



## Walden and Other Writings (Modern Library Classics)

*Henry David Thoreau*

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## Walden and Other Writings (Modern Library Classics) Henry David Thoreau

Henry David Thoreau's vision of personal freedom is indelibly etched on the American consciousness. 'We need the tonic of wildness,' Thoreau wrote in *Walden*, and by turning his back on town amenities to build a house on Walden Pond in 1845, he helped shape our notions of the individual, subsistence, and a moral relation to nature. Raising white beans and potatoes that he sold to his Concord neighbors, he stayed for two years; his book records both the philosophy he developed while living alone and the facts of his everyday life. Included here with the complete text of *Walden* are selections from Thoreau's first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*; 'A Plea for Captain John Brown,' his eloquent defense of the American abolitionist's rebellion at Harper's Ferry, and such masterpieces as his famous essay 'Civil Disobedience,' in which he describes a night spent in prison for refusing to pay a poll tax to a government that condoned slavery.

## Walden and Other Writings (Modern Library Classics) Details

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# From Reader Review Walden and Other Writings (Modern Library Classics) for online ebook

## Trish says

I'm just gonna say it, I like Ralph Waldo Emerson's essays and poetry better. His writing is more refined and stylistically pleasing. Reading "Civil Disobedience" is like bachelorhood being shoved in your face. Thoreau clearly isn't speaking of a method of action that could ever be followed by the family-man or woman or young adult. I understand his ideology and thought-process, but it doesn't seem to include an ounce of practicality in it.

Nonetheless, he's a good essayist who has respectable views and beliefs on important topics like slavery, military, war, government, society, voting, nonviolence, nature, individualism, religion, etc. Don't skim this if you have to read it for school. It's an invaluable asset to understanding and criticizing politics, religion, society and the U.S. government.

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## James says

On or about July 23, 1846 Henry David Thoreau was detained in Concord for nonpayment of the poll tax, and he spent the night in the Concord Jail. He described his experience in jail thus: "The rooms were whitewashed once a month; and this one, at least, was the whitest, most simply furnished, and probably the neatest apartment in the town." He described his fellow inmate ("room-mate") as someone accused of "burning a barn" who had been incarcerated for three months waiting for trial. He was "quite domesticated and contented, since he got his board for nothing, and thought that he was well treated." They each had a window of their own to look out and Thoreau noted that "It was like traveling to a far country, such as I had never expected to behold, to lie there for one night." The next day some anonymous person paid the tax and Thoreau was once again a free man.

The episode would be little noted but for the essay that Thoreau proceeded to write, an essay that would become one of the great Western statements on the importance of conscience. The essay is now known as "On Civil Disobedience" although its original title was "Resistance to Civil Government". It is short, less than twenty pages in the edition I read, but it lays out Thoreau's thoughts on the nature of Government: where it gets its authority, when it must be resisted, and more.

He begins the essay with the motto, "That government is best which governs least;" and he immediately makes a case for a government that "governs not at all", at least when men are "prepared for it". He will go on to identify three objections that he, and others, have against the government: namely, maintaining a standing army, the mistreatment of native Americans, and the institution of slavery. He claims that the American government has lost some of its integrity and is not worthy of our respect. However he quickly notes that he is not a "no-government man", because "to speak practically and as a citizen" he does not want no-government but merely "better government". That is he wants a government he can respect.

How does he recommend that he and his friends should resist a government that has lost his respect? He does not speak of a "call to arms". He is not a man like John Brown would become in less than a decade; rather he lays out a pacifist strategy of civil resistance to the government. He describes this resistance in several ways throughout the essay, including: refusing allegiance to the state of Massachusetts; receding from government

(withdrawing his association with it); resigning your office (for those who have been appointed); refusing to pay taxes; and refusing to serve in an "unjust war" (the Mexican-American war had begun in April, 1846 and would continue until February, 1848).

To a great extent the essay is both anti-war and anti-slavery. Thoreau references sources as disparate as Confucius and the Bible to under gird his arguments. Although he makes an effort to sound practical at times his primary tendency is one of dissociation from the current American government. His rhetoric demonstrates a moral absolutism that is reminiscent of the speeches of William Lloyd Garrison. He is a genuine radical as he makes statements like: "If I have unjustly wrested a plank from a drowning man, I must restore it to him though I drown myself . . . The people must cease to hold slaves, and to make war on Mexico, though it cost them their existence as a people." He castigates as "the most serious obstacle to reform" those liberals who personally disapprove of slavery or the war yet still support the government. Moreover, he observes that "action from principle . . . is essentially revolutionary". His personal episode in jail is one small example of the consequences of his adherence to principle. "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison."

