

40 CRITICS DISCUSS

Walden (1854)

Henry David Thoreau

(1817-1862)

“The economical details and calculations in this book [*Walden*] are more curious than useful; for the author’s life in the woods was on too narrow a scale to find imitators. But in describing his hermitage and his forest life, he says so many pithy and brilliant things, and offers so many piquant, and, we may add, so many just, comments on society as it is, that his book is well worth the reading, both for its actual contents and its suggestive capacity.”

A. P. Peabody
North American Review 79
(October 1854) 443-48

“He was happy enough to get back among the good people of Concord, we have no doubt; for although he paints his shanty-life in rose-colored tints, we do not believe he liked it, else why not stick to it?... It strikes us that all the knowledge which the ‘Hermit of Walden’ gained by his singular experiment in living might have been done just as well, and as satisfactorily, without any experiment at all...”

There is much excellent good sense delivered in a very comprehensive and by no means unpleasant style in Mr. Thoreau’s book, and let people think as they may of the wisdom or propriety of living after his fashion, denying oneself all the luxuries which the earth can afford, for the sake of leading a life of lawless vagabondage, and freedom from starched collars, there are but few readers who will fail to find profit and refreshment in his pages. Perhaps some practical people will think that a philosopher like Mr. Thoreau might have done the world a better service by purchasing a piece of land, and showing how much it might be made to produce, instead of squatting on another man’s premises, and proving how little will suffice to keep body and soul together. But we must allow philosophers, and all other men, to fulfil their missions in their own way. If Mr. Thoreau had been a practical farmer, we should not have been favored with his volume... As it is, we see how much more valuable to mankind is our philosophical vagabond than a hundred sturdy agriculturists; any plodder may raise beans, but it is only one in a million who can write a readable volume.”

Charles Frederick Briggs
“A Yankee Diogenes”
Putnam’s Monthly Magazine 4 (October 1854)

“In a volume called *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, published last year, but quite interesting enough to make it worth while for us to break our rule by a retrospective notice--we have a bit of pure American life (not the ‘go a-head’ species, but its opposite pole), animated by that energetic, yet calm spirit of innovation, that practical as well as theoretic independence of formulae, which is peculiar to some of the finer American minds. The writer tells us how he built his house; how he earned the necessaries of his simple life by cultivating a bit of ground. He tells his system of diet, his studies, his reflections, and his observations of natural phenomena. These last are not only made by a keen eye, but have their interest enhanced by passing through the medium of a deep poetic sensibility; and, indeed, we feel throughout the book the presence of a refined as well as a hardy mind. People--very wise in their own eyes--who would have every man’s life ordered according to a particular pattern, and who are intolerant of every existence the utility of which is not palpable to them, may pooh-pooh Mr. Thoreau and this episode in his history, as unpractical and dreamy. Instead of contesting their opinion ourselves, we will let Mr. Thoreau speak for himself. There is plenty of sturdy sense mingled with his unworldliness.”

George Eliot
Westminster Review 65 (9 N.S.)
(January 1856) 302-03

“Prominent among the older men of this group [the New England group] is that strange, shy haunter of the woods, Henry D. Thoreau; ill at ease in the midst of conventionalities and at home in the wilderness, the preacher of a simpler and more unfettered life. There, too, were men of a yet broader and nobler type: George Ripley, the devoted laborer at Brook Farm; and George Williams Curtis, the patriot, orator, and man of letters.”

Henry S. Pancoast
An Introduction to American Literature
(Holt 1898, 1902) 200-01

“*Walden* is the handbook of an economy that endeavors to refute Adam Smith and transform the round of daily life into something nobler than a mean gospel of plus and minus... As Thoreau understood the problem of economics there were three possible solutions open to him: to exploit himself, to exploit his fellows, or to reduced the problem to its lowest denominator....The story of Thoreau’s emancipation from the lower economics is the one romance of his life, and *Walden* is his great book. More restrained than the *Week* and lacking the exuberant beauty of the latter—its noble talk and scathing criticism—it is ‘informed by a more explicit unifying philosophy.’

It is a book in praise of life rather than of Nature, a record of calculating economies that studied saving in order to spend more largely. But it is a book of social criticism as well, in spite of its explicit denial of such a purpose, and in its speculations much of Carlyle and Ruskin and William Morris crops out. In considering the true nature of economy he concluded, with Ruskin, that ‘the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run.’ Conceive of life as cheap, a poor thing to be exploited, and the factory system becomes the logical economic order; but conceive of it as dear, and the common happiness the great objective of society, and quite another sort of individualism will emerge. Thoreau did not look with approval on the rising city of Lowell, with its multiplying spindles and increasing proletariat, and he did not understand why Americans should boast of a system that provided vulgar leisure for the masters at the cost of serfdom for the workers.

Where is the division of labor to end? [he asks] and what object does it finally serve? I cannot believe that our factory system is the best mode by which men may get clothing. The condition of the operatives is becoming every day more like that of the English; and it cannot be wondered at, since, as far as I have heard or observed, the principal object is, not that mankind may be well and honestly clad, but, unquestionably, that the corporations may be enriched. (‘Economy’)

The whole middle-class philosophy of exploitation was hateful to him, the middleman equally with the manufacturer. ‘Trade curses everything it touches; and though you trade in messages from heaven, the whole curse of trade attaches to the business.’ Men have been deceived by a false economy—lured by the bog lights away from the open fields to flounder in the miasmatic marshes. While Ruskin was still puttering over Turner, Thoreau was elaborating in *Walden* the text: The only wealth is life.”

Vernon L. Parrington
Main Currents in American Thought 2
(1927; Harcourt/Harvest 1954) 393, 397, 399

“He built his hut at Walden Pond, and also a philosophy which cut deeper into the marrow of actual life than Emerson’s. Silent, big-nosed, carrying his umbrella, he trudged the fields in search of arrowheads. Ice-fishing in Walden Pond, he surveyed the bright-colored perch and pickerel, read and green against their white background of snow, or, on a summer night, he drowsed in his boat. ‘It seemed,’ he said, ‘as if I might next cast my line upward 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.’

He snared, indeed, the thoughts of the mystic, the poet, the philosopher, the humanitarian, the naturalist. Yet his inner unity, in which he bears, after all, his strongest resemblance to Emerson, touched such wisdoms incidentally. At heart, Thoreau was a skeptic, in the true sense of the word, that is, doubtful of the forms and of the emotion of religion, doubtful of the canons and the accomplishments of civilization, doubtful even—there is evidence for this—that life as most men lived it was good. But his skepticism was not apathy... Thoreau pledged himself to a tireless search for the secret of living... He was not, as is so

often said, practicing the teachings of Emerson or turning hermit-naturalist or skulking in misanthropy. He craved truth... He was, he said, keeping step to the music of another drummer, and not to the squads right of organized society....

This 'cosmic Yankee'...would not gather the fruits of romanticism, democracy, and transcendentalism; he preferred to analyze the soil in which they grew. The romantic strain in himself was paled by thought; checked by his classical bias, by his interest in science, and by a noticeable coldness of mind. To democracy, in its sweating, bumptious complacency, he opposed not merely the philosopher's disdain but distrust of its gods.... Thoreau favored, as in 'Of Civil Disobedience,' no government at all; his thinking inclined toward anarchy. And transcendentalism, too, he held under fire; its violence perturbed him. He, at least, would remain objective, curious, appetent. Nor does his attitude now appear radical, as in the days of our early mercantile culture. Proleptic [anticipating in advance], he expressed a mood of our civilization which today is vocal indeed." [during the Great Depression of the 1930s]

Stanley T. Williams
American Literature
(Lippincott 1933) 74-75

"Walden Pond is about two miles southeast of Concord, and is about one-half mile wide at its broadest point. The Fitchburg Railroad skirts the southwest side of the pond. The land on which Thoreau 'squatted' belonged to Emerson. For his building Thoreau borrowed an ax from Alcott, which he returned, he says, sharper than he found it. He bought the lumber for his shack from an Irishman, who had used it for a shanty; and the total cost of his building was \$28.12. A group of friends helped him to erect it—Alcott, Emerson, Ellery Channing, George Curtis, Burrill Curtis, Edmund Hosmer, and Hosmer's three sons, John, Edmund, and Andrew. It must not be thought that Thoreau lived an isolated life at Walden; he frequently made trips into Concord (on one of which he was arrested), and sometimes went on longer journeys; and he was visited by a number of friends and curious strangers."

Howard Mumford Jones, Ernest E. Leisy, Richard M. Ludwig, eds.
Major American Writers I
(Harcourt 1935) 907

"*Walden* as a whole...meets Coleridge's demand of shaping, 'as it develops, itself from within'... As a result *Walden* has spoken to men of widely differing convictions, who have in common only the intensity of their devotion to life. It became a bible for many of the leaders of the British labor movement... When the sound of a little fountain in a shop window in Fleet Street made him think suddenly of lake water, Yeats remembered also his boyhood enthusiasm for Thoreau.... *Walden* was also one of our books that bulked largest for Tolstoy when he addressed his brief message to America (1901) and urged us to rediscover the greatness of our writers... In 1904 Proust wrote to the Contesse de Noailles: 'Lisez...les pages admirables de *Walden*....'

The structural wholeness of *Walden* makes it stand as the firmest product in our literature of such life-giving analogies between the processes of art and daily work.... Thoreau demonstrated what Emerson had merely observed, that the function of the artist in society is always to renew the primitive experience of the race... The uneradicated wildness of man is the anarchical basis both of all that is most dangerous and most valuable in him... By following to its uncompromising conclusion his belief that great art can grow from the center of the simplest life, he was able to be universal."

F. O. Matthiessen
American Renaissance
(Oxford 1941)

"May be read simply as a narrative—with regrettable digressions—of two years spent close to Nature, and of the efforts required to provide the minimum essentials of food and shelter. As such, it appeals to something elemental and primitive in the reader. May be read as the record of an experimental demonstration of a theory—that life can be lived fruitfully on a far less complex, crowded, and expensive level than the conventional. As such, its conclusiveness may be questioned. Thoreau's experiment was carried on in close proximity to the village whither he went frequently, and with some assistance from

friends and family. Actually, this purpose was quite secondary, the primary objective being quiet, and favorable surroundings for meditation and literary composition. In that sense, the philosophical observations scattered through *Walden*, though often drawn from the Journals of preceding years, may properly be regarded as the chief fruit of the experiment, and, in the aggregate, his message to his age.

Chiefly, these observations are individual rather than doctrines of Transcendental philosophy. Thoreau was called a Transcendentalist and used the word freely. His love of solitude, of contemplation, and of communion with Nature is Oriental and Transcendental though he more than others put them into practice. The rhapsodic passages, less common here than in *A Week*, are often of exquisite beauty. He was, however, basically a believer in Free Will and individual sensibility rather than Oriental passivity, and he combined with a strain of the mystic a high degree of physical competence as farmer, surveyor, and general handy man, together with an insatiable scientific curiosity.... *Walden* [was] named by H. S. Canby along with *Moby-Dick*, Emerson's *Essays*, Poe's *Poems*, *Leaves of Grass*, and *The Scarlet Letter* 'one of the six most remarkable books of our single century of national existence.' Prose Style: The style of Thoreau is grounded in the classics and the best of English literature, not entirely uninfluenced by that of Emerson, but essentially original. It is crisp, vigorous, allusive, colorful in diction, full of subtle harmony. At its best it is unsurpassed in American literature."

Bartholow V. Crawford, Alexander C. Kern, Morriss H. Needleman
American Literature
(Barnes & Noble 1945-61) 99-100

"The manuscript of *Walden*, Thoreau's maturest record of his life and thinking, was ready for printing as the first book appeared; but, chilled by the reception of the *Week*, no publisher would now touch it. Henry had to wait. Yet the mental and emotional incentives that created *Walden* were the guarantors of its ultimate success. Henry's devoted love of life at the pond and in Concord township, his intense religious feeling for nature (on the alert for the God behind it), his protest at the waste of life through misdirection by the code of the mercantile system, his feeling for his friends, his interest in men--all this and more enter into *Walden*....

Thoreau's intuitional process of thinking led to the minting of individual sentences.... Though Nature was still religion to him, something of a change had taken place. Harvard's famous scientist Louis Agassiz, author of the 'Essay on Classification,' had become his friend. Agassiz imparted to Thoreau his own absolute passion for minutely detailed description--which came naturally enough to Henry. But this approach, typical of nineteenth century science, brought no philosophy to release its practitioners from an ever-increasing rubble of facts.... Henry sometimes lost sight of the God in the wood....

Like so many intellectual men, Emerson, though drawing inspiration from the woods, was awkward in them.... So Emerson followed as best he could his friend's striding figure, Thoreau clad in efficient homespun.... *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, at last was published. A packed book, beautifully and economically written; among many things the autobiography of a mind and body in cooperation enjoying fullness of living. The structure of the whole is based on the framework of the author's life at the pond; its sense of time established by the passage of the seasons, through summer, autumn, and winter to a triumphant spring--the year itself a symbol of man's lifetime. As in the *Week*, and with like purpose, Thoreau did not stick to the chronology of his stay, but considerably shortened it. It's many topics and reflections, arranged with a skillful eye on contrast or agreement, are joined with neatly managed links and transitions.... In sly amusement, to catch literal minds, he attached sundry fractions to his figures, down to three-fourths of a cent, and succeeded all too well, side-tracking readers from greater matters....

Ninety years after *Walden* was published, this appraisal could be written: 'We read *Walden* as notes toward a philosophy of human happiness, with digressions into the movement of ponds, the flight of hawks, the patterns of snow, and the habits of owls. But it is most triumphant in the superb grace with which it joins the life of man to the life of nature. Its woodland jottings fold into its condemnation of greed and insincerity like the pauses of a prayer'."

Townsend Scudder
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 388, 401-05

“*Walden*, like the *Week*, has for structure an elaborated metaphor. It is that of the traveler who, instead of leaving home, explores the very ground he lives on.... The strategic metaphor in *Walden* becomes the exploration of one’s own life surroundings, because only here has one the centrality of focus from which to lay out measurements in all directions....

In *Walden* the metaphor almost invariably has its matter-of-fact root in the literal context of the narrative; there is no sense of two separated levels, as in *Week*, one of narrative and one of thought. The metaphor expresses a relation rather than a parallel.... This may be contrasted with Emerson’s assertion of correspondence. The word ‘use’ here is important, as it eliminates the possibility of nature’s actually reflecting man’s thought. Thoreau’s nature, like that of the twentieth-century scientist’s, has as its regularities not those of human thought, but laws which human thought can discover, and which we yet only partially know.... The idealist invariably assumes an *a priori* known structure. Thoreau adheres to the empirical approach....

The geometric symbol for *Walden* is the upward curve. The background one would chart it against is the single knowable world of nature and experience. The lower part of the line is lost in an unknown beginning, just as the upper part continues potentially into the unknown. Underlying Thoreau’s thought is the assumption of evolution, in both geological history and human affairs. His knowledge of geology was, incidentally, fairly extensive and accurate by present day standards... He appears to believe that this development means improvement; hence the *upward* curve. It is better, for example, that men are no longer cannibalistic, strictly speaking, and are even beginning to find any animal food distasteful... As important as the winter-spring and night-morning imagery in *Walden* is the considerable use of imagery drawn from measurement: fixed known points, relative distances, depths, maps and charts, geometry, astronomy. *Walden* is above all concerned with the adjustment of relations, and this is most evident in these images.... This ingrained habit of vision in terms of measurement doubtless reflects his experience as a surveyor; but it is an important index to his thought as well. No measurement is absolute, since it is significant only by relation. Landmarks define one’s position and direction; the unknown defines one’s knowledge....

Human evolution therefore means ‘spiritual’ evolution. Thoreau knew full well how slowly men improve their condition, and how formidable are the entrenched traditions and customs that hold men back. Hence his experiment, to see how far one man can go in the desired direction. *Walden* begins with a discussion of the means utilized, and concludes with an invitation to all to wake up, explore themselves, find out exactly who they are. The constant theme of *Walden* is that of ‘spiritual’ awakening. It appears in metaphor in almost every chapter, the commonest symbols being those of spring, morning, and restorative medicines. By simplifying all his relations, Thoreau is able to define their fundamental character, their functions and possibilities. ‘Economy’ is an essay not on economics, but on the economic utilization of one’s time and energy.... Civilization means only improved methods, which allow that valuable margin of leisure for development beyond the satisfaction of animal wants....

‘Spiritual’ and ‘animal’ are thus opposite directions, rather than a dualism. The point in returning to a more or less primitive condition in one’s practical life is to clarify basic relations, to throw into relief the extent of one’s ignorance and the distance he has traveled in his development.... The dominant metaphors of inward spring and inward morning appear constantly in many forms, emphasizing this theme.... What man seeks...is self-realization, and the main problem he faces is how to solve the practical problems that stand in his way... The end result of relations explored, clarified, and established from a focal point, is self-realization.... The reverence Thoreau has for the animal in himself fades before the strenuous task of self-purification. But while calling for the animal to be overcome, he has his misgivings, and admits that perhaps we may withdraw from the ‘animal in us’ but ‘never change its nature’.... Thoreau does not work out an articulate view of the foundations of human morality in nature.... He shifts then to a compromise, sublimation of the sexual drive; the same energy, according to its direction, can be unclean or inspiring and invigorating, and Thoreau attributes all great ‘spiritual’ achievements of the race to chastity...

‘Higher Laws’...seems at first that it could be cited as evidence of a dualism, ‘spiritual’ and ‘animal,’ in Thoreau’s thought, a contradiction of his other views. However, his ‘reverence’ for primitive instincts begins to qualify what appears to be a bifurcation of nature, and what is ‘higher’ is clearly laid out in a scale that graduates downward. The ‘animal’ is characterized by unrestrained appetite and predatory

practices. The moral scale measures development—‘even in civilized communities, the embryo man passes through the hunter stage of development.’ This is also true of the growth of the race....

Winter, with its dying down, retraction of life and freezing over, is the larger symbol of spiritual sleep, or loss, from which one awakens to the discovery of himself and the ‘infinite extent’ of his relations. ‘Spring’ announces that ‘Walden was dead and is alive again.’ The concluding chapter’s vitality and assertion of wakefulness, renewal and joy depend entirely on the preceding period of self-discovery.... Chapter IX, ‘The Ponds,’ following ‘The Village,’ identifies Walden Pond as [the] vital center: ‘It is earth’s eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature.’ This figure is not fully exploited until near the end of *Walden*, when the bottom of the pond is sounded.”

William Drake

“A Formal Study of H. D. Thoreau”

M.A. Thesis (U Iowa 1948)

reprinted in *Thoreau: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Sherman Paul
(Prentice-Hall/Twentieth-Century Views 1962) 71-90

“*Walden* is a profoundly rhetorical book, emerging unmistakably from the long New England preaching tradition; though here the trumpet call announces the best imaginable news rather than apocalyptic warnings. Thoreau, in *Walden*, is a man who has come back down into the cave to tell the residents there that they are really in chains, suffering fantastic punishments they have imposed on themselves, seeing by a light that is reflected and derivative. A major test of the visionary hero must always be the way he can put his experience to work for the benefit of mankind; he demonstrates his freedom in the liberation of others. Thoreau prescribes the following cure: the total renunciation of the traditional, the conventional, the socially acceptable, the well-worn paths of conduct, and the total immersion in nature. Everything associated with the past should be burned away. The past should be cast off like dead skin....

Transcendentalism was Puritanism turned upside down, as a number of critics have pointed out; historically, it could hardly have been anything else. Transcendentalism drew on the vocabularies of European romanticism and Oriental mysticism... Thoreau had, as he remarked in his...deathbed witticism, no quarrel with God; his concern was simply other. His concern was with the strangulation of nature by convention. The trouble with conventions and tradition in the New World was that they had come first; they had come from abroad and from a very long way back; and they had been superimposed upon nature. They had to be washed away, like sin, so that the natural could reveal itself again and could be permitted to create its own organic conventions....

The structure of *Walden* has a similar beginning and a similar motion forward [similar to “Higher Laws”]. The book starts amid the punishing conventions of Concord, departs from them to the pond and the forest, explores the natural surroundings, and exposes the natural myth of the yearly cycle, to conclude with the arrival of spring, the full possession of life, and a representative anecdote about the sudden bursting into life of a winged insect long buried in an old table of apple-tree wood.... The end of the experience narrated by Thoreau was the reintegration of the personality. And since, according to Jung, ‘the lake in the valley is the unconscious,’ it is possible to hold that *Walden* enacts and urges the escape from the convention-ridden conscious and the release of the spontaneous energies of personality lying beneath the surface...substituting terms associated with the unconscious for all the terms associated with Emerson’s ‘Reason’.”

R. W. B. Lewis

The American Adam

(U Chicago 1955) 20-27

“The knowledge of the seasons was the most important addition to Thoreau’s thought after 1850. It made possible the metaphors of ripening and completion that give his last work a tone of acceptance and quiet satisfaction; and it also made possible the fable of the renewal of life in Walden.... In the seasons of *Walden* he could trace his metamorphoses: the passage from servitude to liberation, and the self-transcendence of his transformation from impurity to purity--the rebirth of new life out of the old.... Natural facts became the metaphors in terms of which he told of his desire to pass from a lower to a higher form of

life, from fixity to fluidity (he would share again the 'circulations' of Being), from the innocence of youth to the wisdom of maturity, from larval sensuality to aerial purity....

As Emerson had done in *Nature*, he began with commodity before turning to spirit. But more fully than Emerson, whose treatise had its point-by-point parallels in *Walden*, he employed history, anthropology, books (even Scripture), paradox, humor, irony, ridicule, scorn, philosophical puns, parables, dramatization, Utopian prospects, and every variety of symbolic statement to establish the contrasting values of surface and depth (appearance and reality), transient and permanent, complex and simple, disease and health, tradition and the uncommitted life, desperation and joy, spiritual emptiness and spiritual fullness....

Indeed, in dramatizing these changes from society and commodity to spirit and self, *Walden* worked inward from the circumferential to the central life, from the external to the real self, from extrinsic to intrinsic success.... If anything, he was undermining the Franklinian virtues, replacing the *Autobiography* with a model for another kind of success--utilizing the very terminology of business to raise the uncomfortable question of whether possessions actually helped one possess life... The burden of 'Economy,' in fact, was that the way to wealth was not the way to health, but to lives of quiet desperation....

Thoreau knew that his life at the pond and in Concord pastures was far from wild; and though he always maintained that the health of civilization needed the tonic of the wild, his experience had taught him that the pastoral landscape was the best setting for human life. On one level, in fact, he intended *Walden* for a modern epic of farming, and he had purposely begun his life from scratch in order to relive all history and test this mode of life against the achievements of civilization....When he proposed that the civilized man become a more experienced and wiser savage, he hoped that he would retain the physical simplicity of the one in order to achieve the complex goals of the other, that he would 'spend as little time as possible in planting, weaving, building, etc.' and devote his freedom to cultivating 'the highest faculties.'

This...made it possible for Thoreau to recapitulate the entire history of his life from youth to maturity: the first spring, the dewy, pure, auroral season of Olympian life, was true to his youth, and the subsequent seasons and the second spring were the record of the growth of consciousness and of his conscious endeavor to earn the new world of his springtime again.... The seasons of man, of course, corresponded to the seasons of Nature: summer representing the outdoor life, when man was alive in all his senses and Nature supplied his vital heat; autumn, the gathering of consciousness; and winter, the withdrawal inward to self-reflection. This development, moreover, had its counterpart in the seasons of history, for, as Emerson had noted, 'The Greek was the age of observation; the Middle Ages, that of fact and thought; ours, that of reflection and ideas'."

Sherman Paul
Introduction, "A Fable of the Renewal of Life"
Walden by H. D. Thoreau (Houghton 1957)

"The self-induced captivity of the American mind to some concept of Nature--NATURE writ large--can be traced, it would seem, to the shores of Walden Pond... The principle of turning one's back on unpleasant facts--unpleasant because they were so deeply inessential, so foreign, in a way, to our essential Nature--is one *naturally* congenial to the American mind. Thoreau gave this principle its classic utterance. In his spirit, if not in his name, we still take to such woods as we can find. If his genius had been of another kind he might have scrutinized this principle, rather than Nature, but it was his destiny to be the archetypal American....

It is in the woods at Walden that the shape of things to come is formulated. Here the American mind is divided down its center, fact against fact. At the threshold of our literature the prevailing tendency is given its classic statement and justification. Turn your back on the city, the civilized inessential, and withdraw into the wilderness.... The prevailing tendency, having finished with Thoreau, reappears as a sauntering song in Walt Whitman, as he makes his way, idly, down the endlessly open road."

Wright Morris
The Territory Ahead
(Atheneum 1957) 39-50

“Mark Van Doren said of *Walden*, ‘it was written in bounding spirits, with eyes twinkling and tongue in cheek.’ So it was, and Thoreau wrote with the same joy and humor and challenging assurance at the beginning. There is considerable difference, however, between the first and the last versions; the flavor is the same, but at the end it is much richer, since, as time went on, Thoreau added more and more of every element.... Indirectly, the public’s lack of appreciation of *A Week* had a great deal to do with *Walden*’s being the masterpiece it is. The financial failure of *A Week* kept Thoreau from publishing *Walden* when he first wanted to, and when he did publish it five years later, he had enlarged and improved it almost beyond compare.... And when it was too late for the benefit of others, he made a few corrections in his own copy of *Walden*.”

J. Lyndon Shanley
The Making of Walden
(U Chicago 1957) 18-33

[1] First, *Walden* takes on, from Thoreau’s arrangement of its sections, what we may call absolute form. That is to say, this arrangement has an overall shape and symmetry mainly separate from the specific content and function of each individual section. After a long introduction, these sections gather themselves...in two groups roughly balanced around a longer central section, ‘The Ponds’....

[2] Second, *Walden* has narrative movement. It takes the reader through a sequence in time, and although Thoreau often moves outside the limits of his two years and two months at the pond and at the same time, for convenience and economy and for symbolic purposes, condenses the two years into one, he retains a basic linear, chronological pattern. He sometimes expresses this pattern by alluding to the season, sometimes by citing the month and even at critical points the date. Thus, in spite of the obviously topical arrangement of the first half of the book and the obvious typicality of many of the activities Thoreau narrates, the basic chronology remains in force and gives a second, vital shape to the book, vital because it reaffirms our faith in that healthy, deliberate progress of time organic to the world of nature but too often accelerated by man in his world beyond all due proportion. Thoreau finds this organic time embodied everywhere in nature, and on this time...he bases his myth of spiritual rebirth.

[3] Third, in *Walden* Thoreau is obviously trying not only to narrate the story of his sojourn at the pond but to present to the reader a body of information about the two worlds of man and of nature, information both useful and meaningful. Thus, the sections of the book are so arranged as to give us facts in the right expository order, for important expository purposes. What makes ‘Economy’ over twice as long as any other section of *Walden* is, more than anything else, its special expository purpose. In this, his opening, introductory section, Thoreau has to put forth much crucial information. The basic facts of his stay at the pond, many details about his way of life there that he will later treat more expansively and suggestively, information about his previous existence, practical advice on how to go about building a cabin—all this and more Thoreau gives to the reader, to inform him and thereby to equip him to read further in *Walden*....

‘Where I Lived, and What I Lived For’ is one of the three pivotal sections of *Walden*, the other two being...‘The Ponds’ and ‘Conclusion.’ Thus its expository purpose, less vital to its force as literature than its rhetorical and mythic ones, is submerged within them.... The sections ‘Where I Lived, and What I Lived For’ and ‘The Ponds’ deal with six specific topics, each important for our literal understanding of *Walden*. They tell us Thoreau’s main activities at Walden and the principles behind them. Now that we are fully aware of Thoreau’s basic situation, these sections extend our knowledge of six important directions. ‘The Ponds’ completes Thoreau’s exposition of his typical summer world and expands out information about the ponds into other seasons and other years, thereby preparing us for the later sections....

[4 & 5] To turn to *Walden*’s fourth and fifth patterns of movement, the rhetorical and the mythic, is to change modes of expression radically. For narrative and exposition of essentially factual and autobiographical matter, no matter how well ordered, belong to assertive, nonfictional prose; but rhetorical appeals and the creation of myth belong to imaginative prose. To put it another way, factual narrative and exposition direct us centrifugally toward real experience; rhetoric and myth direct us centripetally toward literary experience. *Walden*’s ordered narrative and expository movement we see and accept; to *Walden*’s ordered rhetorical and mythic movement we react and respond....

Finally, by his apparent digression on philanthropy, Thoreau anticipates a fundamental objection to his whole way of life and to *Walden* and answers it before it can harm his purpose. *Walden* sets forth not one but two myths—of entry into nature and of rebirth through nature. In ‘Economy’ Thoreau tells how he first entered the world of nature and hints of the rebirth to come. Not only is Thoreau’s initial move to the side of Walden Pond an essential step, but as he discusses how men should order their lives, he supports his myth by praising the natural against the artificial whenever possible. In his use of images of growth and of moulting and shedding and in his short description of the spring during which he built his cabin, a single paragraph that looks forward to *Walden*’s climax, Thoreau foreshadows his myth of rebirth and regeneration, which he and the reader can only re-enact after they have become as fully a part of nature as possible. At the same time, through such symbolic details as the materials for his cabin, Thoreau warns us that both myths are myth and not reality, that man must compromise and make adjustments, that he can commit himself to nature emotionally and even spiritually but never wholly....

As he describes his own ‘morning life,’ Thoreau establishes his two myths, of uniting with nature and through that union being spiritually reborn.... Taken as a group the first three, the activities of the private life, in their fullness and richness contrast sharply with the second three, the activities of the public life. Taken in pairs, ‘Reading’ contrasts with ‘Sounds,’ ‘Solitude’ with ‘Visitors,’ and ‘The Bean-Field’ with ‘The Village,’ always significantly. Furthermore, not only does each of them upset our own thoughts on its subject, but each has a special rhetorical function. ‘Reading,’ for example, shows how to give ourselves to *Walden*; ‘Solitude’ under what conditions best to do so....

Through these six essays, moreover, Thoreau brings his myth of entry into nature ever closer to its fulfillment in ‘The Ponds.’ The first three draw us more and more into nature from the world of man; in the second three, the point of view has reversed, and we are now within nature, looking back at the world of man from a further and further remove. As our involvement in the world of nature increases, so do Thoreau’s promises and prophecies of the natural cycle of rebirth and renewal. The image of the silent and secret growth of summer recurs, and climaxes in ‘The Bean-Field’ in Thoreau’s own parable of the sower and the seed....

‘The Ponds’ is the central, crucial, pivotal section of *Walden*. Its length suggests this; its contents confirm it. In reading ‘The Ponds’ we feel *Walden*’s five patterned movements even more intensely than elsewhere in the book. As we have seen, ‘The Ponds’ is the keystone of the arch of *Walden*’s absolute form. Also, it marks a major stage in *Walden*’s narrative movement, and it reflects that movement in little, displaying within itself Thoreau’s double chronology of compression into one year and extension far beyond two. It completes the first half of *Walden*’s exposition and makes an important transition to the second half. It does more than this, however. By inviting us to think poetically and imaginatively, rather than logically and dialectically, it frees us from the challenge and controversy of the first half of the book and admits us into Thoreau’s innermost, most secret confidence as the earliest sections never seemed to do.

Finally, as we respond poetically and imaginatively to ‘The Ponds,’ we are immersed as fully in the world of nature as we are ever to be, thereby completing Thoreau’s first myth, and we are symbolically baptized and purified and thereby made ready to re-enact Thoreau’s second myth, of seasonal change, with him. Symbolically, too, ‘The Ponds’ tells us, in our seasonal renewal, to shun the muddy, impure shallows, to seek the clear, deep, solitary life, a life cleansed by regular chance, and reflecting heaven....

He has subtly adopted a new manner to suit the second half of his and the reader’s journey together. Often he seems more generous and less demanding, for he and the reader are now one in purpose, and we share his thoughts rather than being tested by them. At times, even—‘Higher Laws’ for example—he now dares to admit to personal crotchets and whims that humanize his ideals without marring them. In the winter sections, his tone grows quieter and more private yet, as if, forced by Thoreau’s isolation to abandon his actual presence, we have retreated within his mind and there listen to his symbolic telling and enacting of his myth of spiritual sleep or death followed by the miraculous rebirth or reawakening of spring, at which time the tone of the rhetoric passes out of reverie, and rises swiftly to affirmation and exultation.

This myth of rebirth, long promised, and made manifest in these final sections, is *Walden*’s most important literary statement.... Thoreau begins his myth with the opening section of ‘Baker Farm,’ his

religious communion with and consecration by nature.... With 'Brute Neighbors' come, as the fulfillment of Thoreau's refusal to prey any longer on natural life, what are for most readers the richest and most intimate moments of his life in nature, each of them a further source of moral education and a rite of communion. By such episodes, and especially by the mysterious and intensely empathetic final encounter with the loon and the god of the loon, the mind is fed with matter for it in turn to feed on during the long winter quiescence before rebirth in spring....

With 'Spring,' in style, image, allusion, and theme the most insistently symbolic of all *Walden's* sections, the myth is fulfilled, the rite is enacted. 'Walden was dead and is alive again,' and so likewise is the soul of man on that symbolic 'spring morning' that fuses *Walden's* two dominant images into a moment of forgiveness and renewal. *Walden's* 'Conclusion' is...the further abutment of the arch of formal structure. Apart from this, it is, as suits its purpose, no real conclusion at all but rather, to re-phrase another literary moralist, a conclusion in which everything is begun, in short, the near abutment of an even higher and firmer arch.... His exposition suddenly shows us 'new continents and worlds' and makes clear that *Walden* has always been not a program but a parable, not a way of life but only one man's way of leading life rightly. By his rhetoric he once more challenges us, this time hopefully and affirmatively, to put foundations under our castles in the air, and leaves us on a rising note. Finally, by such images as the sea journey and such stories as that of the artist of Kouroo, Thoreau suggests new myths through which we may inform our lives...

To sum up, *Walden* has organic structure—a patterned movement that is formal, narrative, expository, rhetorical, and above all, mythic. The careful and responding reader of *Walden* feels these patterns of movement, at places some more intensely than others, at crucial places all united as one, working together to further Thoreau's intent to revive and re-form his reader's mind. *Walden's* straight narrative chronology carries the reader naturally from one stage of exposition to the next: moving in time, he grows in knowledge. And as *Walden*, rhetorically heightened and imaginatively ordered and intensified, becomes literature, narrative in turn becomes ritual, and knowledge revelation; and the sum of these becomes myth, the ultimate literary experience, still contained within the arch of absolute form. Thus, when the reader has finished *Walden*, for the first time or the fiftieth, he has moved with Thoreau through this fivefold organic structure. He has expected and had his expectations fulfilled. He has traveled much in *Walden*."

Lauriat Lane, Jr.
"On the Organic Structure of *Walden*"
College English XXI (1960) 195-202

"*Walden* is one of the supreme achievements of the Romantic Movement--or to speak accurately, of Romantic Naturalism.... Neither he nor they were able to answer the terrible question of whether, once they committed themselves to the proposition that their most delicate experience was typified in Nature, they were thereafter actually writing about Nature--about Walden Pond, for instance--or about nothing more than their delicious experiences. If in reality they were only projecting their emotions onto the natural setting...

Robert Frost, while objecting with all his Yankee soul to Thoreau's epistemology, still proclaims that with him Thoreau is a 'passion'... Thoreau was a great writer, and so his pages survive in spite of changes in metaphysical fashions. But that is truly an easy, a luxurious way of salvaging our poet. The more difficult, but I believe the more honest and, in the final accounting, the more laudatory way is to say that the Romantic balance, or its 'Idea' of combination, of fusing the fact and the idea, the specific and the general, is still a challenge to the mind and to the artist. Thoreau was both a Transcendentalist and a Natural Historian. He never surrendered on either front, though the last years of the *Journal* show how desperate was the effort to keep both standards aloft."

Perry Miller
"Thoreau in the Context of International Romanticism"
The New England Quarterly XXIV (June 1961) 147-59

"Almost more than anything else, Thoreau is an inspiring writer, and *Walden* is about the only book I know of written by a genuine author that seems to promise us happiness.... The devoted reader knows what

Thoreau is saying, for he speaks directly to the heart, confirming what the heart already knows. Life is good.”

Theodore Baird
“Corn Grows in the Night”
The Massachusetts Review (Autumn 1962) 93-103

“As rhetoric, the work begins and ends by advocating the deliberate, simple life as opposed to the life of haste and conformity. In its structure it moves from the cycles of a single day to the cycle of the seasons, and from the pond outward in widening circles to the reminder at the end that ‘home cosmography’ is the great adventure. Within this argumentative and structural frame, Thoreau achieved a sense of organic fullness and life by means which he defined this way in his journal: ‘If I am overflowing with life, am rich in experience for which I lack expression, then nature will be my language full of poetry,—all nature will fable, and every natural phenomenon be a myth.’ Not all the tropes and parables of *Walden*, it may be noted, are drawn from the author’s experience of nature in Concord township: many come from writers, such as Homer and the authors of the Eastern bibles.”

William M. Gibson and George Arms, eds.
Twelve American Writers
(Macmillan 1962) 81

“It lauds simplicity by means of complexity. In substance as well as in mode of expression, the ‘humor’ of the book is paradoxical. Thus the author asserts that neither the New Testament nor Poor Richard speaks to our condition, but the opening of *Walden* sounds remarkably like Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*.... Just as Franklin is charmingly frank about his egotistic desire to talk about himself, so Thoreau admits in a delightful phrase, ‘I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well.’ The title of the first chapter would surely have been approved of by Poor Richard: ‘Economy’... He deliberately appropriates the language of the success ethic in order to expose it... *Walden* contains itemized lists which outdo anything in the collected works of Franklin. The cost of the things Thoreau buys is given in meticulous detail, down to the half penny—even the quarter penny... Thoreau’s tall tale of economy reduces Ben Franklin to a spendthrift....

Prosperity, indeed, is ruining the country. The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. Their fingers tremble from the hard work they do. They are nothing but machines. They are gasping for breath’ they must lie and flatter to get ahead. Published two years after Harriet Beecher Stowe had made Simon Legree a national byword, *Walden* asserts that ‘it is hard to have a Southern overseer; it is words to have a Northern one, but worst of all when you are the slave-driver of yourself’.... As for luxuries and the so-called comforts of life, they have been throughout history positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind. Against this appalling picture of the economy of his neighbors, Thoreau sets forth his own economy, his personal plan of living, in a series of elaborate financial metaphors which appear at first glance to be an attempt to justify his plan in terms of the Poor Richard civilization he has just been scorning. The decision to go to the woods is spoken of as the determination ‘to go into business at once’....

The asceticism of Thoreau is directed toward the goal of a greater awareness, a superior intensity, a more and more absolute self-consciousness....Thoreau accepts the frugality of Poor Richard, but to the end that he will achieve the sensitivity of a Cremona violin, not that he will make a fortune.... In perhaps the clearest indication that Thoreau had Franklin in mind when he wrote *Walden*, he says that one of his prime motives for early rising was so that he could hear the crowing of the wild cocks in the woods—for to hear those birds ‘who would not be early to rise, and rise earlier and earlier every successive day of his life, till he became unspeakably healthy, wealthy, and wise?’ In this juxtaposition of the wild chanticleer of the woods with the most famous of Poor Richard’s aphorisms is contained the essence of Thoreau’s defiance of Franklin’s America....

He wants to get rid of all pretense and display, he wants to get to the heart of things and start growing outward from there. He comes to the Pond to confront experience directly, to make a fresh start, to shuck off the dead skin of a materialistic civilization. This is the ‘private business’ he wishes to transact, and *Walden* is the story of his metamorphosis. In this light, the practical details of economy can be seen to have a transcendental significance.... *Walden* itself is a new ‘garment’ for mankind as well as for the man who

made it, and by donning it mankind can accomplish collective rebirth and renewal.... He dug his cellar where a woodchuck had a hole. Thus his house had grown from the inside out, like an organism.... Christ's forty days in the wilderness were a process of purification, and to Thoreau, who regarded Christ as 'a sublime actor on the stage of the world,' such a retreat from the world was an act of supreme self-consciousness which he self-consciously wished to repeat. The Christian parallel by no means exhausted Thoreau's awareness of the religious nature of his sojourn at the Pond... The fable of withdrawal and return was one which was common to all the great religions of the world....

He cuts down young trees in the spring and he bleaches boards in the sun; these are preliminary steps in building a house. They are also a part of the religious ceremony of purification and renewal. The fourth chapter of *Walden*, 'Sounds,' introduces another major aspect of the renewal theme: the seeding, planting, fertilizing, flowering, and harvesting of crops. The progress of his bean field is a conversational topic of which Thoreau never grows tired; it also furnishes him with a rhythm that finally imposes an order on the entire book. The structure of the *Week* is a sequence of seven days; in *Walden*, the action begins in early summer and ends the following spring; the twenty-six months which Thoreau actually spent at the Pond are compressed into the cycle of a year; his account of his life in the woods follows the elemental pattern of the flowering, death, and replanting of a bean crop....

In the second half of the book, in the chapters which follow the crucial chapter 'The Ponds,' the seasonal cycle comes more and more to dominate the action.... Throughout *Walden* he glorifies poverty.... Melville's story 'Cock-a-Doodle-Do!,' published the year before *Walden*, both prophesies and parodies the naïve belief that Self-Reliance is a solution to the problem of human want.... In the dramatic structure of *Walden*, 'The Ponds' is the central chapter. Coming in the exact center of the book, it looks back on the more worldly first half and looks forward to the more seasonal, more mythological second half.... 'We must make shift to live, betwixt spirit and matter, such a human life as we can,' and 'The Ponds' maintains an exquisite balance between these two realms of existence. Walden Pond, Thoreau tells us here, has two colors. Viewed at a certain distance on a certain day, the Pond is 'a clear and deep green well.' At other times it is a 'matchless and indescribable blue... Blue and green, the color of the sky and the color of the earth, of this world and the next.... Both the 'earth's eye' and 'sky water,' the Pond is also the supreme object of correspondence between the mind and Nature, between the soul and God....

The loon, with whose moulting Thoreau had already identified himself, is the great embodiment of the spirit of the Pond. The loon can soar and swoop in the sky; it can also dive under water all the way to the bottom and swim under water for great distances.... The woods around the lake may be cut down, but after a season another forest 'is springing up by its shore as lustily as ever'.... In the chapter called 'Spring' the ritual of renewal reaches its climactic stage... In May, the loon returns to the Pond. 'Walden,' says Thoreau, 'was dead and is alive again.' With its rebirth, Thoreau changes 'from the lumpish grub in the earth to the airy and fluttering butterfly.' Gathering together all the metamorphic symbolism of the book, Thoreau concludes *Walden* with the triumphant fable of the bug.... By his refusal to hurry, by the heroism of his patience and his singleness of purpose and his resolution, Thoreau in *Walden* triumphs over the tyranny of time. A gasping, clock-watching, hurrying America is enslaved by time."

Kenneth S. Lynn
Major Writers of America I
(Harcourt 1962) 598-604

"Beginning with the building of his cabin in the spring, it follows through with an account of his gardening in the summer, his house-warming in the fall, winter life at the pond, and in the end returns once more to spring with its promise of rebirth and revival, giving the book a unity and at the same time enabling Thoreau to symbolize his constant optimistic hope for a spiritual rebirth and revival in mankind.

Thoreau carries this interest in form down into the smaller units of his works. The chapter on 'Sounds' in *Walden*, for example, carries out the pattern of the day, just as the whole book does the year. It begins with the sounds of the morning, moves on into the afternoon, then evening, then night, and ends with the revival of life with the dawn. Similarly he is concerned to make each individual paragraph and sentence interdependent with the preceding and following paragraph and sentence. It causes little surprise, then, to discover Thoreau's interest in architecture, frequently shown in *Walden* and his other works, for he was

well aware of the relationship in structure of both buildings and books. If one need further evidence of Thoreau's interest in form and style, he need only turn to his *Journal* and there he will find the art of writing one of Thoreau's favorite topics. Indeed, one student has culled from the *Journal* more than two hundred pages of quotations devoted to the craft of writing.

Of all Thoreau's works, *Walden, or Life in the Woods* is unquestionably the masterpiece. Ostensibly it is the account of the period of two years he spent at Walden Pond. As such the book has its own special appeal. Thoreau is almost a Massachusetts Robinson Crusoe or backyard Daniel Boone who shows us how to satisfy our pioneering instincts without hitting the trail west. He enables us to discover the adventurous life right at home. So appealing does he make the simple life and the charms of nature that the countryside ever since has been dotted with the cabins of aspiring disciples of Thoreau—despite his specific admonition in *Walden* that he wanted no imitators.

But *Walden* is more than another *Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. It is a devastating commentary on the values of our contemporary civilization—even more pertinent today than when it was written a century ago. In it he dares to ask the questions that most people prefer to leave unexamined. Is what we call success really success? Is what we call happiness really happiness? Are the goals we have set up in life the goals we really want to attain? Why then do 'the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation'? Why then do so many 'when they come to die, discover that they have not lived'? Thoreau has a way of asking disconcerting questions, questions aimed at making us think fundamentally. But because *Walden* does challenge us to think, many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of the book. Read on its highest level, however, *Walden* becomes still another book—a *Pilgrim's Progress*—an account of one man's successful search for spiritual values."

Walter Harding
Eight American Writers: An Anthology of American Literature
(Norton 1963) 416-17

"The organizing design is like that of many American fables: *Walden* begins with the hero's withdrawal from society in the direction of Nature. The main portion of the book is given over to a yearlong trial of Emerson's prescription for achieving a new life. When Thoreau tells of his return to Concord, in the end, he seems to have satisfied himself about the efficacy of this method of redemption....

Thoreau adopts the tone of a hard-headed empiricist.... Though the dominant tone is affirmative, the undertone is skeptical.... Skilled in the national art of disguising art, in *Walden* he succeeds in obscuring the traditional, literary character of the pastoral withdrawal. Instead of writing about it...he tries it. By telling his tale in the first person, he endows the mode with a credibility it had seldom, if ever, possessed.... Convinced that effective symbols can be derived only from natural facts, Thoreau had moved to the pond so that he might make a symbol of his life. If we miss the affinity with the Virgilian mode, then, it is partly because we are dealing with a distinctively American version of romantic pastoral....

The hut beside the pond stands at the center of a symbolic landscape in which the village of Concord appears on one side and a vast reach of unmodified nature on the other. As if no organized society existed to the west, the mysterious, untrammelled, primal world seems to begin at the village limits. As in most American fables, the wilderness is an indispensable feature of this terrain, and the hero's initial recoil from everyday life carries him to the verge of anarchic primitivism. 'We need the tonic of wildness,' Thoreau explains, using the word 'pasture' to encompass wild nature... But Thoreau is not a primitivist... In effect he was reaffirming the Jeffersonian hope of embodying the pastoral dream in social institutions....

By 1845, according to Thoreau, a depressing state of mind--he calls it 'quiet desperation'--has seized the people of Concord. The opening chapter, 'Economy,' is a diagnosis of this cultural malady. Resigned to a pointless, dull, routinized existence... As if their minds were mirrors, able only to reflect the external world, they are satisfied to cope with things as they are. In Emerson's language, they live wholly on the plane of the Understanding.... He is contending against a culture pervaded by this mechanistic outlook.... The clock, favorite 'machine' of the Enlightenment, is a master machine in Thoreau's model of the capitalist economy. Its function is decisive because it links the industrial apparatus with consciousness....

In Concord, within the dominion of the mechanistic philosophy, the machine rode upon men, but when seen undistorted from Walden, the promise of the new power seems to offset the danger.... Compared to popular, sentimental pastoralism, or to Emerson's well-turned evasions, there is a pleasing freshness about Thoreau's cool clarity. He says the pastoral way of life--pastoralism in the literal, agrarian sense--is being whirled past and away.... So far from representing a 'pastoral life,' a desirable alternative to the ways of Concord and the market economy, the typical farmer in *Walden* is narrow-minded and greedy.... Thoreau has no use for the cant about the nobility of the farmer....

The result of the venture in husbandry prefigures the result of the Walden experiment as a whole. Judged by a conventional (economic) standard, it is true, the enterprise had been a failure. But that judgment is irrelevant to Thoreau's purpose, as his dominant tone, the tone of success, plainly indicates. It is irrelevant because his aim had been to know beans: to get at the essential meaning of labor in the bean-field.... If the promise of romantic pastoralism is to be fulfilled, nothing less than an alternative to the Concord way will suffice. Although his tone generally is confident, Thoreau cunningly keeps the issue in doubt until the end.... The findings of the Walden experiment seem the work of a tough, unillusioned empiricist....

In *Walden* Thoreau is clear, as Emerson seldom was, about the location of meaning and value. He is saying that it does not reside in the natural facts or in social institutions or in anything 'out there,' but in consciousness. It is a product of imaginative perception, of the analogy-perceiving, metaphor-making, mythopoeic power of the human mind. For Thoreau the realization of the golden age is, finally, a matter of private and, in fact, literary experience... The writer's physical location is of no great moment.... In the end Thoreau restores the pastoral hope to its traditional location. He removes it from history, where it is manifestly unrealizable, and relocates it in literature, which is to say, in his own consciousness, in his craft, in *Walden*."

Leo Marx
The Machine in the Garden
(Oxford 1964) 242-65

"The writer of *Walden* establishes his claim upon the prophetic writers of our Scripture by taking upon his work four of their most general features: (1) their wild mood-swings between lamentation and hope (because the position from which they are written is an absolute knowledge of faithlessness and failure, together with the absolute knowledge that this is not necessary, not from God, but self-imposed; and because God's prophets are auditors of the wild mood-swings of God himself); (2) the periodic confusions of their authors' identities with God's--stuck with the words in their mouths and not always to remember how they got there; (3) their mandate to create wretchedness and nervousness (because they are 'to judge the bloody city' and 'show her all her abominations' (Ezek. 22:2); (4) their immense repetitiveness. It cannot, I think, be denied that *Walden* sometimes seems an enormously long and boring book."

Stanley Cavell
"Words," *The Senses of Walden*
(Viking Penguin 1972)

"His scatological jokes are the quintessential embodiment in style of a life lived at its best and worst moments...as a heroic game... To a degree paralleled in English only by Shakespeare, Milton, and Joyce, he made the pun a vehicle for literary genius.... Early in *Walden*'s chapter 'Economy,' while describing his self-appointed duties throughout the township, Thoreau remarks.... 'I have watered the red huckleberry, the sand cherry and the nettle tree...which might have withered in dry seasons.' No one seems to have noted precisely what Thoreau's insouciant claim to doing his 'business' in lonely corners amounts to.... He is playing on the reader's conception of him as a nature-loving crank, of course, while mischievously asserting that he has urinated widely in Concord.... "I considered that I enhanced the value of the land by squatting on it.' Very few readers catch the joke--that Thoreau's privy, genteelly neglected in *Walden*'s account of his construction projects, was not always used, and that squatter's rites of any sort served to manure and so improve Emerson's woodlot....

As Poirier remarks, 'Thoreau's best jokes occur...precisely where he sounds most harmless, most idiomatically familiar,' and he 'was apparently willing to go to the grave without having anyone recognize' them.... Thoreau remains haunted by a profound [Victorian] ambivalence toward the body and toward those excremental processes that he explicitly undertakes to defend in 'Higher Laws.' Unlike Whitman, whose phrenological ardor beats hymns to the body electric, Thoreau could not project a convincing vision of 'the bowels sweet and clean.' Indeed, when he first visited Whitman in Brooklyn, nothing bothered him more than being received in Walt's bedroom while the chamber pot was still clearly visible beneath the bed—a fact that Thoreau's lengthy account of their meeting stresses with unusual exasperation."

Michael West
"Scatology and Eschatology: The Heroic Dimensions of Thoreau's Wordplay"
PMLA 89 (October 1974) 1043-64

"*Walden* has traditionally been regarded as both a simple and a difficult text, simple in that readers have achieved a remarkable unanimity in identifying the values Thoreau is understood to urge upon them, difficult in that they have been persistently perplexed and occasionally even annoyed by the form his exhortations take.... The primary strategy, it seems to me, has been to follow a policy of benign neglect in regard to the question of what *Walden* means; thus...critics have concerned themselves largely with 'style,' agreeing from the start that the book's distinction lies 'more in its manner than its matter'....referring mainly to the tradition of essentially formalist studies ushered in by F. O. Matthiessen's monumental *American Renaissance* in 1941 [Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot preceded him by decades]...

Where nineteenth-century critics tended to regard *Walden* as an anthology of spectacular fragments and to explain it in terms of the brilliant but disordered personality of its author (his 'critical power,' wrote James Russell Lowell, was 'from want of continuity of mind, very limited and inadequate'), more recent criticism, by focusing directly on the art of *Walden*, has tended to emphasize the rhetorical power of its 'paradoxes,' finding elegant formal patterns in what were once thought to be mere haphazard blunders.... Critics like Lowell domesticated the contradictions by understanding them as personal ones; to point out Thoreau's (no doubt lamentable) inconsistencies was not, after all, to accuse him of schizophrenia—the parts where he seemed to forget himself or ignore what he had said before were evidence only of certain lapses of attention. The formalists, turning their attention from the author to the text, transformed Thoreau's faults into *Walden's* virtues; theirs was already the language of paradox, apparent inconsistencies pointing toward final literary (i.e., not necessarily logical) truths. Now...unity which was claimed first for the personality of the author, then for the formal structure of the text itself, now devolves upon the reader. *Walden's* contradictions are resolved... 'if you know how to interpret them' [Stanley Cavell and Lawrence Buell]....

'Economy' has usually been read as a witty and bitter attack on materialism, perhaps undertaken...in response to [John Stuart] Mill's *Political Economy* and/or Marx's *Communist Manifesto* (both published in 1848), motivated, in any event, by a New Testament perception: 'Men labor under a mistake.... They are employed...laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal.' But it isn't simply a mistake in emphasis—too much on the material and not enough on the spiritual—that Thoreau is concerned with here, for the focal point of...attack is not wealth per se but 'exchange,' the principle of the marketplace....

If we turn again to the attempt to sound the depths of Walden Pond, we can see that [dualistic oppositions privileging the first term of the opposition] are all values of what I have called *bottomlessness*. A shallow pond would be like a shallow book, that is, a travel book, one meant to be read literally. *Walden* is written 'deep and pure for a symbol'.... To read *Walden*...is precisely to play at kittybenders, to run the simultaneous risks of touching and not touching bottom. If our reading claims to find a solid bottom, it can only do so according to principles which the text has both authorized and repudiated; thus we run the risk of drowning in our own certainties. If it doesn't, if we embrace the idea of bottomlessness and the interest of the ice itself, we've failed *Walden's* first test, the acceptance of our moral responsibility as deliberate readers. It's heads I win, tails you lose. No wonder the game makes us nervous."

Walter Benn Michaels
"Walden's False Bottoms"

“Strangest of all is the song that by all rights is the real national anthem, ‘Yankee Doodle.’ This song was written by an Englishman in derision of colonial Americans, who then took it as their own marching song. This combination of revolutionary assertiveness and humorous self-deflation was deeply imbedded in the American character. It appears everywhere in *Walden*, even on the title page, which gives a polite printed form of the rooster’s crow that backwoodsmen theoretically uttered: ‘I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up.’ For a man to crow like a rooster was to utter a defiant challenge—and also to play the fool. It makes sense that American humor became the distinctive nineteenth-century literary genre for men.”

Alfred Habegger
Gender, Fantasy, and Realism in American Literature
(Columbia U 1982) 131

“Every schoolchild knows that *Walden* is about innocence, the aural Adam bathed in the primal light of nature. Writing that work is a formal attempt to preserve the meaning and truth discovered in the woods. In this sense, *Walden* displays a mode of writing that is fundamentally journalistic, not in the sense of recording events in linear sequence but in the close correlation of writing and experience.... *Walden* involves a withdrawal from social life designed to enable the ‘I ultimately to achieve a higher form of communal existence....

Walden is Thoreau’s perfect form; it has the mathematical precision of a musical composition. Thoreau certainly appears to demonstrate in this work the radically formalized truth he had foreseen in an earlier work: ‘The most distinct and beautiful statement of any truth must take at last the mathematical form’.... *Walden* is primarily intended as a Baedeker to the order of nature, the primacy of which remains unquestioned. Writing is sacred and mystical in its universal appeal and endurance, but nonetheless secondary to the literal text of nature: ‘It is the work of art nearest to life itself’.... *Walden* betrays the desire for an established metaphysical center to determine human behavior and organize knowledge....

Awakening is the avowed aim of *Walden*, and it means the *arising* of truth into consciousness by means of a systematic removal of barriers to open a path. For Thoreau, to awaken is to ‘come into being’ Language facilitates such discovery only to the extent that it serves a prior perception and thus may be made ‘pertinent’ to reality.... Thoreau’s insistence on the ultimate literality of natural facts reduces language to a secondary representation.... All seasons speak the same truth in but varied manifestations, so that the poet need only lift the corners of his veils to disclose the divinity in things.... *Walden* mocks measured time by finding the signs of divinity in all seasons, in every weather....

Thoreau relies...on his confidence in a fundamental language of Nature from which human speech derives.... Thoreau insists on the *presence* of unmediated truth in the earth’s ‘living poetry’.... Thus, in *Walden* every impulse to discuss poetics is quickly diverted back to the controlling meditation on the permanence and variety of natural forms. The mastery of this work relies largely on Thoreau’s insistence that language and thought would be indistinguishable from natural phenomena if we fully understood our being.... The grounding of human language in an inexpressible natural presence is symbolized in *Walden* in terms of building: a house, a self, a neighborhood with what is.... The order of the mind has a structural identity with the order of Nature.”

John Carlos Rowe
“‘The Being of Language: The Language of Being’”
Through the Custom-House:
Nineteenth-Century American Fiction and Modern Theory
(Johns Hopkins 1982)

“Among the many paradoxes of *Walden* perhaps none is more ironic that the fact that this modernist text—modernist in its celebration of private consciousness, its aestheticizing of experience, its demands upon the reader—starts out as a denunciation of modernity. It is inspired by the agrarian ideals of the past, yet in making a metaphor of those ideals it fails as a rejoinder to the nineteenth century and creates as many

problems as it lays to rest. Personal and historical disappointment determines the shape of Thoreau's masterpiece. In important ways it is a defeated text. Though Thoreau begins with the conviction that literature can change the world, the aesthetic strategies he adopts to accomplish political objectives involve him in a series of withdrawals from history; in each case the historical maneuver disables the political and is compromised by the very historical moment it seeks to repudiate. This is not to deny *Walden's* greatness, but rather to emphasize the cost of Thoreau's achievement and to begin to specify its limits.... Underlying that triumph is a forsaking of civic aspirations for an exclusive concern with 'the art of living well' (in Emerson's phrase about his former disciple). And to say this to suggest that *Walden* is a book at odds with its own beliefs; it is to point out Thoreau's complicity in the ideological universe he abhors....

At the heart of Thoreau's dissent from modernity is a profound hostility to the process of exchange, to what he calls the 'curse of trade.' He pictures a contemporary Concord where everyone is implicated in the market, and he mounts a critique of that society as antithetical to independence, to identity, and to life itself. His antimarket attitude, though it has similarities to pastoralism, is more properly understood as a nineteenth-century revision of the agrarian or civic humanist tradition. Civic humanists regarded the economic autonomy of the individual as the basis for his membership in the polis. The self-sufficient owner of the soil, in their view, was the ideal citizen because he relied on his own property and exertions for his livelihood and was virtually immune to compromising pressures. Commercial enterprise, in contrast, endangered liberty because it fostered dependence on others and, by legitimizing the pursuit of private interest, undermined devotion to the common good. Jeffersonian agrarianism, the American development of this tradition, retrained its antimarket bias and its stress on freedom from the wills of others. In Jefferson's own formulation from *The Notes on the State of Virginia*, commerce is productive of subservience, and the independent husbandman uniquely capable of civic virtue....

For Thoreau, commercial agriculture has an impact on the physical world which is just as devastating as its effect on the farmer. In the chapter 'The Ponds' he describes an agricultural entrepreneur named Flint for whom nature exists solely as commodity.... A companion chapter, 'The Pond in Winter,' shows this destruction of nature actually coming to pass through the speculations of a 'gentleman farmer' who carries the landscape off to market.... Thoreau believes that along with the degradation of the physical object in exchange there occurs a shriveling of the individual.... Thoreau's analysis of commodification has certain affinities with the Marxist critique of capitalism.... 'Enjoy the land, but own it not,' he squats on soil belonging to someone else (Emerson, as it happens) and endeavors to 'avoid all trade and barter'.... One of his principal objectives in writing *Walden* is to restore his countrymen to the freedom which they have lost under the market system....

Thoreau makes no attempt to disguise the fact that he is unable to emancipate himself completely from exchange relations. He freely 'publishes his guilt,' as he puts it, that his venture at subsistence farming is not strictly speaking an economic success. He raises a cash crop of beans and uses the proceeds to give variety to his diet, and he is forced to supplement his income from farming by hiring himself out as a day laborer, the employment he finds 'the most independent of any, especially as it required only thirty to forty days in a year to support one.' He recognizes, in other words, the obsolescence of his program as a *literal* antidote to the ills of market civilization....

Walden retreats into the self while 'Civil Disobedience' calls for resistance to the government. This change can be seen in the book's very structure, its transition from 'Economy' to 'Conclusion,' from Concord and Thoreau's neighbors to the inwardness of self-discovery. A mood of withdrawal totally dominates the final pages, as Thoreau urges his readers to turn their backs on society and look inside themselves.... The image left is of a solitary individual pursuing his own development, cultivating his own consciousness, in utter indifference to the common good. Such an image is not only radically at odds with the tone of *Walden's* beginning; it also amounts to a distorted—and reified—reflection of the laissez-faire individualist pursuing his private economic interest at the expense of the public welfare. Thoreau's unwitting kinship with social behavior he deplores can also be seen in his effort to create a myth of his experience.... The text's denial of history, its flight from Jacksonian America, paradoxically resembles the commodified mode of thought which Thoreau charges against his countrymen and which permits Flint to perceive his fruits and vegetables as dollars. In an analogous way, Thoreau allows them mythic value of his *Walden* experiment to displace the actual circumstances of its occurrence....

The two goals he sets himself as an author, to initiate civic reformation while resisting the exchange process, turn out to be so incompatible by the mid-nineteenth century as to render their attainment mutually exclusive.... The literary work as article of exchange and the author as tradesman was the accepted state of affairs when Thoreau wrote *Walden*.... He links authorship and agriculture and portrays both the artist and his audience as figurative husbandmen, extricating *Walden* from the marketplace by means of metaphor.... Thoreau also depicts the reader as a laborer 'of the hands' and contrasts the toil of reading *Walden* with the 'easy reading' suitable to popular literature.... Under the market system, there is no way for an author to exert influence to a significant degree without attracting a popular audience....

Thoreau is caught in a contradiction...While he craves the authority of a founder [commercial publisher], he refuses to view his text as a commodity and to accept 'the necessity of selling' it. The failures of 'Civil Disobedience' and *A Week* strengthen his anti-market resolution, but at the same time they force him to retreat from his ambition to reform the polity. Since he cannot shape popular opinion without large sales, he effectively abandons his civic project by striving to make *Walden* a difficult text at which the reader has to labor—hence a text which is inaccessible to the great majority of the public.... At this point Thoreau's celebration of figurative husbandry has become indistinguishable from the modernist credo of textual complexity, even incomprehensibility. The first draft of *Walden* was 'Addressed to my Townsman,' but the last, colored by disappointment, seeks to exclude the many and narrow its appeal to a 'fit audience, though few'....

Since neither *A Week* nor the first draft of *Walden* is a masterpiece...Thoreau's publishing difficulties suggests some final ironies of history. Insofar as *Walden* does 'transcend' the Age of Jackson, does rise above its historical moment as a consequence of its excellence as an artwork, it does so precisely because of the particular nineteenth-century circumstances under which it reached print. Its transcendence of history is rooted in the conditions of its production—its *belated* production—as a commodity to be marketed by publishers. And still more: there is the additional irony that *Walden* is its own most effective reply to Thoreau's denigrations of commercial enterprise. One need not even point out that the values of brotherhood and love, values conspicuously absent from *Walden*, are inextricably bound up with the principle of 'exchange.' On strictly aesthetic grounds, the text disputes the contention that 'trade curses every thing it handles.' Far from impairing the quality of *Walden*, commercial considerations conspired to make it a better work. *Walden* is the one undeniably great book Thoreau ever wrote, thanks in part to the operations of the marketplace.”

Michael T. Gilmore
American Romanticism and the Marketplace
(U Chicago 1985)

“None of Emerson's moony followers equaled Thoreau in the ease with which he found 'correspondences' in Nature to every wish. It is this testament to perfect happiness that gives *Walden* its glowing surface. Nothing untoward, nothing really 'personal' was allowed to break through. Style accomplished the perfect pastoral of the century. Walden Pond was a perfect mate. The contemplativeness at the center of the book dreamily fills up everything Thoreau sees, makes nature incandescent. 'Life in the woods' shows man perfectly at home.... *Walden* is a meticulously manufactured altarpiece. A sense of deliverance is its subject matter, and the grateful reader acquires this as a spiritual gift from Henry David Thoreau. Reverie is its real persona. Dreamy as the book is...Thoreau fills up every space he sees with evidence of design, growth, meaning. The beautiful fiction of *Walden*, its 'plot,' is that Thoreau did nothing but live with perfect attachment to the pond and woods.... This sweet American myth, man and Nature in perfect congress, was Thoreau's fulfillment....

Thoreau's success in *Walden* is not as philosopher but as illusionist; he can persuade us that we can 'spend' our lives just as we like. Romanticism remains a vital expression of the modern mind because it prolongs into the world of actual necessity every criticism made by our dreams....Thoreau created the perfect romance between man and Nature—what he sought from Nature was not knowledge but the possibility of loving.... This effort called for the most relentless ordering of every experience, by constant fireworks of epigram, pun, paradox, ingenious derivation... *Walden* yokes together many passages written separately. Some of them are positively hallucinating in their ability to evoke a moment. And Thoreau can hold us to the glory of a moment.”

Alfred Kazin
*An American Procession:
The Major American Writers from 1830-1930, The Critical Century*
(Random House/Vintage 1985) 69-71

“England as a term in *Walden* stands simply and consistently for that which is too premeditated and overcultivated (like English hay) and for that which is too circumscribed (like the hunting grounds of English noblemen or the official English holidays implying the scheduled limiting of joys that should be daily). England stands for that which is decadent (‘The government of the world I live in was not framed, like that of Britain, in after-dinner conversations over the wine’) or exploitive (‘England, which is the great workhouse of the world’)... *Walden* is arranged so as to avoid anything like the tight structure of an ode [such as “Ode to Dejection” by Coleridge], with a simulated...spontaneity rather than the scene, meditation, initial-scene-transformed movement of Coleridge’s poem, much less the rigorous ordering of Coleridge’s philosophical writings. Braggling is vocal, part of an earlier, oral mode of transmission, and it is early too in refusing the sublimating restraints upon the ego of a Christian-civilized humility. By such means is Coleridge made all to much a poet.”

Robert Weisbuch
“Thoreau’s Dawn and the Lake School’s Night”
*Atlantic Double-Cross:
American Literature and British Influence in the Age of Emerson*
(U Chicago 1986)

“Thoreau spent five years reworking the material he had gathered into his journals during the Walden years of 1845 to 1847. He tinkered and copied, rewrote and recopied. With extreme consciousness of effort, he mastered a language of spontaneity. With great seriousness, he pointed up the wit of his observations concerning the absurdities of the country’s social conditions. When at last the book was published, his friends responded to its several levels of mysticism and social theory. Too many took Thoreau’s remarks too literally. *Walden* was liked, but not greatly, and it received relatively little critical attention. Thoreau’s masterwork, so many years in the making, had to wait almost eighty years more—until the 1930s—before people recognized how advanced his program for the good life was.”

Justin Kaplan
The Harper American Literature I
(Harper & Row 1987) 1222

“Emerson...in ‘Experience’ is repudiated in and by the desperately energetic, indeed apocalyptic Transcendentalism of the end of *Walden*, an end that refuses Emersonian...dialectical irony. But the beautiful, brief final paragraph of *Walden* brings back Emerson anyway, with an unmistakable if doubtless involuntary allusion to the rhapsodic conclusion of *Nature*...*Walden*’s greatest triumph [is] its preternaturally eloquent ‘Conclusion’.”

Harold Bloom, ed.
Henry David Thoreau
(Chelsea House/Modern Critical Views 1987) 11

“*Walden* breaks out of the structure of Emersonian Transcendentalism current at the time (though influenced by it), lifting the perceptive reader to a rare and exhilarating self-knowledge, as Thoreau’s romantic contemporary John Keats observed that poetry should do, ‘surprising by a fine excess.’ That is to say, by employing many of the devices of poetry—allusion, figures of speech, imagery—and through a disciplined process of refinement and constriction of his text that took portions of the book through seven versions, Thoreau achieved a work of such subtlety and suggestiveness that repeated readings do not exhaust its meanings or dim the brilliance of its insights.”

Wendell P. Glick
The Heath Anthology of American Literature I
(D. C. Heath 1990) 1965

“During the 1960s Thoreau was so popular in college courses that one parody of freshman composition courses advised, ‘Chances Are, You’ll Read Thoreau’ (Meyer, *Lives to Live* 186). In the 1990s chances are even better that students will read Thoreau, in even more places in the curriculum and for a wider range of reasons. Thoreau’s popularity in the 1960s rested primarily on his political radicalism and on his advocacy of the simple life. Interest in him waned somewhat during the 1970s, but in the late 1980s and early 1990s Thoreau has emerged with new popularity and versatility.

His concept of passive resistance found renewed relevance in the events of China’s Tiananmen Square and in the collapse of Communist governments throughout Eastern Europe in 1989 and the early 1990s. His pioneering interest in the unity of Nature supports the ecology movement’s urgent attempt to dissuade the human species from presiding over ‘the end of nature.’ Part of that attempt also includes Thoreau’s emphasis on the simple life, which becomes increasingly important as our natural resources are consumed and our landfills overflow.

For these reasons it is not surprising that a 1990 MLA survey of college teachers (B. Huber 40) found that Hawthorne and Thoreau were the authors most frequently mentioned as being particularly important among those regularly taught in nineteenth-century American literature courses (56% and 49%, respectively). Furthermore, *Walden* was mentioned more frequently than any other single work of nineteenth-century American literature. At a time when the canon of American literature is in tremendous flux, Thoreau’s place in it seems firmer than ever.... My own survey of college professors indicates that he continues to be taught regularly in Freshman composition courses. The survey also indicates that Thoreau is taught regularly in introduction to literature courses, in special literary topic courses, and in interdisciplinary courses....

Of most interest to students is Thoreau’s affirmation of the integrity of the individual conscience, and second is his ecological approach to nature, especially his defense of the wilderness. Students are also interested in Thoreau’s feisty personality and nonconformism, his involvement in political and social reform, his reflective attitude, his difficulty in finding a vocation, and his attempt to simplify his lifestyle.... Among the problems that students find in reading Thoreau the most frequently mentioned by teachers is his superior stance, what one survey respondent described as his ