

## ANALYSIS BY CHAPTER

*Walden* (1854)



Henry David Thoreau

(1817-1862)

## INTRODUCTION

Thoreau began his project at Walden Pond in March 1845 and took up residence there symbolically on Independence Day, July 4. The pond is only a short distance from Concord, in the woods around a bend. He was a homeless man allowed to camp on private land. While living there he entertained guests, frequently walked into town, did odd jobs and spent a night in jail for not paying his poll tax in protest to slavery. In 1846 he went on an excursion into the Maine woods. He left the pond on 6 September 1847 and moved in again with Emerson in Concord. He published *Walden* in 1854, condensing his experiences at the pond into one year. Over time, his book became increasingly popular worldwide among readers not prejudiced against him by knowing him personally nor by his reputation as a crackpot, promoted by James Russell Lowell and others. Though not as generous toward Thoreau as Emerson, who considered him a disciple, Hawthorne enjoyed his company.

## POPULARITY

*Walden* has great appeal because it is (1) a retreat, dramatizing a universal human desire and frequent experience, an archetypal theme and pattern of action in literature since the ancient Greeks; (2) a safe pastoral escape--what Leo Marx defines as "sentimental pastoralism" in *The Machine in the Garden*--from society, as represented by the town, to a "good place"; in popular terms the retreat to the pond is simply "getting back to Nature," a prototype of the common American vacation; (3) a critique of prevailing social values full of truisms with which many readers agree in large measure; (4) the autobiography of a fascinating eccentric who has become an international icon; (5) an inspiration to the environmental movement that became a liberal religion in the late 20th century; (6) a model of ecological awareness; (7) a rare demonstration of archetypal thinking and original metaphorical language, as in *Black Elk Speaks*; (8) a literary masterpiece rich in epigrams, memorable images, symbolism, erudite allusions, insights, wit and wisdom--the source of more famous quotations than any other American book; (9) one of the most "organic" works of art in literature, exemplifying all of the aesthetic values characteristic of Romanticism, though some critics dissent on pantheism; (10) a dramatization of the individuation process culminating in psychological wholeness and transcendent consciousness; (11) an ostensible validation of the grasshopper in the fable and the hippie in the 1960s.

## Economy

He opens by quoting his motive: “to wake my neighbors up.” He introduces himself as a man so independent and self-reliant, he is only a “sojourner in civilized life.” At first he speaks in the voice of a common man giving “a simple and sincere account of his own life,” saying it is “natural” for him to respond to the curiosity and in some cases the disapproval of his neighbors. He confesses to the narrowness of his experience, yet he claims to have something to teach, in the spirit of a tutor and guide to Nature: “Perhaps these pages are particularly addressed to poor students.” Sooner or later most of them will probably surrender to society, “But I would say to my fellows, once for all, As long as possible, live free and uncommitted.”

He addresses himself to his fellow New Englanders, but then he expands his focus with a line that raises his language from literal to figurative and consciousness from ordinary to transcendent: “I have traveled a good deal in Concord....” (1) Literally, he has done a lot of walking in his little town; (2) punning on Concord, he has traveled a good deal in harmony with his neighbors; (3) spiritually, in the way of the mystic William Blake, he has transcended in consciousness the limitations of place and the material world. Allusions to Hinduism and Greek mythology deepen his vision in time and expand it to the cosmos. In his fifth paragraph, quoting Ovid in Latin, he raises his perspective over the head of the common man, just as the transcendental dimension of his narrative likewise will be over the heads of most readers yet may lure them higher as he reveals what he has learned. An educated head is a component of Thoreau’s holistic consciousness, or what he calls “a true integrity.” Literature elevates the soul to a “higher and more ethereal life.”

Most of his neighbors—“serfs of the soil”—through “mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them.” In *Walden* Thoreau sets about offering his neighbors a harvest of what they are missing in life, handing out aphorisms like apples from a bucket. For the laboring man “has no time to be anything but a machine.” The machine is a metaphor of society and enslavement common in the Romantic movement and was later used in the anti-war rhetoric of the 1960s. To the anarchistic temperament, society is an inhuman machine and convention is enslavement: “It is hard to have a southern overseer; it is worse to have a northern one; but worst of all when you are the slave-driver of yourself.” A hardworking white farmer is worse off than a shackled black slave whipped to his knees and parted from his wife and children by auction? The white farmer is free to walk away from his family any time he pleases and commune with Nature in the woods. If Thoreau had been as persuasive then as he became to many in the counterculture of the 20th century, the woods around the pond would have filled up with so many farmers playing flutes in the moonlight that Thoreau would have had to flee into the wilderness of Maine.

As a bachelor with no responsibility to anyone but himself, Thoreau enjoys a luxury that responsible family men could not afford. Many people inclined to indolence, like hippies and the French, belittle people who work hard. One of Thoreau’s most popular aphorisms probably became so because it applies more to people in the 20th century than it did to his neighbors: “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” For “men have become the tools of their tools.” They “are not so much the keepers of herds as herds are the keepers of men.” They spend most of their lives “earning money in order to enjoy a questionable liberty during the least valuable part of it.” Therefore, the old adages apply: Seize the day; gather ye rosebuds while ye may; take time to smell the flowers--which led to variations in the 1960s: Go with the flow; get back to the garden; drop out, tune in, turn on; give peace a chance; make love not war.

Thoreau affirms the myth of the American Adam and Eve: “our lives must be stripped” to the “simplicity and nakedness of man’s life in the primitive ages.” The ideal of equality would be served if men of rank “were divested of their clothes.” In popular theory Thoreau would have felt more comfortable among the Maypolers at Merry Mount than among the Puritans, and would have loved the Woodstock festival of 1969--but no, in reality he was by temperament a prudish ascetic who did not take drugs, have sex or dance. His reference to his “calling” evinces the influence upon him of Puritan tradition, as does his use of old Puritan adages such as, “the devil finds employment for the idle.” His whole life was a disciplined spiritual retreat, as expressed in *Walden*. Like Melville, he wrote his own bible. His great theme

that civilization dissociates people from Nature, life and the soul, was taken up by the Modernists in the early 20th century. T. S. Eliot's "dissociation of sensibility" is an extension of the theme.

