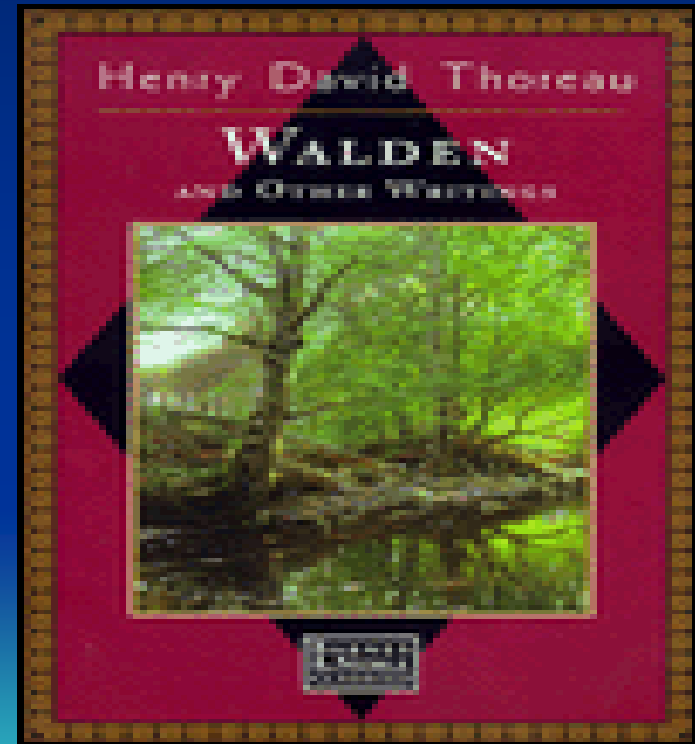


Thoreau

Main Themes And Study Guide



Quotes

It is never
too late to
give up your
prejudices.
Walden



Quotes

- 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 different drummer. *Walden*



Quotes

- Most of the luxuries and many of the so-called comforts of life are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind. *Walden*



Quotes

- Things do not change; we change.

Journal



Quotes

- In any weather, at any hour of the day or night, I have been anxious to improve the nick of time, and notch it on my stick too; to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and the future, which is precisely the present moment; to toe that line.



Quotes

- We do not enjoy poetry unless we know it to be poetry.



Quotes

- For more than five years I maintained myself thus solely by the labour of my hands, and I found, that by working about six weeks in a year, I could meet all the expenses of living.



Quotes

- On tops of mountains, as everywhere to hopeful souls, it is always morning.
- All this worldly wisdom was once the amiable heresy of some wise man. *Journal*



Quotes

- I heartily accept the motto, "That government is best which governs least"; and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. *Civil Disobedience*



Quotes

- Many go fishing all their lives without knowing that it is not fish they are after.
- I had three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society.



Quotes

- Wherever a man goes, men will pursue him and paw him with their dirty institutions, and, if they can, constrain him to belong to their desperate oddfellow society.



Themes



The slumbering of mankind and need for spiritual awakening

- To Thoreau, the trappings of nineteenth century existence - the cycle of tiring work to support property ownership - forced the common man to live as if he were sleep-walking. Thoreau uses the idea of slumbering as a metaphor for mankind's propensity to live by routine, without considering the greater questions and meaning of existence. Therefore, Thoreau urges his readers to seek a spiritual awakening. He emphasizes the perspective he gains by awakening early and experiencing nature while others in the village are still sleeping and using the metaphor of awakening in the morning to demonstrate the difference between himself and his Concord townsmen. The spiritual awakening of Thoreau and his readers is reflected both in the times of day and in the seasons of the year, with the greatest self-awareness and spiritual discoveries occurring in the morning and spring.



Man as part of nature

- Living in a society in which man - in the form of railroads, factories, and other technical innovations - had begun to tame and control nature, Thoreau counters the separation of man from society by conceiving of man as a part of nature. Through his life in the woods, living for the most part off the fruits of the land and deriving intellectual stimulation from plants and animals, Thoreau demonstrates that man can live successfully in the midst of nature. The animals give him companionship and accept him as a familiar part of their environment. Even nature itself is empathetic to him, for example waiting to blow its coldest winds after Thoreau builds his chimney and plasters his walls. The assertion that man is part of nature promotes Thoreau's suggestion that most people who be more intellectually fulfilled and spiritually aware away from the smothering cocoons of city and village life.



The destructive force of industrial progress

- Thoreau began his life at Walden, when the Industrial Revolution was in full force. Its impact upon life is best illustrated in Walden by the locomotive which passes daily by the pond, its whistles and rumbling contrasting with the natural sounds of the birds. Village life now runs at a faster pace, "railroad time," leaving even less time for the contemplation of self and nature which Thoreau desires. Such "progress" has a negative impact upon people's lives and upon the environment, the purity of which it pollutes and destroys.



The animal/spiritual dialectical struggle within man

- Within himself and all men, Thoreau perceives two struggling natures - one a wild, animal nature and the other a spiritual nature. It is this animal nature which occasions the impulse to catch and deliver a woodchuck raw and which he detects in its fullest form in the French-Canadian woodcutter. However, he seeks in himself and urges in his reader the perfection of the spiritual nature, through avoidance of meat and animalistic desires, and represents the struggle in himself through the imagined conversation between the Hermit (spiritual) and Poet (animal). Only within a few examples from the animal kingdom - noble battling ants, the winged cat, and the loon - can Thoreau see the animal and spiritual coexist peacefully.



