

Walden analysis



Thoreau begins by matter-of-factly outlining his two-year project at Walden Pond, near Concord, Massachusetts (on land owned by his spiritual mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson, although Thoreau does not mention this detail). He says he lived there for two years and two months, and then moved back to "civilized society"—thus acknowledging right away, and quite honestly, that this was not a permanent lifestyle choice, but only an experiment in living. He describes the reactions of people to news of his project, noting their concern for his well-being out in the wilderness, their worry about his health in the winter, their shock that anyone would willingly forsake human companionship, and occasionally their envy. Thoreau moves quickly to the moral of his experiment: to illustrate the benefits of a simplified lifestyle. He tells us he is recounting the rudimentary existence he led there so that others might see the virtue of it. He argues that excess possessions not only require excess labor to purchase them, but also oppress us spiritually with worry and constraint. As people suppose they need to own things, this need forces them to devote all their time to labor, and the result is the loss of inner freedom. Thoreau asserts that, in their own way, farmers are chained to their farms just as much as prisoners are chained in jails. Working more than is necessary for subsistence shackles people. Faced with a choice between increasing one's means to acquire alleged necessities and decreasing one's needs, Thoreau believes minimizing one's needs is preferable by far. Thoreau identifies only four necessities: food, shelter, clothing, and fuel. Since nature itself does much to provide these, a person willing to accept the basic gifts of nature can live off the land with minimal toil. Any attempt at luxury is likely to prove more a hindrance than a help to an individual's improvement. Thoreau describes the construction of his small

house as an application of his faith in simplicity and self-reliance. Starting with nothing, Thoreau must even borrow the axe he needs to fell trees, an axe that he later returns (eager never to appear indebted to anyone) sharper than when he got it. He receives gifts of some supplies, purchasing others, and sets to work slowly but steadily through the spring months. Thoreau is ready to move in on July 4, 1845, the day of his own independence from social norms and conventions. Throughout the construction process and the agricultural endeavors that follow, Thoreau keeps meticulous books that he shares with us, accounting for all his debits and credits literally down to the last penny. He explains that in farming, after an investment of roughly fifteen dollars, he is able to turn a profit of almost nine dollars. He describes the diet of beans, corn, peas, and potatoes that sustains him, giving us the market value for all these foodstuffs as well. Overall, Thoreau's review of his own accounts reveals approximately sixty-two dollars of expenses during his first eight months at Walden, offset by a gain of almost thirty-seven dollars. Thus, at a total cost of just over twenty-five dollars, Thoreau acquires a home and the freedom to do as he pleases—a handsome bargain, in his opinion. House, \$28 12 1/2 Farm one year, 14 72 1/2 Food eight months, 8 74 Clothing &c., eight months, 8 40 3/4 Oil, &c., eight months, 2 00 In all, \$61 99 3/4 (See Important Quotations Explained) Analysis The first chapter of Walden offers an introduction to the oddball hodgepodge of styles, allusions, and subject matter that the work as a whole offers us. Thoreau moves from moral gravity to the style of a how-to manual, and then to a lyrical flight of fancy, and then to a diary entry. In a prophetic vein he tells us that his Walden experiment was intended to instruct his fellow men, who “labor under a mistake” about life, work, and leisure. But soon afterward, he

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tells us we may expect to spend \$3. 14 on nails if we build a shack of our own. And then, just as unexpectedly, he quotes the poet Chapman telling us how " for earthly greatness / All heavenly comforts rarefies to air. " He can speak like a philosopher, using grand polysyllabic words, or he can talk quite simply about sitting on a pumpkin. It is never obvious whether this is the diary of a private experience, a sermon delivered to his compatriots, an extended fantasy about life in the woods, or a piece of nature writing. The common denominator of all this patchwork is the distinctive voice of Thoreau himself, who is the true subject of this work. Rather than a handbook for good living, Walden might best be read as a subjective extravaganza on the subject of Henry David Thoreau. Reading the work as a personal fantasia rather than as a manual or sermon allows us to brush aside a lot of the criticism that has been aimed at Walden from its first publication until now. Some readers enjoy pointing out the failure of his project, how contradictory it is to claim self-reliance when he builds a shack on another man's property with borrowed tools and gifts of lumber, and how self-centered Thoreau seems throughout the work. Yet Thoreau himself never denies any of these accusations. He tells us in the first paragraph of " Economy" that his Walden project was only a temporary experiment, not a lifelong commitment to an ideal. He never claims to be a model socialist or a pioneer hero; he never even claims to be a very successful farmer or house-builder. Nor does he ever claim to eschew society altogether; on the contrary, he tells us that he never had more company than when he went to live in the woods, and that he goes to the village every day. As for self-reliance, he is content merely to have acquired a house for little money, relying more or less on his own labor, and is not an extremist about never seeking help from others (though he

always aims to return favors). Self-reliance for Thoreau is more than paying one's own bills without debt; it is the spiritual pleasure of fully claiming ownership over the world in which one lives. Finally, Thoreau would happily admit the charge of self-centeredness: he exults in his vision and in the depths of his mind and soul. The vitality of this first chapter makes us ponder whether a lively sense of being centered in one's world is such a bad thing after all.