

The value of reading according to henry d. thoreau essay

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In the “ Reading” section of *Walden*, Henry D. Thoreau presents personal opinions and guidance based on his own beliefs and experiences with reading. He outlines the type of reading we should engage in and details why certain books are or are not of value. Thoreau also illustrates more generalized concepts typical of the Transcendentalism movement to which he and local contemporaries belonged. Thoreau considers the thoughtful reading of certain books a means of acquiring truth and wisdom.

Unlike more worldly pursuits or even personal endeavors such as founding a family, for Thoreau, “...in dealing with truth we are immortal...” (1989/1854, p. 179). Truth in the form of the written word is for Thoreau, “ the choices of relics” (1989/1854, p. 181). Unlike the spoken word or even works in other genres of art, “ Books are the treasured wealth of the world and the fit inheritance of generations and nations” (1989/1854, p. 182). Thoreau’s ultimate regard for books and reading mirrors what we might expect to hear from literary scholars or men and women of letters. Yet considering the time and place in which he wrote, his message must have resonated with few of his neighbors or friends.

Ralph Waldo Emerson and the other transcendentalists aside, it’s difficult to imagine his neighboring farmers and the townsfolk of Concord agreeing with his assertions. Aside from the wealthy, elite and uncommonly philosophical, who among Thoreau’s contemporaries would have had time to devote to studying classical literature and ancient scriptures? Not only should these books be read, but Thoreau asserts that the ancient classics should be read and studied in their original languages. Thoreau insists, “ It is worth the

expense of youthful days and costly hours, if you learn only some words of an ancient language" (1989/1854, p.

180). It is not enough to read the classics, but readers should take the time to learn Greek and Hebrew in order to fully grasp the wisdom and truth of Homer, Aeschylus and Virgil. Thoreau sets high standards and insists on reading books that readers in today's society (much like his own) would have little time or inclination to read. Recognizing the challenge he presents, Thoreau makes his argument in a sound, strong, sensible and at times entertaining way. He admits to thinking the " Little Reading" series of " universal noveldom" books in Concord's Circulating Library must refer to a town he had yet to visit, as he couldn't imagine anyone naming let alone taking the time to read books that belittle reading in their titles (1989/1854, p. 183).

As a practical example of the value of " high reading" for everyday people, Thoreau provides the example of the hired hand on the outskirts of town who has a profound religious experience, yet may because of the nature of his faith, " think it is not true" (1989/1854, p. 185). Exposure to the work of Zoroaster written thousands of years ago could enable the hired hand to instead, "...commune with Zoroaster...and through the liberalizing influence of all the worthies, with Jesus Christ himself...let our church ' go by the board'" (1989/1854, p. 185). This example points to Thoreau's ultimate value for personal reflection and self-consciousness as opposed to concerns with convention or the opinions of society at large. Reading is of value because it

imparts truth and knowledge, but ultimately, the real value of what is gleaned through reading is how one can use it to discover selfhood.

Unlike the strict objectivity sciences such as psychology demanded, Thoreau considered personal reflection and exposure to truth, knowledge and experience with nature to be paramount to understanding the inner intellectual, moral and spiritual self. Thoreau and the Transcendentalists advocated a much more personal and subjective approach to understanding, but his belief in the validity of the discovery process mirrors psychologists' attempts to describe and understand the workings of the mind. Despite its high-minded sensibility and tone, in "Reading" Thoreau manages to connect with and speak directly to common, everyday people. This is one of the most charming aspects of this chapter in *Walden*, and it is the reason his opinions and personal recommendations retain a level of appeal today, despite the challenges they present. References Thoreau, H. D.

(1989). *Reading. Walden and Other Writings* (pp. 179-187).

New York: Bantam. (Original work published 1854).