These are strong words that suggest why the ideas presented in this essay have continued to have a profound effect until our own day. It is why the essay has influenced subsequent thinkers like Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and others. It is why this essay is considered one of the "great essays" of Thoreau's era and our own.

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## **Alan says**

I never have understood why this dense book is assigned for schoolkids to read. Yes, it is unprecedented in American literature, a great book--without being particularly "good reading." It's formidable, and I have never gotten through it, chapter after chapter. I find it a great dippers' book, and maybe those who assign it are exactly that, dippers. Several of Thoreau's other works are more engaging and accessible, from the Maine Woods (perhaps my favorite) to Cape Cod, even A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, and especially, Selections from the Journals (see my GRds rev). The Maine Woods has its challenges, too--for example, Thoreau's fascination with, and dictionary of, native Indian language (Abnaki, not Pasamoquoddy). Also, as ever in Thoreau, botanical classifications in Latin--his Harvard education actually benefitted him as Bill Gates' arguably did not, except for affiliations (no reason to go to school, yet the prime reason in 21st C for most status schools like Harvard Biz).

HDT's Cape Cod varies tremendously, including journalistic reporting of a terrible shipwreck on the South shore of Massachusetts (not unlike the one that killed Margaret Fuller returning from Garibaldi's Italian revolution and losing her MS on that seminal event). But also, perhaps Thoreau's funniest story ever, the Wellfleet Oysterman chapter. Hilarious.

Thoreau often writes with humor in his Journals, too, especially when his publisher sends him the remaindered 706 copies (out of the edition of 1000) of his A Week on the Concord and Merrimack River: "I now have a library of nearly nine hundred volumes, over seven hundred of which I wrote myself." His story of chasing the pig is a classic, very different from my own family story. My grandfather had a pig, Delfiney, who had the run of the little house-backhouse and barn, but escaped anyway one day. Gramp enlisted his only neighbor within a mile, who reluctantly agreed to the futile task. When they got about three quarters of a mile, they sighted the pig and Gramp called, "DeIFINEY!!" The pig came running to him.

Thoreau reaches down into a bullhead nest to discover their pattern of habitation. Here's part of his long encounter with a Woodchuck. After a long run, he exhausts the creature: "I sat down by his side within a foot. I talked to him quasi forest lingo, baby-talk, at any rate in a conciliatory tone, and throughout that I had some influence on him. He gritted his teeth less. I chewed checkerberry leaves and presented them to his nose at

last without a grit, though I saw that by so much gritting of the teeth he had worn them rapidly and they were covered with a fine white powder, which, if you measured it thus, would have made his anger terrible." These journals prove HDT a worldclass botanist and taxonomist; in fact, he died a martyr to science, counting tree rings (see T Baird's "Corn Grows in the Night" in the Norton Walden.) Ironically, Walden is not Thoreau's best book, but it is the only one most students ever encounter. It vocalizes the aspirations of a young college grad to higher thoughts--and such thoughts permeated the literature of the Nineteenth Century, especially in America.

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## **Fergus says**

I first read this paean to a rustic, forgotten - and vanished - way of life in the Purple Passion Pit.

I'll try to justify my little (apparent) attempt at levity. Actually, the Pit was the ultra-modern reading room in a converted 19th century chapel within the Victorian Gothic ivy-covered walls of our university library. It was the time of Kent State, and here I was reading one of the literary pillars of the American Way of Life.

I was entranced, somehow, by Thoreau's simple and lingering description of planting beans in a neat little row out in the Massachussetts semi-wilderness not far from the madding crowd - all for the purpose of putting food on the table. And I tried to shut out all the gaudy purple-themed passion around me.

By the way, it was the Flower Power student body that gave this huge, sun-filled, purple university oasis the luring sobriquet of the Purple Passion Pit. Many young romances had their conception here - most of them temporary fixes to the endemic loneliness of any large institution, as my single tryst was - but it tried to be the kind of place it was designed for, namely a study hall.

However, from time to time I would concentrate hard on reading Thoreau's lean, spare prose. And you know, I found I was REALLY enjoying it!

