

Henry David Thoreau

(1817–1862)

On July 4, 1845 (the date was apparently accidental), a young man ended a three-year stay at the house of a friend and moved to a cabin on the shores of Walden Pond in Massachusetts. He was almost twenty-eight years old and, to all appearances, a failure. He had lasted only two weeks as a school-teacher (he refused to whip a child, then a mandatory form of punishment); his public lectures had been uninspiring; the woman to whom he had proposed marriage had turned him down; and he had little interest in the family business. Despite his impressive Harvard education, he had not realized his literary ambitions.

If ever a person looked like a self-unmade man, a man who had squandered the advantages of intelligence, education, and the friendship of brilliant and successful people, it was Henry David Thoreau. On top of all his other problems, Thoreau was difficult to get along with. Three days before Thoreau went to Walden, Nathaniel Hawthorne (page 249) wrote to a New York publisher that Thoreau was “tedious, tiresome, and intolerable.” Hawthorne added, “And yet he has great qualities of intellect and character.”

Even his closest friends had doubts about Thoreau. “He seemed born for great enterprise and for command,” Ralph Waldo Emerson said years later at Thoreau’s funeral, “and I so much regret the loss of his rare powers of action, that I cannot help counting it a fault in him that he had no ambition. Wanting this, instead of engineering for all America, he was



Henry David Thoreau (1856).
Photograph by Benjamin D. Maxham.

the captain of a huckleberry party.”

What Emerson failed to see, and what Thoreau knew (or hoped) all along, was that by leading a berry-picking party on a jaunt in the woods he could “engineer for all America” in the most profound way. This paradox is at the center of Thoreau’s life and work.

The Student Who Wouldn’t Wear Black

Thoreau was born in Concord, Massachusetts, in

1817. His father was a moderately successful manufacturer of pencils. His mother took in boarders, among them the sister of Emerson’s wife, thus establishing the relationship between the two families. As a boy, Thoreau tramped the woods and fields around Concord, often with a fishing rod and seldom with a gun.

Thoreau entered Harvard in 1833 and graduated four years later. Independent and eccentric even then, he attended chapel in a green coat, “because,” he wrote, “the rules required black.” Thoreau never ranked higher than the middle of his class, but he was extremely well read. He became thoroughly familiar with English literature and with the German philosophers who provided many of the underpinnings of Transcendentalism.

After returning to Concord and teaching school, Thoreau went to New York in 1843, but he pined for his hometown. After six months of struggling, he gave up and returned to Concord. A friend proposed that Thoreau and he sail to Europe and work their way across the Continent, but Thoreau turned him down. He appeared to be floundering, but in

fact he knew what he was doing. Thoreau's voyage would be inward, and it would depart from Walden Pond, where Emerson had offered him the use of some land.

Walden: Life in Its Essence

The experiment at Walden Pond was an attempt to rediscover the grandeur of a simple life led close to nature. Though only two miles from town, Walden offered a focus for Thoreau's contemplative urge. "I wish to meet the facts of life," he wrote in his journal, "the vital facts, which are the phenomena or actuality the gods meant to show us . . . and so I came down here."

This private confrontation was to Thoreau's mind the truly heroic enterprise of his time. "I am glad to remember tonight as I sit by my door," he wrote on the evening of July 7, "that I too am at least a remote descendant of that heroic race of men of whom there is a tradition. I too sit here on the shore of my Ithaca, a fellow wanderer and survivor of Ulysses."

When he looked toward town, Thoreau saw his fellow citizens so caught up in making a living that they had become one-dimensional. "The mass of men," as one of the most famous sentences in *Walden* puts it, "lead lives of quiet desperation." He hoped to wake them up and show them that the heroic enterprise of confronting the "vital facts of life" lay literally in their own backyards.

Walden—one of the most well-known works ever produced in America—owes much of its artistic success to Thoreau's blending of style and content. He looked to nature, rather than to the stylists of the past, for a model. To Thoreau a style that imitated nature would speak fundamental spiritual truths. Thoreau wished to build sentences "which lie like boulders on the page, up and down or across; which contain the seed of other sentences, not mere repetition, but creation; which a man might sell his grounds and castles to build."

Thoreau the Protester

It was while he was at Walden that Thoreau's other famous act took place. As a protest against the Mexican War, which he and many

others saw as an attempt to extend American slaveholding territory, Thoreau refused to pay his poll tax and spent a night in jail as a result. While at Walden and again in 1851 (after the Fugitive Slave Act had been passed), Thoreau helped fugitives escaping slavery make their way to Canada. In 1859, he was one of the first defenders of John Brown, the radical abolitionist who staged a famous raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry in Virginia.

Thoreau remained at Walden for a little more than two years. In 1847, he left the cabin and moved back into the Emersons' house in exchange for a few hours a day of odd jobs and gardening. During the next few years he worked on *Walden* (which was published in 1854) and essays such as "Resistance to Civil Government" (page 235). The latter, delivered as a lecture in 1848 and published as an essay in 1849, had little immediate influence, but few essays have had such an overwhelming long-term effect on human history. It was especially important in helping to inspire the passive resistance used by Mohandas K. Gandhi in India and later by Martin Luther King, Jr., in the United States.

Thoreau moved back into his parents' house in 1848 and lived there the rest of his life. He supported himself by making pencils, taking odd jobs (he was an excellent carpenter, mason, and gardener), and doing survey work on the land around Concord. Thoreau became a kind of local record keeper, a fount of knowledge about the amount of rainfall and snowfall and the first days of frost. He could predict to the day when each wildflower in the area would bloom.

In 1860, Thoreau caught a cold, and it soon became clear that beneath the cold lay incurable tuberculosis. He faced his coming death with great calm. The town constable, Sam Staples (who had jailed Thoreau for refusing to pay his poll tax), told Emerson that he "never saw a man dying with so much pleasure and peace."

"Henry, have you made your peace with God?" his aunt is said to have asked him toward the end. "Why, Aunt," he replied, "I didn't know we had ever quarreled."