Nature as reflection of human emotions

- More than once, Thoreau describes Walden Pond as a mirror. Throughout the novel, the weather continually reflects his emotional state. His period of melancholy and doubt occurs during the winter when the pond is frozen and nature is silenced, and his joy and exultation is reflected in the thawing of the lake and growth of new life in the spring. The daily and seasonal variations in the pond and surrounding environment parallel the variety of and changes in Thoreau's intellectual musings. The idea of nature reflecting human emotion supports Thoreau's belief in man as a part of, rather than separate from or above, nature.



Spiritual rebirth reflected in nature and the seasons

- Thoreau employs the repeated metaphor of rebirth throughout his book, as a means of convincing his readers to seek new perspective on themselves and the world. The cycle of the seasons, with the rebirth of the winter-dormant pond, animals, and plants in the spring, functions as the promise of an eventual spiritual rebirth in humans. Likewise, Thoreau's description of the hunter boy who grows to be a naturalist as a man and his metaphor of awakening from the slumber of life evince his hope and belief in the progress of human beings to a newer, greater understanding of themselves. He ends the book with a final metaphor of rebirth, describing the bug which hatched out of a wooden table after decades, in the hope that some day, even if not immediately such a rebirth will occur within human society.



Discovery of the essential through a life of simplicity

- In his first chapter, "Economy," Thoreau says that he went to the woods to describe what is truly necessary in life. Later, he says that he "went to the woods to live deliberately" so that when he died he would not find that he had never really lived. By ridding himself of the luxuries of society - a big house, coffee, meat, even salt and yeast - Thoreau discovers through his own "economy" what is really necessary to live a fulfilled life. His discovery of the relatively small amount of work needed to live in relative comfort leads him to attempt to convince his reader - as well as John Field - to similarly simplify their own lives and thus live more happily. For Thoreau, this is a happy discovery, for he comes to believe that one could be as happy in almshouse, with the same afternoon sun coming in the window as does in a rich person's house, as he would anywhere else. To his reader, Thoreau insists, "Simplicity! Simplicity! Simplicity!"



Exploring the interior of oneself

- Thoreau omitted the subtitle of *Walden*, or *Life in the Woods* in its subsequent publications because he feared his readers would take it too literally. Though he was enthralled by the nature around him, Thoreau also went to the woods to consider himself. In his final chapter, he urges his reader, who may not be able to voyage to Africa or India, to instead explore within himself. He believes that there are uncharted depths within such as will continue to surprise and occupy anyone who explores within, but he perceives that such self-exploration is rare. He uses his own experience at Walden as an example for his reader and urges not social change but change on the level of the individual.



The Transcendentalist conception of nature as the embodiment of the divine

- A follower of the Concord school of Transcendentalism and a good friend of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau expressed and clarified his own personal understanding of Transcendentalism in *Walden*. For him, the divine is most sublimely expressed in nature. He draws upon various Christian conceptions of the divine, as well as those from Eastern religions with which he is familiar, and recontextualizes them to create new meaning. For him, the role of God as creator of all of nature is most inspirational, and through this understanding, he expresses the Transcendentalist belief in existence of a spark of divinity in all men.



The state as unjust and corrupt controller of men's thoughts and actions

- In sentiments that would be more fully expressed in his essay "Civil Disobedience," Thoreau recounts in *Walden* the story of his imprisonment in jail for not paying taxes to a government that supports slavery. Elsewhere in the book, as when he aids a fugitive slave on his journey to Canada, Thoreau demonstrates his opposition to slavery and disgust with the Fugitive Slave Law. He sees the state and its institutions as corrupt and insidious controllers of men, even when they try to escape it, as he does by living in the woods. On a more basic level, he sees the gossip of townspeople and the constant, artificial interactions demanded by village life as distracting from concentration on the true essentials of life.



Original
Title
Page of
Walden

WALDEN;
OR,
LIFE IN THE WOODS.

By HENRY D. THOREAU,
AUTHOR OF "A WEEK ON THE MERRIMACK AND MICHIGAN RIVERS."



I do not presume to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as characterize in the morning, standing on his coast, if only to wake my neighbors up. — Page 96.

BOSTON:
TICKNOR AND FIELDS.
M DCCC LXV.

Links

- <http://www.usmh.usmd.edu/thoreau/>
- [Cybersaunter: Thoreau World Wide](#)
University of Maryland site hosts a comprehensive biography of Thoreau, with sections including Formal Education, Employment & Jobs, and Friends & Love Interests.



<http://www.geocities.com/freereligion/1thoreau.html>

- [Henry David Thoreau \(1817-1862\): A Guide to Resources](#) Collection of links to biographies, portraits, cybertexts of all of Thoreau's works, commentary, analysis, and biography on the Net.



<http://libws66.lib.niu.edu/thoreau/>

- [The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau](#) The online presence of the Thoreau Edition, an academic project which seeks to recover his lost words and create definitive editions of existing works. Includes the biographic "Life and Times of Henry D. Thoreau," analysis in "Reflections on Walden," and a "Thoreau FAQ."



<http://www2.cybernex.com/%7Erienat/ignored.html>

- [Thoreau Information](#) Links to a large number of writings by Thoreau, analyses of Thoreau by other writers, and various writing inspired by Thoreau.



<http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/eng385/walden/chap1.htm>

- [Study Text of Walden](#) Online critical edition of Walden, with comprehensive notes on the various literary allusions, historical circumstances, and ind-depth analysis of the text.