Over the next week, now on my own, I immersed myself in this gentle and soft-spoken protest against the horrid place our world was, even then, becoming. THIS was a valid response to it all!

And since that long-ago time, my wife and I have, step-by-step, removed many of the accoutrements of "modern" life from our home. We are stuck in a time warp. And we like it that way.

Thanks, Henry! Five full stars for you.

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## **Kira Simion says**

The thing is, I look for simplicity in philosophical writing for I agree with Albert Einstein when he talked about how if one cannot explain something to a child, one doesn't truly know it. My knowledge and my understanding are intertwined, and thus when I don't understand (tangents, for example, are difficult for me because I get bored and skim and then only understand some bits), it isn't fun to read.

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## **Steel says**

This book just edged out the *Richest Man in Babylon* and *Money: How to Get as Much as You Can of It!!!!* as my favorite book of all time. Not getting results at work? This book can help! A classic self-help manual, this book can teach you how to make money and become the most popular person of all time, just like its handsome, wealthy, much adored author. You can even learn how much it costs to build a 1840's style log-cabin. Did you know that pumpkins make good chairs? I bet that even if you did, you probably thought that Martha Stewart was the first person to think of it. Well, she wasn't. H. Dave Thoreau (as his numerous fellow tea party goers knew him) was! Read the book that inspired Abercrombie to team with his old buddy Mr. Fitch to invent the shopping mall. Read the book that the OED has credited as the earliest to use such immortal terms as LOL; OMFG; :-); foshizzle; phat beatz; and shopaholic (with a hint towards the later evolution of the term into chocoholic). If you can find this book in print (it's pretty rare), I'd check it out. You might even discover a surefire way to convince that girl (or guy) you have your eye on to start noticing you and figure out the quickest way to get a raise while working even less hours at your glorious bureaucratic administrative/management position!!!

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## **Havva says**

It's not that I'm not interested in the remaining stories, but there's only so much Thoreau I can take at once. I'll try the rest on the collection as individual e-books.

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## **Whitney says**

At long last. It took me a while to make it through this. It's not something that I could power through 30 pages of on my lunch break. Reading *Walden* is a lot like watching paint drying. And I mean that in the most complimentary way possible. Like if you could really experience the paint drying.

Thoreau was way ahead of his time. A lot of people are starting to come to the same conclusions he came to some 150 odd years ago: Man has a deep connection to nature, and nature fills a need in man that modern capitalist society cannot. We are all caged animals to modernity. I'm going to find out if Cornel West has anything to say about Thoreau.

He refers to the Vedas and Bhagavad Gita, which I found pleasantly surprising. So there is a hint of Eastern mysticism to his philosophy. Thoreau's words are flowery and his descriptions verbose. But if you follow him to his point, his ideas are beautiful, relevant, and necessary.

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## **Stephen Hicks says**

G.K. Chesterton once said, "There are no boring subjects, only disinterested minds." I believe this vision of the world is one of the main themes that runs throughout *Walden*. Thoreau writes about seemingly every minute detail during his experience at Walden Pond, and he mixes in his precious New England Transcendentalism, captivating nature writing, and clever cultural commentary (commentary that I thought is pertinent even today). I really enjoyed this account of Thoreau's first of two years (After 262 pages of

describing his first year he writes, “Thus was my first year’s life in the woods complete; and the second year was similar to it.” I guess even nature becomes mundane) on the shores of Walden Pond.

During a recent trip to Boston, I considered visiting Walden Pond and sitting on its banks to see it as Thoreau saw it (sort of). However, I didn’t want to pay the admission fee, so I opted out. I’d like to think Henry Thoreau supported my decision.

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### **Adam says**

If Edgar Allan Poe was the original goth, Henry David Thoreau was the original obnoxious vegan. His tone at the beginning of the book is like a know-it-all kid in his first year of self-employment: smarmy and convinced he's cracked the code on the only right way to live. As the book goes on, he mellows out a little. I guess living in the woods was good for him. While still being condescending of his neighbors (“...his little broad-faced son worked cheerfully at his father's side the while, not knowing how poor a bargain the latter had made”), it’s the side-stories, like meeting fishermen, ice-cutters and packs of free-roving hounds, and the native american legends of the lake, that make up the parts worth reading. I wanted to like this book, because I appreciate how it’s inspired some people I respect (Don Henley?), but it was so difficult to read, it put me to sleep every time I tried to read a page until I switched to the audio version.

