

Emerson's influence on Thoreau



Emerson's Influence of Thoreau Amateur naturalist, essayist, lover of solitude and poet, Henry David Thoreau was a student and protégé of the great American philosopher and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson. Thoreau's construction of a cabin on Emerson's land at Walden Pond is a fitting symbol of the intellectual debt that Thoreau owed to Emerson. In "Nature," Emerson wrote, "In the woods, we return to reason and faith...." However, it was Thoreau who took this literally and tests Emerson's ideas about nature by living at Walden Pond. Strongly influenced by Transcendentalism, Thoreau believed in the "perfectibility of mankind through education, self-exploration and spiritual awareness." (cite). It could be argued that ideas about learning and growing intellectually and spiritually, education, in a word, are the heart of American transcendentalism. Even the transcendentalists' most literary works are explorations, open-ended and suggestive, both conducted by the author and, as they always hoped, the reader. As usual with this group, Ralph Waldo Emerson set the tone for discussions about education, especially with his Harvard lecture, "The American Scholar" [1837] which has had endless "rewritings" by Phi Beta Kappa lecturers and writers; his later unfinished "Essay on Education" shows his lifelong interest in the subject. Krystyna Grocholski shares her responses to Alcott, Emerson, and Thoreau. Another response is the on-line essay, "Emerson's Philosophy of Education" by Sanderson Beck. Henry David Thoreau tried to carry out some of his own revolutionary ideas, teaching several years in Concord. An excellent overview of his ideas may be found in Martin Bickman's essay, "Thoreau and the Tradition of the Active Mind" in *Uncommon Learning: Thoreau on Education*. Thoreau describes thinking as a retreat into the self, but it is hardly a passive retreat. Self-exploration can occur and may even be

promoted by action; indeed, the best sources of employment are one's that encourage self-exploration. "What should we think of the shepherd's life if his flocks always wandered to higher pastures than his thoughts?" he wonders.⁵ Individuals must also make sure that their actions do not hinder self-expression. In the beginning of *Walden*, Thoreau argues that all men should construct their exterior dwelling places. Not only is physical labor good for the soul, but it also minimizes one's dependence upon other people, making unfettered self-exploration more possible. Similarly, men should construct their own inner dwellings. Thoreau believes that individuals are responsible for the kinds of selves they have, and he attributes both major and minor evils to a failure of responsibility. His fellow citizens live lives of "quite desperation" because they do not recognize that they have chosen this kind of life and they are not aware that they have other choices. Immoral behavior is often

4 *Walden*. From *Walden and Other Writings*, Bantam Books, 1989: 205. 5 *Walden*, 171. 8 caused by a lack of concern for the self, and by a failure to recognize that an unjust self is not worth having. Individuals who are truly concerned with themselves, Thoreau argues, may not be particularly charitable, but they will refrain from harming others. "It is not a man's duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong." However, "if I devote myself to other pursuits and contemplations, I must see, at least, that I do not pursue them upon another man's shoulders. I must get off him first."⁶ Thoreau lives at Walden Pond to find the true meaning of life. He wants to experience things for himself. Thoreau says, "I wanted...to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion" (Thoreau...). He takes Emerson's advice who says, "Let us demand our own works and laws and

<https://assignbuster.com/emersons-influence-on-thoreau/>

worship" (Emerson...). " Standing on the bare ground- my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space- all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball" (Emerson...). In this sense, Emerson refers to vision, perception and the eye, which become the links between man and nature, and man's ability to tap into nature spiritually. Like Emerson, Thoreau also wanted to live a simple life in order to find the deeper meaning. Thoreau says, " I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life..."