Instead of atonement for sins, Thoreau preaches the need for atonement with Nature. The wild is essential to wholeness but is lower in a moral hierarchy than the "higher spirit." Hence he is not a primitivist: "If it is asserted that civilization is a real advance in the condition of man,--and *I think that it is*, though only the wise improve their advantages..." (italics added) "The civilized man is a more experienced and wiser savage." Accordingly, contrary to what would be permitted today, he cuts down trees and with civilized means he builds his hut--in the spring. In the spring "the winter of man's discontent was thawing as well as the earth, and the life that had lain torpid began to stretch itself." This metaphor unites his higher consciousness with his lower "savage" or animal self, with the earth and with all Nature. Thoreau's numerous metaphors are the proof of his at-one-ment, for they spring organically from Nature, become allegorical in his actions and constitute his scripture.

Psychologically, he is beyond the town limits--the conditioning by society that alienates us from our own natures and puts our souls to sleep. To awaken his neighbors, he must first awaken himself. As soon as he commits to living alone in the woods, to solitude in the tradition of monks and mystics, his true nature begins to awaken like the earth in spring, the time of renewal--a dominant motif and the season that begins and ends *Walden*. Most men remain in a "low and primitive condition; but if they should feel the influence of the spring of springs arousing them, they would of necessity rise to a higher more ethereal life." He sets out "to live a primitive and frontier life, though in the midst of...civilization"--unlike the actual pioneers at that time, who were rolling west across the real frontier, dying in deserts and Indian attacks. Thoreau thinks they all should walk. He cannot imagine what it is like having children, or does not care. In his essay "Walking" (1862) he says, "I must walk toward Oregon." But he never did. Unlike the real pioneers, he never experienced the full reality of Nature--the Wilderness. He talks the talk but he never walked the walk. Instead, he "traveled a good deal in Concord."

He opposes using animals for labor, having no need for them himself, a practice necessary to the survival of most human societies. Oddly, he does not seem to know much about animals, at least not animals that benefit from their labor along with humans in a mutually beneficial relationship. Like many of the later environmentalists who came to worship him, Thoreau is an idealist whose ecology oversimplifies Nature by selective perception that excludes the dominant animal on the planet. Idealization of Nature led to such laws as the Endangered Species Act, which interferes with natural selection and attempts to *conquer* Nature by stopping evolution, requiring the government to slaughter many thousands of animals annually to protect the vulnerable. Likewise, idealization has led to policies that are now resulting in the destruction of overgrown forests by wildfires increasing in size every year, due to no thinning or firebreaks. Nature may be seen as divine with realism rather than idealization, as it is by Black Elk, Hawthorne, Melville, Frost, Cather, Hemingway, and Faulkner.

*Walden* is a model of both ecological awareness and the incomplete romantic ecology biased against the human race that became characteristic of the environmentalist movement after the 1960s. Thoreau's consciousness is holistic in a cosmic sense, but he limits Nature by reducing the universe to his little pond. He claims that he wants to "combine the hardiness of...savages with the intellectualness of the civilized man." Like a pacifist Natty Bumppo armed with a flute instead of a rifle, he becomes the philosopher of his pond, where he does not have to compete or fight any Indians and can live a safe life of "simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust." Like romantics of the late 20th century, he has the luxury of idealizing Indians, disregarding the fact that they too used animals for labor.

His theme in this chapter is spiritual economy--living simply. His lists of supplies and expenses calculated down to fractions of a cent parody a how-to-do-it manual, as he satirizes the literal-minded and those for whom money is the most important concern, much as Melville mocks the penny-pinching ship owners Bildad and Peleg in *Moby-Dick* for values that were stereotyped in Benjamin Franklin. Yet Thoreau himself often proves to be as reductively provincial as Mark Twain in *Innocents Abroad*, as when he belittles 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."

The first chapter, the longest in the book, concludes with an audacious indictment of established religion for its dogmas, otherworldly focus and failure to affirm “the gift of life.” He sounds as if the churches of New England were still Calvinist, whereas in fact by the 1850s most churches there had softened into a benevolent Unitarianism.

#### Where I Lived, and What I Lived For

In retreat from the *puritanism* of a social order, the *pastoral* inverts prevailing values: “A man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone.” This had been common wisdom for centuries. At the same time, however, Thoreau can be infantile: “I have always been regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born.” Babies do not have to work. “It makes but little difference whether you are committed to a farm or the county jail.” He thinks criminals are the same as law-abiding farmers--actually superior if they are in jail for civil disobedience.

His hut by the pond is “somewhat higher” than the town. And he is no longer just around the bend from Concord: “Both time and place changed.” In the hip vernacular of the later 1960s counterculture, he is “far out”: “Where I lived was as far off as many a region viewed nightly by astronomers.” Here in his pastoral “good place” he compares himself to a shepherd: “There was pasture enough for my imagination.” His readers are his flock he hopes to awaken with his neighbors. “Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature itself.” His idealized Nature is innocent, as if without dangers. No bears, cougars or Indians.

Morning becomes another motif of spiritual awakening: “The morning, which is the most memorable season of the day, is the awakening hour”; “Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me. Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep.” He makes a ritual of bathing in the pond as “a religious exercise,” creating his religion as he goes along: “Renew thyself completely each day.” In this passage he twice uses the word “Genius,” a term common among the New England Transcendentalists referring to a transcendent Spirit manifest in “the soul of man”--what Emerson called the Over-Soul. Their concept of Genius is comparable to Jung’s concept of a collective unconscious in transcending the individual.

