

Background nearly  
half of the article is



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## **Background**

Why I Went to the Woods was written by Henry David Thoreau and was inspired by an ‘ experiment’ in which he constructed a small house in the woods near his residence in Massachusetts. He stayed in the small house for 2 years, 2 days, and 2 months, and while living in the woods, wrote an article about the ordeal. Nearly half of the article is made up of Thoreau’s reflection on human nature and society. He mentions that nobody can be an unbiased commentator on these two things unless he eliminates himself from them and exists in what he calls “ voluntary poverty”.

Thoreau definitely has much to talk about in relation to society. He writes that men labor their lives away, toiling and paying their expenses with no knowledge on what it means to be human, he continues to write that “ The mass of men live lives of quiet desperation” (Thoreau, pp. 283). In this section, Thoreau encourages us to become independent and to have a purposeful life. The second half of the article delves on Thoreau’s day-to-day activities in the house in the woods; his experiences during trips to the town and the people he encounters. Above all, Thoreau tries to explain why he

opted to get away from society and move into the woods, just as the article's title. This is evident in the first paragraph, he writes " 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" (Thoreau, pp. 278).

## **We Should Live a Simplistic Life**

The central idea that Thoreau tries to convey in the article is that life should be taken in the simplest of forms, evidenced by opting to live in the woods for more than two years. " What news! How much more important to know what that is which was never old!" (Thoreau, pp. 280), this is just one of the several lines in which he attempts to convince society to adopt his simplistic lifestyle.

He writes that we should live a simple life with only the essential needs, he urges his audience " Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumbnail" (Thoreau, 278). To ensure that his message reaches the intended audience in the intended manner, Thoreau incorporates several rhetorical tools. For example, he chooses words that bring out his confidence, in one instance he writes " And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us" (Thoreau, pp. 281) instead of writing " We understand unique stuff by looking at what is real". He chooses his words carefully. Thoreau also uses imagery and metaphor in *Why I Went to the Woods* to add meaning and develop his

stance. He calls life the “chopping sea of civilized life” (Thoreau 278) to stress on the labors of life.

This harsh comparison of civilized life to a chopping sea demonstrates Thoreau’s rejection of a flowery and worthless lifestyle. It also plainly pushes on simplification to avoid the challenges that most people come across if they opt to choose a complex lifestyle. Thoreau makes use of rhetorical questions in the article. He uses several of these questions, the one that struck me most was “Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life?” (Thoreau, pp.

279). This single line brings out the central theme of the article: that of simplicity. It projects humans’ as blatantly stupid enough to waste away their lives.

Another important use of rhetoric language is a synecdoche, he writes about an “overgrown establishment, cluttered with furniture” (Thoreau, 279). Here, the clutter of furniture symbolizes all facets life, forced together into the tiny brain of man. Thoreau makes a convincing point here. Essentially, the mind resembles an attic. Many people opt to fill up their attics with old property as they are fed up with it, or purely yearn for more that they have already. However, after some time, the space in the attic is used up and we become overpowered.

Thoreau advises us to throw out the old stuff that are filling up the attic. His escape to the woods was a way of clearing out his “attic”.

## **Conclusion**

In *Why I Went to the Woods*, Thoreau conveys his views about simplicity of life.

Every word inside the article points to this theme. To begin with, he uses a scholarly tone and this brings out his message in the intended manner.

However, he balances the tone and even gives his personal outlook. He also uses rhetorical tools such as imagery, metaphors, and rhetorical questions to stress on the importance of adopting a simple life, and the risks of failing to do the same. All of these language tools add up to bringing out the central theme of the article.

## **Work Cited**

Thoreau, Henry David. *Why I Went to the Woods*. In *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*. Devon: Dover Publications, Inc, 1995.