

Henry david thoreau



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He spent his life in voluntary poverty, enthralled by the study of nature. Two years, in the prime of his life, were spent living in a shack in the woods near a pond. Who would choose a life like this? Henry David Thoreau did, and he enjoyed it. Who was Henry David Thoreau, what did he do, and what did others think of his work? Henry David Thoreau was born in Concord, Massachusetts on July 12, 1817 ("Thoreau" 96), on his grandmother's farm. Thoreau, who was of French-Huguenot and Scottish-Quaker ancestry, was baptized as David Henry Thoreau, but at the age of twenty he legally changed his name to Henry David. Thoreau was raised with his older sister Helen, older brother John, and younger sister Sophia (Derleth 1) in genteel poverty (The 1995 Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia 1). It quickly became evident that Thoreau was interested in literature and writing. At a young age he began to show interest writing, and he wrote his first essay, "The Seasons," at the tender age of ten, while attending Concord Academy (Derleth 4). In 1833, at the age of sixteen, Henry David was accepted to Harvard University, but his parents could not afford the cost of tuition so his sister, Helen, who had begun to teach, and his aunts offered to help. With the assistance of his family and the beneficiary funds of Harvard he went to Cambridge in August 1833 and entered Harvard on September first. "He [Thoreau] stood close to the top of his class, but he went his own way too much to reach the top" (5). In December 1835, Thoreau decided to leave Harvard and attempt to earn a living by teaching, but that only lasted about a month and a half (8). He returned to college in the fall of 1836 and graduated on August 16, 1837 (12). Thoreau's years at Harvard University gave him one great gift, an introduction to the world of books. Upon his return from college, Thoreau's family found him to be less likely to accept

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opinions as facts, more argumentative, and inordinately prone to shock people with his own independent and unconventional opinions. During this time he discovered his secret desire to be a poet (Derleth 14), but most of all he wanted to live with freedom to think and act as he wished. Immediately after graduation from Harvard, Henry David applied for a teaching position at the public school in Concord and was accepted. However, he refused to flog children as punishment. He opted instead to deliver moral lectures. This was looked down upon by the community, and a committee was asked to review the situation. They decided that the lectures were not ample punishment, so they ordered Thoreau to flog recalcitrant students. With utter contempt he lined up six children after school that day, flogged them, and handed in his resignation, because he felt that physical punishment should have no part in education (Derleth 15). In 1837 Henry David began to write his Journal (16). It started out as a literary notebook, but later developed into a work of art. In it Thoreau record his thoughts and discoveries about nature (The 1995 Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia 1). Later that same year, his sister, Helen, introduced him to Lucy Jackson Brown, who just happened to be Ralph Waldo Emerson's sister-in-law. She read his Journal, and seeing many of the same thoughts as Emerson himself had expressed, she told Emerson of Thoreau. Emerson asked that Thoreau be brought to his home for a meeting, and they quickly became friends (Derleth 18). On April 11, 1838, not long after their first meeting Thoreau, with Emerson's help, delivered his first lecture, "Society" (21). Ralph Waldo Emerson was probably the single most portentous person in Henry David Thoreau's life. From 1841 to 1843 and again between 1847 and 1848 Thoreau lived as a member of Emerson's household, and during this time he came to know Bronson Alcott, Margaret

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Fuller, and many other members of the " Transcendental Club" (" Thoreau" 696). On August 31, 1839 Henry David and his elder brother, John, left Concord on a boat trip down the Concord River, onto the Middlesex Canal, into the Merrimack River and into the state of New Hampshire. Out of this trip came Thoreau's first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (25). Early in 1841, John Thoreau, Henry's beloved older brother, became very ill, most likely with tuberculosis, and in early May a poor and distraught Henry David moved into the upstairs of Ralph Waldo Emerson's house (35). On March 11, 1842 John died, and Henry's life long friend and companion was gone (40). In early 1845 Thoreau decided to make a sojourn to nearby Walden Pond, where Emerson had recently purchased a plot of land. He built a small cabin overlooking the pond, and from July 4, 1845 to September 6, 1847 Thoreau lived at Walden Pond (" Thoreau" 697). When asked why he went to live at Walden Pond Thoreau replied: 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. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life... (Thoreau 75- 76). One night in July 1846, during his stay at Walden, Thoreau was walking into Concord from the pond when he was accosted by Sam Staples, the Concord jailer, and charged with not having paid his poll tax. Thoreau had not paid a poll tax since 1843 when his friend Bronson Alcott spent a night in jail for not paying his. He didn't see why he should have to pay the tax, he had never voted, and he knew that such a purely political tax had to be affiliated with the funding of the Mexican War and the subsistence of slavery, both of which he

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strongly objected to (Derleth 66). The following morning Thoreau was released because someone, probably his Aunt Maria Thoreau, had paid his back taxes (68). This imprisonment compelled Thoreau to write "Civil Disobedience," one of his most famous essays. On May 6, 1862 ("Thoreau" 697), after an unavailing journey to Minnesota in 1861 in search of better health, Henry David Thoreau died of tuberculosis. Thoreau was buried in Sleep Hollow Cemetery in Concord near his friends Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Bronson Alcott (The 1995 Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia 2). Thoreau never earned a livelihood by writing, but his works fill twenty volumes. His first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, was a huge failure selling only 219 of the original 1,000 copies ("Thoreau" 697), but his doctrine of passive resistance impacted many powerful people such as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. (The 1995 Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia 1). Thoreau's essay, "Civil Disobedience," accentuated personal ethics and responsibility. It urged the individual to follow the dictates of conscience in any conflict between itself and civil law, and to violate unjust laws to invoke their repeal. Throughout his life, Thoreau protested against slavery by lecturing, by abetting escaped slaves in their decampment to freedom in Canada, and by outwardly defending John Brown when he made his hapless attack on Harpers Ferry in 1859 (2). *Walden* is conceivably Thoreau's most famous work, however, for nearly a century after its publication it was considered to be only a collection of nature essays, as social criticism, or as a literal autobiography. *Walden* is now looked upon as a created work of art ("Thoreau" 697). In *Walden* Thoreau expresses his sentiments on varying subjects such as, the attitudes of society, age, and work. Thoreau felt that society had no right to

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judge people on the basis of their appearance: No man ever stood the lower in my estimation for having a patch in his clothes; yet I am sure that there is greater anxiety, commonly, to have fashionable, of at least clean and unpatched clothes, than to have a sound conscience (Thoreau 27). Thoreau believed in relaxation and simplicity, and he said: " As for work, we haven't any of any consequence" (78). Thoreau also believed that older people should not tell younger people how to live because: Age is no better, hardly so well, qualified for an instructor as youth, for it has not profited so much as it has lost. One may almost doubt if the wisest man has learned anything of absolute value by living (16). Walden is filled with sarcasm, criticism, and observations of nature, life, and society, and is written in a very unique style. Walden has been described as an elaborate system of circular imagery which centers on Walden Pond as a symbol of heaven, the ideal of perfection that should be striven for (" Thoreau" 697). Thoreau has been called America's greatest prose stylist, naturalist, pioneer ecologist, conservationist, visionary, and humanist (The 1995 Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia 2). It has also been said that Thoreau's style shows an unconscious, but very pointed degree of Emerson's influence. However, there is often a rudeness, and an inartistic carelessness in Thoreau's style that is not at all like the style of Emerson. Thoreau possessed an amazing forte for expressing his many observations in vivid color: No one has ever excelled him in the field of minute description. His acute powers of observation, his ability to keep for a long time his attention upon one thing, and his love of nature and of solitude, all lend a distinct individuality to his style (Pattee 226). Thoreau's good friend Bronson Alcott described his style as: More primitive and Homeric than any American, his style of thinking was robust, racy, as if Nature herself had built

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his sentences and seasoned the sense of his paragraphs with his own vigor and salubrity. Nothing can be spared from them; there is nothing superfluous; all is compact, concrete, as nature is (Alcott 16). Most of Thoreau's writings had to do with Nature which caused him to receive both positive and negative criticism. Paul Elmer More said that Thoreau was: " The greatest by far of our writers on Nature and the creator of a new sentiment in literature," but he then does a complete turn around to say: Much of his [Thoreau's] writing, perhaps the greater part, is the mere record of observation and classification, and has not the slightest claim on our remembrance, -- unless, indeed, it posses some scientific value, which I doubt (More 860). Thoreau was always very forthright in everything he said. Examples of this can be found throughout Walden, one of which being his statement in chapter two: " To a philosopher all news, as it is called, is gossip, and they who edit and read it are old women over their tea" (Thoreau 79). There is certainly no ersatz sentiment, nor simulation of reverence of benevolence in Walden (Briggs 445). Thoreau was a philosopher of individualism, who placed nature above materialism in private life, and ethics above conformity in politics (The 1995 Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia 1). His life was marked by whimsical acts and unusual stands on public issues (" Thoreau" 697). These peculiar beliefs led to a lot of criticism of Thoreau and his work. James Russell Lowell complained the Thoreau exalted the constraints of his own dispositions and insisted upon accepting his shortcomings and debilities as virtues and powers. Lowell considered: " a great deal of the modern sentimentalism about Nature... a mark of disease" (Wagenknecht 2). In some ways Walden is deluding. It consists of eighteen essays in which Thoreau condenses his twenty-six

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month stay at Walden Pond into the seasons of a single year. Also, the idea is expressed in Magill's Survey of American Literature that: Walden was not a wilderness, nor was Thoreau a pioneer; his hut was within two miles of town, and while at Walden, he made almost daily visits to Concord and to his family, dined out often, had frequent visitors, and went off on excursions. Walden is a testament to the renewing power of nature, to the need of respect and preservation of the environment, and to the belief that: "in wildness is the salvation of the world" (Magill 1949). Walden is simply an experience recreated in words for the purpose of getting rid of the world and discovering the self ("Thoreau" 697). Henry David Thoreau strived for freedom and equality. He was opinionated and argumentative. He stood up for what he believed in and was willing to fight for it. His teachings and writings had an amazing affect on people and the world, and will have for centuries to come.