#### Reading

Thoreau like Franklin, Emerson, Henry Adams and many other Americans see life as an ongoing education: He would have all men become “students and observers.” He thinks “It is time that we had uncommon schools, that we did not leave off our education when we begin to be men and women. It is time that villages were universities.” Like the charismatic Emerson, Thoreau lectured at the Concord Lyceum, but he was not popular. “Instead of noblemen, let us have noble villages of men.” Let us commune with “all the worthies, with Jesus Christ himself, and let ‘our church’ go by the board.” Let us each discover his or her own religion.

Educated at Harvard, Thoreau as an intellectual is traditional and conservative: “The adventurous student will always study classics... We might as well omit to study Nature because she is old.... In dealing with truth we are immortal.” He advocates objective reading, what in the 20th century became New Criticism:

To read well, that is, to read true books in a true spirit, is a noble exercise, and one that will task the reader more than any exercise which the customs of the day esteem. It requires a training... Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written...this only is reading, in a high sense, not that which lulls us as a luxury and suffers the nobler faculties to stoop the while, but what we have to stand on tiptoe to read and devote our most alert and wakeful hours to.

As a literary critic Thoreau is a precursor of Modernists, in contrast to Postmodern academics: He believes in universality and greatness, that a great writer “speaks to the intellect and heart of mankind, to all in any age who can *understand* him.” Unfortunately, he says, most people “are under-bred and low-lived and

illiterate,” including many who have “learned to read only what is for children and feeble intellects.” Like only what is politically correct for liberals.

He enlarges upon his motives: “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.” This is *puritanism*, as he purifies his life of all that is inessential, much as the veteran does to recover from war trauma in Hemingway’s “Big Two-Hearted River.” The theme of *carpe diem* or seize the day is an old one taken up later by Henry James. Unlike e. e. cummings, the Beatniks and the hippies, Thoreau integrates his *pastoralism* with *puritanism* in a discipline: the only cure “is in a rigid economy, a stern and more than Spartan simplicity of life and elevation of purpose.” His *pastoralism* consists of freedom, slowing down, acting at his own pace according to his nature without worldly ambition, enjoying a simple life of sensations and reflection, centering the cosmos in himself much like Walt Whitman does in “Song of Myself,” except that Henry largely excludes other people whereas Walt embraces everyone.

Thoreau’s emphasis on living in the moment is transcendental for him: “God himself culminates in the present moment.” However, the wisdom of this principle for others is relative; it depends upon character and may result in mere hedonism and drug addiction. Thoreau is exceptional in his authenticity and self-denial. In the last paragraph of this chapter, his metaphors express the integrity of his higher spirit with his lower animal nature--psychological wholeness: (1) “I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars.” Sky is the archetypal space evoking transcendence. Paradoxical inversion, turning the world upsidedown, is a characteristic of literature in the transcendental mode. (2) “My instinct tells me that my head is an organ for burrowing, as some creatures use their snout and fore-paws.” He seems to intuit evolution five years before Darwin published *Origin of Species* (1859).

#### Sounds

The transition from books to experience balances intellect and instinct, thought and sensation, civilization and primitivism: “Will you be a reader, a student merely, or a seer?... I did not read books the first summer; I hoed beans.” Sometimes “I could not afford to sacrifice the bloom of the present moment to any work, whether of the head or the hands.” He is able to transcend time and place, “for I lived like a Puri Indian.”

The railroad becomes his machine in the Garden, in contrast to the machine of Society (City). The railroad was a popular symbol of American efficiency and Progress throughout the 19th century: “To do things ‘railroad fashion’ is now the by-word.” Though he questions the notion of “Progress” and criticizes its price, Thoreau like Whitman welcomes the railroad: “I have heard the rattle of railroad cars, now dying away and then reviving like the beat of a partridge.” And “The whistle of the locomotive penetrates my woods summer and winter, sounding like the scream of a hawk.” These bird metaphors imply that the railroad is natural. Likewise: “when I hear the iron horse...it seems as if the earth had got a race now worthy to inhabit it. If all were as it seems, and men made the elements their servants for noble ends!”

Thoreau affirms free enterprise as self-reliance: “What recommends commerce to me is its enterprise and bravery... It is very natural in its methods... I am refreshed and expanded when the freight train rattles past me...” Like Whitman, he believed in Manifest Destiny and spiritualized American geographical expansion, though he tempered his enthusiasm with skepticism: “We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate.” At the same time, “Have not men improved somewhat in punctuality since the railroad was invented? Do they not talk and think faster in the depot than they did in the stage-office? There is something electrifying in the atmosphere of the former place. I have been astonished at the miracles it has wrought.”

The railroad is like an Internet, and his ambivalence about it is analogous to his feelings about society: “I usually go to the village along its causeway, and am, as it were, related to society by this link.” The railroad serves the farmers and the shepherd boys by transporting animals, filling the air with their bleats “as if a pastoral valley were going by... So is your pastoral life whirled past and away.... I must get off the

track and let the cars go by... I will not have my eyes put out and my ears spoiled by its smoke and steam and hissing.”

In contrast, the bells on Sundays import a “natural melody” into the woods. This sound is “a vibration of the universal lyre,” enlarging consciousness. The echo, a motif in literature in the transcendental mode, has “magic” and is “partly the voice of the wood”--an “articulation of Nature.” Screech owls “are the spirits...of fallen souls that once in human shape night-walked the earth and did the deeds of darkness, now expiating their sins with their wailing.” Hoot owls sound insane, “suggesting a vast and undeveloped nature which men have not recognized.” Only to this extent does Thoreau acknowledge the larger, darker, violent Wilderness recognized in the fiction of Poe, Hawthorne and Melville. In the next chapter he says, “I believe that men are generally still a little afraid of the dark.”

In the midst of urging people to reform themselves, Thoreau admits “how almost hopeless and incurable are all constitutional vices. I confess, that practically speaking, when I have learned a man’s real disposition, I have no hopes of changing it for the better or worse in this state of existence.”

### Solitude

Synesthesia is another experience common in the transcendental mode of literature, usually in poetry: “This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense... I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself... Sympathy with the fluttering alder and poplar leaves almost takes away my breath; yet, like the lake, my serenity is rippled but not ruffled.... We are not wholly involved in Nature. I may be either the driftwood in the stream, or Indra [Hindu god of earth, thunder and rain] in the sky looking down on it.” He is “sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another...a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator...no more I than it is you.” This capacity to transcend himself, or his ego, is what he called “Genius.” Such “doubleness” and transcendence of oneself occurs to some people in dreams and to others in near-death experiences.

“This doubleness may easily make us poor neighbors and friends sometimes... I love to be alone... God is alone,--but the devil, he is far from being alone; he sees a great deal of company.” In society, the devil “is legion.” With no real Wilderness to worry about, thanks to society, Thoreau is able to idealize Nature and invert the moral hierarchy of society and the Puritan tradition: He makes the City (society) the place of evil and Wilderness the place of redemption. Solitude in safety is conducive to his sentimental view of Nature, comparable to the extreme idealism--subjective to the point of solipsism--in the conclusion of Emerson’s *Nature*: “The indescribable innocence and beneficence of Nature...such sympathy with our race, that all Nature would be affected, and the sun’s brightness fade, and the winds would sigh *humanely*, and the clouds rain tears, and the woods shed their leaves and put on mourning in midsummer, if any man should ever for a just cause grieve.” (italics added) This is an example of the *pathetic fallacy*, the projection of human sentiments onto Nature. The pioneer families who grieved as they buried their dead along the Oregon Trail had very different feelings about Nature.

### Visitors

Some of Thoreau’s pronouncements in this chapter are provincial: “Individuals, like nations, must have suitable broad and natural boundaries, even a considerable neutral ground, between them.” Space and solitude were among his luxuries as an American, as most people in the world remain crowded together in cities and in poverty.

The slave he helps escape is not introduced as an individual. He is a metaphor of enslavement. Visiting with a woodchopper--a *logger!*--Thoreau resists stereotyping, unlike environmentalists in the late 20th century, yet he has the condescension of a college graduate: “I did not know whether he was as wise as Shakespeare or as simply ignorant as a child, whether to suspect him of a fine poetic consciousness or of stupidity... The highest that he appeared to conceive of was a simple expediency, such as you might expect an animal to appreciate; and this, practically, is true of most men.” Yet at the same time Thoreau identifies with an Indian who is not a college graduate rather than with the civilization that educated and sustains

him, welcoming his visitors with the greeting reputedly given by Samoset to the Pilgrims upon their landing at Plymouth in 1620.

#### The Bean-Field

Thoreau affirms *agrarian pastoralism* in the tradition of Crèvecoeur and Jefferson, but he only engages in it for a season or two on a very small scale--one field: "Ancient poetry and mythology suggest...that husbandry was once a sacred art; but it is pursued with irreverent haste and heedlessness by us, our object being to have large farms and large crops merely." Merely? Unlike Henry, the real farmers in his neighborhood were feeding more people than themselves. And if they were "heedless" they would fail like Henry. He dismisses their religion and their "so called Thanksgivings" and complains that they are not pagans instead, that they have no primitive mythology to impart a sense of the sacredness of their calling or [remind them] of its sacred origin." If farming is sacred, why is he more "reverent" for soon giving it up than the farmers who practice it with much greater diligence and success all their lives?

#### The Village

Thoreau's solitude is balanced by the society he scorns: "Every day or two I strolled to the village to hear some of the gossip...as refreshing in its way as the rustle of leaves and the peeping of frogs. As I walked in the woods to see the birds and squirrels, so I walked in the village to see the men and boys; instead of the wind among the pines I heard the carts rattle." He compares the "village of busy men" to a community of "prairie dogs"--equally natural. He depends upon the village for supplies and news, yet feels no obligation to society in return, much less to the State. After resisting the temptations and dangers of the town, he "escaped to the woods again." He compares himself to Orpheus, the hero in mythology who tamed the Wilderness and even descended into Hades, whereas Thoreau merely braves the dangers of society for a little gossip, then retreats.

Since his woods are not a real Wilderness, he uses the density of the trees, darkness and getting lost to evoke the individuation process in the depths of the unconscious: "Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations." Here again Thoreau accompanies traditional wisdom with generalizations that are self-centered and therefore reduce universality: "It is surprising and memorable, as well as valuable experience, to be lost in the woods any time." Any time? The pioneers who got lost usually died. So do many hikers. And this: "if all men were to live as simply as I then did, thieving and robbery would be unknown. These take place only in communities where some have got more than is sufficient while others have not enough." That would be everywhere beyond Walden Pond--including communities of Indians, among whom thieving and robbery, tribe against tribe, were a natural part of life.

The chapter ends with similes that contrast with Whitman in *Leaves of Grass*, published a year later: "The virtues of a superior man are like the wind; the virtues of a common man are like the grass; the grass, when the wind passes over it, bends." Thoreau sets superior men like himself--and other graduates of Harvard--above the common man, whereas the self-educated Whitman exalts the common man as equal to any including the President. Thoreau's metaphors here express his own refusal to bend and his effort to bend the reader with his wind.

#### Ponds

Thoreau does not dramatize his individuation like a fiction writer, he explains it after the fact as a philosopher. In the previous chapter he got "lost to the world" as represented by the town and "found himself" in the woods, in pastoral Nature. By living a simple life without social ambition he subordinated his ego to his soul or central Self, symbolized by Walden Pond. "The Ponds" chapter is at the center of the book and Walden Pond is the center of Thoreau: "A lake is the landscape's most beautiful and expressive feature. It is earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature... White Pond and Walden are great crystals on the surface of the earth, Lakes of Light." Walden and White Pond are monadic symbols of divine totality like the white whale. With a structure corresponding to the seasonal cycles and the pond at the center, *Walden* has a roundness evoking a mandala, a traditional symbol of wholeness comparable to a Tibetan prayer wheel and to later literary structures by Modernists such as Joyce, Hemingway, Faulkner and Cather.

Thoreau ascribes to Walden Pond characteristics traditionally used to describe the soul: (1) It is the center of being, like Jung's concept of the Self, the psychological authority greater than the ego; (2) the divinity within that transcends the individual like Jung's "collective unconscious"; (3) it includes the individual mind and "fishes of thought"; (4) is the source of spiritual vision—"earth's eye"; (5) reflects the light--Truth; (6) is "transparent" like Emerson describing himself in *Nature* as a "transparent eyeball"; (7) is a "gem" and a "crystal"; (8) "remarkable for its depth and purity"; (9) "Seemingly bottomless"; (10) "Sky water...reflecting the clouds"; (11) "Lying between the earth and the heavens, it partakes of...both"; (12) is paradoxical, turning the world upsidedown into circularity; and (13) reconciles opposites. For "Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads": "It seemed as if I might next cast my line into the air, as well as downward into this element which was scarcely more dense. Thus I caught two fishes as it were with one hook"--a transcendental experience of "doubleness."

The "dimpling circles" on the pond contribute to a motif of circularity in this chapter in particular. This chapter contains perhaps the most vivid and memorable image of transcendent consciousness in *Walden*, emphasizing circularity, atonement, harmony and peace:

I used to raise echoes by striking with a paddle on the side of my boat, filling the surrounding woods with a circling and dilating sound, stirring them up as the keeper of a menagerie his wild beasts, until I elicited a growl from every wooded vale and hill-side. In warm evenings I frequently sat in the boat playing the flute, and saw the perch, which I seem to have charmed, hovering around me, and the moon travelling over the ribbed bottom, which was strewn with the wrecks of the forest.

Here again he feels like Orpheus, but he is in heaven rather than Hades, and the growls he hears are distant. The threat is the machine in his Garden: "That devilish Iron Horse, whose ear-rending neigh is heard throughout the town, has muddied the Boiling Spring with his foot, and he it is that has browsed off all the woods on Walden shore."

#### Baker Farm

In the previous chapter he attained complete atonement with Nature, transcendent consciousness and holistic perception. He has become a pantheist. Now cedars are fit "to stand before Valhalla," pine groves are "temples" where the Druids would have worshipped, and other places around Walden are "shrines." Now he stands "in the very abutment of a rainbow's arch...dazzling me as if I looked through colored crystal"—"earth's eye." Opposites are reconciled when he accepts the machine in the Garden: "As I walked on the railroad causeway, I used to wonder at the halo of light around my shadow, and would fain fancy myself one of the elect." Here he contrasts his pantheism with the Puritanism that is his heritage, turning it upsidedown as do the other New England Transcendentalists. According to Puritan theology "the elect" are saved despite their depravity by nature, whereas in Thoreau's religion Nature is salvation: "In Wilderness is the preservation of the World" ("Walking," 1862).

Thoreau places himself among the Transcendentalists by quoting the poetry of Ellery Channing throughout this chapter. Near the end of it he preaches the doctrines of his religion, his form of Transcendentalism, his alternative to Christianity, avowing that his divine authority is his "Good Genius": "Rise from care before the dawn, and seek adventures... Grow wild according to thy nature... Let not to get a living be thy trade, but thy sport. Enjoy the land, but own it not... We should come from far, from adventures, and perils, and discoveries every day, with new experiences and character." Many kids feel this way before adulthood. Many who grow wild according to their natures end up drug addicts and criminals. Most people would rather be employed.

In counterpoint to the easygoing pastoral Thoreau with a halo is Thoreau the puritan reformer. He disapproves of his neighbor John Field, "an honest, hard-working, but shiftless man." Most of his neighbors thought Thoreau himself was shiftless. He mooched his way through life, moving in with Emerson whenever he was homeless. Thoreau even admits that he "looked like a loafer." He stereotypes Field as an



Irishman, much as southern poor whites stereotyped blacks. At the time, poor Irish immigrants were seen as lazy and stupid. That was before they took over Massachusetts. Thoreau tries to convert the Irish family man to his religion of simplicity, urging Field to follow his example: "I did not use tea, nor coffee, nor butter, nor milk, nor fresh meat, and so did not have to work to get them." He thinks that Field is stuck "in a bog," that he should stop paying rent and build his own house for himself and his wife and their "several children," referring to one as a "poor starveling brat." Thoreau did not bother to count the children, nor to consider how much larger than his hut such a "palace," as he calls it, would need to be. Nor how long it would take this man to build it by himself. And upon whose land could he build it? Thoreau is preaching that nobody should own property—"own it not." Even if Field followed his advice and was able to build a house, it would belong to the owner of Baker Farm, who could take it away at will.

At the end of the chapter Thoreau laments that Field is "born to be poor" and "not to rise in the world"--that is, to be *like Henry himself!* At least the little Field children will be able to go on drinking milk and eating meat. Thoreau's advice about building a house is so dumb it is no wonder that Field does not heed his advice on fish bait. That the Irishman catches fewer fish is a forced and illogical parallel to his decision not to subject his family to Thoreau's lifestyle. Thoreau fails as a "fisher of men," in contrast to Christ and his disciples--until the counterculture of the 1960s.

### Higher Laws

Thoreau's conception of himself remains hierarchical in the Puritan tradition, in contrast to Whitman's: "I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both. I love the wild not less than the good." This chapter presents a philosophy of moral evolution, beginning in the Wilderness: "There is a period in the history of the individual, as of the race, when the hunters are the 'best men'." (As Cooper sees Natty Bumppo.) Since the histories of the individual and of the race are analogous, Thoreau's individuation is an allegory of humanity's development, somewhat like Whitman in his "Song of Myself." Today, Thoreau would probably belong to the National Rifle Association, to express "the most original part of himself": "We cannot but pity the boy who has never fired a gun."