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### **Mike says**

I find Thoreau's command of the written language to be astounding. I very much liked this book and I'm surprised that I wasn't required to read this in high school or college.

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### **Monica says**

This book is a treasure for lovers of the simplicity movement. It is now one of my favourite, and one which I would come back to again and again.

It’s not just Thoreau’s message of simplicity, self-reliance and independent thinking which resonates strongly with me. The passion, vigour and clarity in which he puts forward his arguments is incisive and convincing. His writing style is exactly as he is – straightforward, concise, uncompromising and often sarcastic and contemptuous against those he believes to be hypocrites, who allow the mundane to obscure higher spiritual truths and who let expediency over-ride their conscience.

Him being a giant and me being a mere mortal, I am guilty of many short-comings that he riled against so a part of me is also a target of his critique. Yet his sarcasm is sometimes so wicked, I just could not help but laugh at myself at the same time.

You can hardly rely on Thoreau obediently flow with the conventional wisdom of his day. He criticizes men for giving up freedom and allowing themselves to be imprisoned by mundane materialistic life; defends the vilified radical abolitionist Captain John Brown as a man of principle and courage against the vast majority; and refused to pay taxes to support the state government whose support of the Fugitive Slave Law he believed to be morally-wrong. He is unapologetic about his beliefs and uncompromising with his principles.

To go with mainstream thought and behaviour when is against truth and conscience is unacceptable. From his writings, it is clear that he believes in the maxim that oftentimes, majority simply means that all fools happen to be on the same side.

“Public opinion is a weak tyrant compared with our own private opinion. What a man thinks of himself, that is which determines or rather indicates, his fate.”

“If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer.”

His rally call is in Walden - for men to unchain themselves, live simple lives, appreciate and learn the lessons that nature has to offer, and to aspire to higher spiritual lives.

“The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation.”

“The spending of the best part of one’s life earning money in order to enjoy a questionable liberty during the less valuable part of it reminds me of an Englishman who went to India to make a fortune first, in order that he might return to England and live the life of a poet. He should have gone up garret at once.” (Yes, carpe diem spirit!)

Thoreau’s experiment in the woods near Walden Pond shows that one can live simply and have more time to observe nature, and more time for higher learning which is important for spiritual growth, lest one should die and not having lived.

On simplicity, he has this to say:

“In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness.” (This I truly believe, after I have started the road to simplicity.)

“Superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only. Money is not required to buy one necessary of the soul.”

“None can be an impartial or wise observer of the human life but from the vantage ground of what we should call voluntary poverty.” (Three cheers to Thoreau – our grandfather of voluntary simplicity!)

Ultimately, Thoreau argues against being settled in one’s way out of tradition or habit, and for each to develop independent thinking:

“It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves....How worn and dusty, then, must be the highways of the world, how deep the ruts of tradition and conformity!”

“Our universe is wider than our views of it...Nay, be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought.”

“I had learned this, at least, by experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavours to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success in uncommon hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and interpreted in his favour in a more liberal sense and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings.” (similar to the



message in Jonathan Livingston Seagull)

I could go on and on but this would suffice, to encourage others to read Thoreau.

Lastly, Thoreau's exhortation for solitude, for an inner life, is similar to what the yoga and Buddhism advocate in meditation and quietness of mind, as well as the Christian approach for quiet time for prayer and contemplation.

“When our lives cease to be inward and private, conversation degenerates into mere gossip”

I identify with his praise of the sacred hour of dawn for higher inspiration, which is what yogis, spiritual aspirants and poets share. He said that our lives are “frittered away by details” and kept asking us to “Simplify! Simplify! Simplify!” because:

“Knowledge does not come to us by details, but in flashes of light from heaven.” (Amen!)

\*Last word – interestingly, Thoreau used the word “pow-wow” 150 years ago. I thought that this is a recent American invention! Also, he mentioned Singapore (where I live!) “We are told that within three miles of the centre of the East Indian city of Singapore, some of the inhabitants are annually carried off by tigers...”. Yes Mr Thoreau, but the very last tiger in Singapore was shot in the Long Bar in the now famous and very, very expensive Raffles Hotel. The only tigers are now in the Singapore Zoo...very nice tourist attraction too...

\*\*Last, last word - the commentaries of Thoreau by Van Wyck Brooks and EB White at the end of the big are gems, throwing more light on this strange creature, this accident (and gift) of nature called Thoreau. EB white is especially entertaining and witty in his account (a must read).

