

# Henry david thoreau: transcendentalist assignment

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Henry David Thoreau spent much time studying nature and applying those studies to the human condition. His Transcendentalist ideas shone through in his writings and his life. In "Economy" he asks, "Why has man rooted himself thus firmly in the earth, but that he may rise in the same proportion into the heavens above" (Thoreau 58). He asks this question in response to man's ever increasing need to have more than the basic necessities of life. In other words, if we have warmth, food, water, and clothing what purpose does added luxury serve.

Thoreau reinforces this later when he writes, "When I have met an immigrant tottering under a bundle which contained his all ??? looking like an enormous wen which had grown out of the nape of his neck ??? I have pitied him, not because that was his all, but because he had all that to carry" (Thoreau 110). In Thoreau's opinion these things only hamper one's ability to rise above a mundane existence. Moving to the pond and living off what it supplied helped him in that quest.

Reading on into "Where I Lived" he says, "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 dear, nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary" (Thoreau 135). This is an extremely telling statement. Thoreau is speaking of his dedication to finding truth in nature. The real travesty, for him, would be to neglect this opportunity to learn what nature has to teach him or die never the wiser.

He honestly believed nature to be the highest physical reality on Earth and only by understanding it could a person understand oneself. Living in harmony with nature was the first and best way to realize the truths of human nature. He furthers these ideas later in "Sounds" by asking what is gained by earnestly listening to what is around you: The rays which stream through the shutter will be no longer remembered when the shutter is wholly removed. No method nor discipline can supersede the necessity of being forever on the alert.

What is a course of history or philosophy, or poetry, no matter how well selected, or the best society, or the most admirable routine of life, compared with the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen? Will you be a reader, a student merely, or a seer? (Thoreau 156). He had not read any books over his first summer at Walden in favor of working his land and keeping other practical matters in order. The sounds of the natural world, as well as the opportunities he afforded himself to sit in the sun, offered a unique opportunity to for inner reflection.

While he must have gotten much joy from reading and learning he understood that true understanding could only come from observing what nature offered. He continued, "...I was reminded of the lapse of time. I grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been. They were not time subtracted from my life, but so much over and above my usual allowance" (Thoreau 157). How beautiful it must have been for him to have this time to search within himself through nature.

Knowing and understanding that nature provides an environment to grow spiritually allowed Mr. Thoreau to learn his place in the world and accept it happily. This utilization of his natural surroundings helped him focus inwardly. Looking at his isolation as a gift he wrote, " Some of my pleasantest hours were during the long rain-storms in the spring or fall, which confined me to the house for the afternoon as well as the forenoon, soothed by their ceaseless roar and pelting; when an early twilight ushered in a long evening in which many thoughts had time to take root and unfold themselves" (Thoreau 177).

The solitude he found at Walden, on a dreary rainy day that may have found others in different depressed states, he used to ponder the idea of loneliness and how it had such a small effect on him. To Thoreau, loneliness was only possible for those who had to be contented by spending time with others in endeavors that did nothing to increase the human spirit or give way to a heightened perception of one's self. It seems that, above all, Thoreau felt that mankind devoted too much of itself to trying to compete, impress, and just generally keep up with itself. The disarray of the government in Thoreau's time did not serve to better this opinion.

This was the time of the Mexican war and slavery was a growing issue in the United States. Thoreau had come to a point that his faith in government was lost as well as his faith in those that followed it. " The mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines with their bodies" (Thoreau 388). He felt all those employed by the state had lost the ability to make rational moral judgments and the citizens were deprived of a true say in government. He argues that by doing this, "...they put themselves on a level <https://assignbuster.com/henry-david-thoreau-transcendentalist-assignment/>

with wood and earth and stones; and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose as well.

Such command no more respect than men of straw or a lump of dirt” (Thoreau 388). To Thoreau, people of the time were blindly following a government that put its interest ahead of the peoples. What was even worse was that the people could see the truth if only they would look. The answers to these problems at the time did not necessarily have to be revolution. In Thoreau’s mind a man could make a dramatic statement by washing his hands of the whole mess and therefore making a powerful statement to others.