A man "goes thither at first as a hunter and fisher, until at last, if he has the seeds of a better life in him, he...leaves the gun and fish-pole behind." Thoreau here equates his fishing with hunting in a primitive stage of human development reenacted by retreating into the woods and recycling his spirit in accord with the seasons, in a cyclical rebirth characteristic of the individuation process: "Thus, even in civilized communities, the embryo man passes through the hunter stage of development.... There is unquestionably this instinct in me which belongs to the lower orders of creation; yet with every year I am less a fisherman... The gross feeder is a man in the larva state." Our evolutionary destiny is vegetarian. "A little bread or a few potatoes would have done as well as meat." Not for protein, Henry.

The transcendental experiences rendered in "The Ponds" and "Baker Farm" establish "the divine." In this chapter the puritan component is further integrated into his holistic vision, as he asserts "higher laws" than society's, such as: "Chastity is the flowering of man." For "we are conscious of an animal in us, which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers. It is reptile and sensual, and perhaps cannot be wholly expelled." Thoreau is no hippie: "I would fain keep sober always." In effect he predicts the destructive effects of the hippie counterculture of the 1960s: "Even music may be intoxicating. Such apparently slight causes destroyed Greece and Rome, and will destroy England and America."

After all his emphasis upon being natural like Adam and Eve in the Garden before the Fall, he now says: "Nature is hard to be overcome, but she must be overcome." He wants to be natural enough to go fishing, to feel like devouring animals raw and to "speak simply of the necessary functions of human nature," but with genteel limitations. He is too much the son of the Puritans to overcome sexual inhibition to the extent that Whitman did. "All he could think of was to practice some new austerity, to let his mind descend into his body and *redeem* it." (italics added) Whitman did not think the body needed to be redeemed. Thoreau is his own redeemer: "The spirit can...transmute what in form is the grossest sensuality into purity and devotion." That transmutation is his individuation process: "He is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him day by day, and the divine being established."

## Brute Neighbors

Thoreau's (1) *puritan* head is vertical, as expressed in his moral hierarchy; (2) his *pastoral* heart is horizontal like the pond; and (3) his soul is round as expressed by the structure of *Walden*. Once he passes through his center in "The Ponds," his doubleness places him both at the center and at the top of the circular structure. Transcendent experiences--such as sitting out on the pond in his boat playing his flute until he charms the fish by moonlight--are mystical, ineffable and at first beyond human understanding like Melville's whale. They lead to understanding in the next chapter, to a conscious reconciliation of the opposites essential to holistic consciousness, as expressed in Emerson's Hindu poem "Brahma": Thoreau is walking along the railroad tracks when he sees "the halo of light around my shadow," an image evoking what the Puritans would have called divine grace, though his tone is fanciful.

Having attained a spiritual vision of his own--his transcendentalism--he now devotes himself to a "new austerity," a new *puritanism* to replace the old Puritanism. He will live by "Higher Laws" than society's, like a man who becomes a monk after a mystical conversion in order to purify himself--to "redeem" his body or animal nature. Opposites having been reconciled, the tension between himself and society dissipates. His narrative relaxes again into *pastoralism* as he goes fishing with his fellow Transcendentalist the poet Ellery Channing. *Walden* rounds naturally into an easygoing pastoral mode without the dramatic tension of plotted fiction: "Shall I go to heaven or a-fishing... I was as near being resolved into the essence of things as ever I was in my life."

The parallels Thoreau makes between men and other animals imply that they have souls, as St. Francis believed. The cute little mice who sit on his hand might also be carrying the deadly hantavirus, but he could not have known that. "I lived snug as a meadow mouse," he says, and some would say that he carried a virus that became a pandemic during the 1960s. The eyes of a bird reflect the sky like Walden Pond and "All intelligence seems reflected in them." Indeed, Thoreau finds more to admire and interest him in his brute neighbors than in his human ones. Mice get more attention than Emerson. By the 1970s laws such as the Endangered Species Act gave mice and snails and other animals more rights than people. Today some environmentalists believe that humans are a cancer on the earth and should go extinct.

Thoreau recognizes the cruelty in Nature in his account of the epic battle of the ants, "the red republicans on the one hand, and the black imperialists on the other." One warrior has "still living heads...hanging on either side of him like ghastly trophies." Yet he attributes moral consciousness to the insects, though again in a fanciful tone: "I have no doubt that it was a principle they fought for." *Pastoralism* is sustained because ants are so small, they pose no threat, the tone is fanciful and the analogy of ants to people diminishes the magnitude of war in human affairs--still idealizing Nature.

## House-Warming

The year curves into October, wasps move into his hut and he tolerates them, as Crèvecoeur did in *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782). He enjoys the sun as long as possible: "It is so much pleasanter and wholesomer to be warmed by the sun while you can be, than by an artificial fire." At the time, stoves were replacing fireplaces, around which for centuries families had gathered together in an evening ritual. Romantics felt the loss deeply, as expressed by Ellen Sturgis Hooper in the poem Thoreau quotes at the end of this chapter. Hawthorne made the hearth an icon of the heart and Victorian values and explained the significance of the hearth in mythological terms in "Fire Worship" (1843). In "The Tryworks" chapter of *Moby-Dick* (1851) Melville associates artificial fire with society and natural fire with Truth. Obligated to use a stove, Thoreau "felt as if I had lost a companion," he can no longer "purify his thoughts" by looking into the fire, and his cooking is no longer poetic. At the same time, he also approves of what "goes a step or two beyond instinct, and saves a little time for the fine arts."

## Former Inhabitants; and Winter Visitors

Winter is at the bottom of the organic cycle, when much of Nature falls dormant and dead. Thoreau's consciousness loses its fullness of life, its psychological wholeness, and reverts from round to vertical,

mystical to rational, figurative to literal: local history addressed to the mind rather than the soul. Metaphors and aphorisms are scarce, like isolated plants still green in the snow, and cosmic consciousness deflates to earth at Concord: "I came to town still, like a friendly Indian." Concord is a rural village and his priority remains pastoral as he roams around the countryside: "Deliver me from a city."

Now, however, his Spirit is asleep like the soil and he turns from solitude back to society, at first merely in his imagination as he ruminates on the past: "For human society I was obliged to conjure up the former occupants of these woods." Casting his local history as a narrative he roams around recalling people who used to live nearby, first singling out a slave, a "colored woman" ("as if [she] were discolored") and a "handy Negro." He refers to the great snow of 1717, the American Revolution, Waterloo and the War of 1812, while describing ruins of former dwellings that convey a vision of passing time and the brevity of human life--themes characteristic of Romantics such as Washington Irving.

His winter visitors are all unnamed embodiments of ideas: first a woodchopper, a man of Nature who might be a dunce or a genius, expressing Thoreau's ambivalence about primitivism; then his educated opposite, the Transcendentalist poet recognizable as Ellery Channing. Thoreau is most impressed by Amos Bronson Alcott, the most dreamy, not to say foolish, of all the Utopian Transcendentalists, satirized by his own daughter Louisa May in "Transcendental Wild Oats" (1873): "His words and attitude always suppose a better state of things than other men are acquainted with, and he will be the last man to be disappointed as the ages revolve." He "is perhaps the sanest man...of any I chance to know." Thoreau himself believes in "building castles in the air for which earth offered no worthy foundation"; and "Thus we kept on like true idealists, rejecting the evidence of our senses." Spoken like a liberal. In the 21st century, politicians who built castles in the air caused an economic depression.

He concludes with his most illustrious unnamed visitor, "with whom I had 'solid seasons,' long to be remembered, at his house in the village, and who looked in upon me from time to time." So much for his benefactor the great Emerson. Minimizing the mighty is consistent with Thoreau's rejection of prevailing values. Merely referring to Emerson in less than one sentence without even naming him elevates the even more airy Alcott above him as an exemplar of Transcendentalism, minimizing the influence upon him of his mentor and conveying his need for independence, countering the common view that he was merely a disciple of the much greater man.

#### Winter Animals

An owl conversing with a goose expresses the divine order of Nature, in which apparent conflicts are actually in concord, a unity emphasized by the pun on the placename: "It was one of the most thrilling discords I ever heard. And yet, if you had a discriminating ear, there were in it the elements of a concord such as these plains never saw nor heard." Throughout his narrative Thoreau himself enacts concord, or at-one-ment, by giving a higher priority to Nature than to society: "I once had a sparrow alight upon my shoulder for a moment while I was hoeing in a village garden, and I felt that I was more distinguished by that circumstance than I should have been by an epaulet I could have worn." Unlike environmentalists of the late 20th century who supposed they were following his example by banning loggers from the forests, Thoreau had common sense. He knew that forests need to be thinned by woodchoppers or they become overgrown, unhealthy and more vulnerable to wildfire ("House-Warming").

#### The Pond in Winter

When he cuts a hole in the ice and looks to the bottom of the pond, his soul, he sees "heaven." Also hell, he fancies: "the undoubted source of the Styx and entrance to the Infernal Regions." For "his life passes deeper in Nature than the studies of the naturalist penetrate." Spirit is wiser than science. Watergazing into the pond he accepts the predatory food chain in Nature: "I love to see that Nature is so rife with life that myriads can be afforded to be sacrificed and suffered to prey on one another." ("Spring"). One creature feeding upon another is part of the divine order and natural laws are as absolute as the laws of geometry:

I am thankful that this pond was made deep and pure for a symbol.  
While men believe in the infinite some ponds will be thought to be  
bottomless.... Such a rule of the two diameters not only guides us

toward the sun in the system and the heart in man, but draw lines through the length and breadth of the aggregate of a man's particular daily behaviors and waves of life into his coves and inlets, and where they intersect will be the height or depth of his character. Perhaps we need only to know how his shores trend and his adjacent country or circumstances, to infer his depth and concealed bottom.

He has become a surveyor of the soul. When men come to cut blocks of ice from his pond, he associates water with affections that can putrefy when removed from the pond, and ice with purity of intellect: "In the morning I bathed my intellect in the stupendous cosmogonical philosophy of the *Bhagvat Geeta*." The fact that local merchants were selling ice to India becomes a metaphor of his own expanded consciousness and of the spiritual unification of all humanity, later the theme of Whitman's "Passage to India" (1871): "The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges." Consistent with the vertical consciousness expressed in this chapter, he does not render any transcendent experience, he reads a book, uses his intellect, calculates like the Pythagoras of his pond and discovers his metaphor by observing others.

### Spring

*Walden* now rounds upward from winter to spring, cycling back to the season in which it began, while it is also progressive as an expression of human development--individuation to psychological wholeness. A symbol of his soul, the pond reflects Thoreau's character and personality, as when he refers to himself from the perspective of his neighbors: "Who would have suspected so large and cold and thick-skinned a thing to be so sensitive?" *Walden* is his rebuttal to neighbors who have misjudged him.

With methodical precision he records the melting of the ice, by date, as an empirical observer--a naturalist in the vertical mode of consciousness identified with the winter, now transitioning back into the round of holistic vision. His fascination with the aesthetic forms of Nature becomes metaphysical rather than scientific as he begins to read the earth as "living poetry": "It is truly *grotesque* vegetation, whose forms and color we see imitated in bronze, a sort of architectural foliage more ancient and typical than...any vegetable leaves... I am affected as if in a peculiar sense I stood in the laboratory of the Artist who made the world and me." *Walden* is his alternative to the *Bible* insofar as it reflects the world truly, like the pond.

Thoreau adopts the old Renaissance metaphor of man as a microcosm of the world: "This sandy overflow is something such a foliaceous mass as the vitals of the animal body." He roots his metaphysics in Platonic idealism: "No wonder that the earth expresses itself outwardly in leaves, it so labors with the idea inwardly... The overhanging leaf sees here its prototype [or archetype]... Thus it seemed that this one hillside illustrated the principle of all the operations of Nature." This aesthetic metaphysics derives from Platonic, or archetypal, thinking and prompts his reasoning by analogy, as Emerson does in his essay "Circles": The various forms of Nature "have the same relation to types already in the mind of man that astronomy has":

Thus...you pass from the lumpish grub in the earth to the airy and fluttering butterfly. The very globe continually transcends and translates itself, and becomes winged in its orbit. Even ice begins with delicate crystal leaves, as if it had flowed into moulds which the fronds of water plants have impressed on the watery mirror. The whole tree itself is but one leaf, and rivers are still vaster leaves whose pulp is intervening earth, and towns and cities are the ova of insects in their axils.

Hawthorne represented his own soul as a butterfly in "The Artist of the Beautiful" (1844) and like Thoreau his metaphysics are aesthetic, as represented by sunlight and shadow in *The Marble Faun* (1860). Both writers see God as the Artist of Nature. The important difference is that Hawthorne is a Christian who does not idealize nor worship Nature, rather he reads it as allegory. Thoreau calls God a "potter" and asks, "What is man but a mass of thawing clay?"--apparently rejecting faith in immortality. But later on he says, "There needs no stronger proof of immortality," and in the next chapter he affirms it again in the

penultimate paragraph of the book: "Who does not feel his faith in a resurrection and immortality strengthened by hearing of this?"

He seems to contradict his recurrent polarization of Nature against the machine of society when he declares that "There is nothing inorganic," but this may be seen as consistent with his earlier assertion that "discord" to the human is "concord" in the cosmos. His concept of "a living earth" precedes the Gaia Theory of later environmentalists and his "symbol of perpetual youth, the grass-blade" precedes Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* by one year. "So our human life but dies down to its root, and still puts forth its green blade to eternity." In this chapter and the last, Thoreau is spiritually reviving from his winter consciousness and is springing forth to eternity. "Walden was dead and is alive again."

He differentiates himself from Emerson in his search for the evening robin: "If I could ever find the twig he sits upon! I mean *he*; I mean the *twig*." Emerson is deductive and abstract, whereas Thoreau is inductive and concrete, founding his intuitive philosophy on facts. In his synthesis of Romantic intuition with empiricism--sensibility with sense, subjectivity with objectivity, poetry with science--Thoreau transcends all the Transcendentalists including Emerson, who associated empiricism with 18th-century "materialism." At the same time, however, the philosophy he builds is so extremely idealistic that few will follow him until the revival of the myth of the American Adam in the 1960s: "Through our own recovered innocence we discern the innocence of our neighbors." He has forgiven them. "The impression made on a wise man is that of universal innocence. Poison is not poisonous after all, nor are any wounds fatal." If only that applied to all those who soon would fall in the Civil War. This passage is solipsistic idealism, like Emerson in the conclusion of *Nature* (1836), so lofty it loses contact with physical reality.

### Conclusion

In the monomyth of the questing hero as explained by Joseph Campbell, the hero returns from his experience in the Wilderness (or peaceful woods) with a boon he gives to humanity. Thoreau's boon is the wisdom and inspiration he conveys in his Conclusion, in which he wisely acknowledges the limitations of his pond: "Thank Heaven, here is not all the world." For "the universe is wider than our views of it." Emerson had cited a multiplicity of circles in *Nature* in his essay "Circles" (1841). The movement of *Walden* through the seasonal cycle coincides with linear movement through the arc of the human life cycle: "Our voyaging is only great-circle sailing." The individual cycle also may parallel human evolution: "These may be but the spring months in the life of the race."

Thoreau articulates a traditional insight that explains the psychological symbolism of Romantics including himself, Emerson, Hawthorne and Melville, the paradox that the outside is inside: "Direct your eye right inward, and you'll find / A thousand regions in your mind / Yet undiscovered." According to psychologists today, the structure of consciousness is a metaphor of the outer world as perceived. See "Model of Metaphors." Thoreau exhorts us to "explore your own higher latitudes... Be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought." Poe had explored his lower latitudes in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838)--"continents and seas in the moral world"--before Antarctica was literally explored in the expedition to which Thoreau refers here in 1854. Thoreau even mentions the theory of Symmes' Hole in the earth at the South Pole, "by which to get at the inside at last," the theory that inspired Poe to write *Pym*. With his mention of this theory, Thoreau enlarges his vision beyond the pond and makes the whole earth a symbol of his soul, like an Indian such as Black Elk--and like Melville, whose exploration is the most comprehensive.

In his final pages, just as the seasons cycle, Thoreau circles back to the style and tone of his opening chapter and aphorisms bloom like flowers in the spring: "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him keep to the music which he hears, however measured or far away." It is ironic that Thoreau, the rebel and social dropout, has been so often quoted on conventional occasions and in particular by commencement speakers to inspire graduates to be ambitious and get ahead in the world. His metaphor of "the parched uplands" points ahead to T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922), but he concludes *Walden* with inspirational rhetoric and a sunburst of optimism in the spirit of Emerson, Whitman and 19th-century America: "Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star." These last lines punctuate organic motifs throughout the

narrative: awakening, renewal, cycling, morning and light. *Walden* ends in the Sky, the archetypal space of transcendence, and its last word expands vision from the earth to the cosmos.

Many later writers have made implicit responses to *Walden* as a cultural touchstone. Among the best recent examples are *All the Little Live Things* (1867) by Wallace Stegner, *Housekeeping* (1980) by Marilynne Robinson, and *The River Why?* (1983) by David Duncan.

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