

# Thoreau's transcendentalism



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In the early 19th century, a philosophy known as transcendentalism emerged in America. Members of the transcendentalist movement believed that the thoughts of individuals were bastardized due to societal issues such as politics and religion. Although transcendentalists held numerous beliefs, the three essential values of transcendentalism are idealism, individualism, and the divinity of nature.

Transcendentalists believed that individuals should be independent, and not influenced by the rules of society. Along with individualism, members of this movement used creative writing in order to describe the significance of nature, and demonstrate their love and respect for the natural world. In order to live a successful life free from the judgement of society, transcendentalists believed that it was crucial to connect and understand nature.

One of the most influential writers of this period, Henry David Thoreau, was very passionate about nature. Thoreau is most well-known for his book *Walden*, which describes the importance of living a simple life and being able to provide for yourself while preserving a connection to nature. The transcendentalist themes reflected in the piece were inspired by the time Thoreau lived away from society in a cabin he built himself on Walden Pond. After Thoreau's death, another piece titled *Walking* was published. In this piece, Thoreau writes on the subject of nature, and dismisses the ideas of society that hinder both individual thought and the experiences provided by nature. Both of these pieces reinforce Thoreau's message that there is value in self-reliance and discovery as well as a connection between man and nature.

Throughout both texts, Thoreau explains that nature represents the natural

aspect to man that has been subdued by society. Unlike most people, Thoreau believes it is more important to be independent in both social and economic situations than to rely on society to make those decisions. Thoreau finds contentedness in solitude, and refuses to interact with society, unless it is on his own terms. Thoreau also expresses that he does not understand how people can be content in life without a strong connection to nature. A passage from *Walking* describes Thoreau's opinions on normal members of society, "I think that I cannot preserve my health and spirits, unless I spend four hours a day at least" and it is commonly more than that" sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields, absolutely free from all worldly engagements You may safely say, A penny for your thoughts, or a thousand pounds. When sometimes I am reminded that the mechanics and shopkeepers stay in their shops not only all the forenoon, but all the afternoon too, sitting with crossed legs, so many of them" as if the legs were made to sit upon, and not to stand or walk upon" I think that they deserve some credit for not having all committed suicide long ago. Thoreau believes that people are distracted by society, and no longer take the time to enjoy the beauty of nature, and this is incomprehensible to him.

In *Walden*, Thoreau reinforces this idea when he states, "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..." In both texts, we see that Thoreau expresses his distaste for society. Instead of a mentality exhausted by societal issues, Thoreau encourages readers to think deeply about themselves and their personal connection to nature. In *Walking* Thoreau says, "In my afternoon walk I would fain forget all my morning occupations and my obligations to society. But it

sometimes happens that I cannot easily shake off the village. What business have I in the woods, if I am thinking of something other than the woods?

Thoreau believes that the only way to fix the issues faced by members of society is to keep the interactions with others to a minimum and to take the time to enjoy the splendor of the natural world.

Thoreau begins *Walking* with a quote that captures the theme of the piece; his admiration of the natural world, "I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil" to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society. Throughout the essay, he describes the wildness present in both man and nature, and uses the activity of walking to explain the human attempt to understand nature. Thoreau believed that man was a part of nature and completely separate from society, and elaborates on this concept in *Walden*.

In order to understand nature himself, Thoreau took a trip to Walden Pond. At the pond, Thoreau lived a simple life and supported himself. He knew that society would be skeptical of his endeavor, but wished to gain valuable knowledge about himself by surrounding himself with the natural world.

Unlike other members of society who focused on materialistic things, Thoreau was content with simplicity, and focused his attention on nature. Not only did Thoreau build the cabin he inhabited himself, but he lived off the land eating foods that nature provided, and found entertainment and intellectual stimulation in the animals and plants surrounding him. He proved that it was possible to live successfully among nature, and that people who escaped the grasp of society would be more satisfied and aware if they accepted themselves as a part of nature. Thoreau explains that after

spending time in nature, he no longer felt that human connection was significant; In the midst of a gentle rain while these thoughts prevailed, I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature, in the very pattering of the drops, and in every sound and sight around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me, as made the fancied advantage of human neighborhood insignificant.

While *Walking* and *Walden* share many of the same themes, the way in which Thoreau presented the ideas was very different. In *Walking*, concepts are presented more dramatically than they are in *Walden*. Although he presented his ideas differently in each of the texts, the relationship between the texts explained Thoreau's reasoning for appealing to humans. In fact, an article published by *Slate Magazine*, claims that *Walking* is *Walden's* counterpart. Wen Stephenson said, "If you understand *Walking*, you can almost skip *Walden*. (I'm not really recommending that" in fact, please don't.) What I mean is this: It's clear that *Walking*, and the actual walking that inspired it, leads to *Walden*. Within a year of delivering the *Walking* lecture for the first time, in the spring of 1851, Thoreau was back at his draft of the big book, revising and expanding with renewed creative energy. You could almost say Thoreau walked to *Walden*. The natural correlation between the two pieces allowed for Thoreau to convey to people that in order to live a successful and happy life, they should not depend on society to guide their actions, and that humans were not superior, but equal to nature.