\*\*\*Last, last, last word - As I am impatient, I had intended to skip the sections on nature but they really deserve a reading because they are not merely descriptive. Thoreau writes beautifully and evocatively for one, but the nature writings also show him to be an innovative and scientific naturalist eg the method he uses to measure the depth of Walden pond. I am amazed that he describes the pond almost like giving a tribute to a lover, and by the energetic manner in which he gives a "live" commentary on a battle between one big black ant and two small ones - like on wrestlemania haha.

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## **Barrett Brassfield says**

Have to agree with E.B. White (author of Charlotte's Web, among other things) who once said that every high school senior should be given a copy of Walden upon graduation. Many of course will choose not to read it but for those who do, and make it through the slog that is the first chapter, Thoreau's timeless classic offers much wisdom on thoughtful living. Why thoughtful living? Because Walden is full of what of what buddhists refer to as the fire of attention. Each chapter, even the dreadful first, Economy, is full of an intense attention to detail both philosophical and practical. Walden may have been written by a 19th century New Englander but it's implications travel far beyond that limited scope of time and space. At the very least, readers of Walden in any age will be encouraged to forgo the way of the lemming and instead give a little thought to each step taken in life, as opposed to just mindlessly stumbling off the proverbial cliff of life.

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## Jennifer says

I am giving 5 stars to "Life without Principle," "On Civil Disobedience," and the following chapters from Walden: Economy, Where I Lived and What I Lived For, Reading, Solitude, Higher Laws, Conclusion. The rest of the book was about nature. While I'm thumbs up when it comes to experiencing nature, I'm thumbs down when it comes to reading about it. I wish I could appreciate the way he describes grass blowing in the wind and ants fighting with each other, but I just couldn't, so I'm not rating his nature writings. His philosophy, however, is great. He can be a sarcastic little bastard too. I didn't learn much from his philosophy, since I already have his beliefs and a very simple lifestyle, albeit not in the woods. But it was very comforting having a dead friend to hang out with for awhile.

Everyone considering joining the military should read "On Civil Disobedience" and the Conclusion to Walden. I wish I would've had Henry as a respectable reference the time a date walked out on me for calling military men mindless robots. I wish I would've had Henry as a reference all those times people criticized me for never reading the newspaper or for not owning a home. But I have that sexy pile of bones as a reference now! Oh Henry, I wish I could be the hoe you used on your bean field! Anyway, below are some of my favorite quotes:

"In proportion as our inward life fails, we go more constantly and desperately to the post office. You may depend on it, that the poor fellow who walks away with the greatest number of letters, proud of his extensive correspondence, has not heard from himself this long while." (Replace post office with cell phones and blackberries and the world is flooded with inward life failures).

"Nations are possessed with an insane ambition to perpetuate the memory of themselves by the amount of hammered stone they leave. What if equal pains were taken to smooth and polish their manners? ....As for the pyramids, there is nothing to wonder at in them so much as the fact that so many men could be found degraded enough to spend their lives constructing a tomb for some ambitious booby, whom it would have been wiser and manlier to have drowned in the Nile, and then given his body to the dogs."

"To a philosopher all news, as it is called, is gossip, and they who edit and read it are old women over their tea."

"The news we hear, for the most part, is not news to our genius. It is the stalest repetition."

"What is called politics is comparatively something so superficial and inhuman, that practically I have never fairly recognized that it concerns me at all."

"Of what use the friendliest disposition even, if there are no hours given to friendship, if it is forever postponed to unimportant duties and relations?"

"Public opinion is a weak tyrant compared with our own private opinion. What a man thinks of himself, that it is which determines, or rather indicates, his fate."

"The cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it."

"...for our houses are such unwieldy property that we are often imprisoned rather than housed in them."

"Men have become the tools of their tools."

"...be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought."

"Merely to come into the world the heir of a fortune is not to be born, but to be stillborn, rather."

"What is it to be born free and not to live free?"

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### **amy says**

I was going to say something silly and *Garden State*-y about how *Walden* changed my life, but am rewording because the experience of reading this book was more like...confirmation. Which is to say, I've chosen a certain way to live that I believe is the right one for me, and reading *Walden* was like being told, "That's right, that's what you need to do. Keep on keeping on, you're heading in the right direction." Except that the life Thoreau writes about is not directional in the least. But you get what I mean.

"So that was a big deal too..."

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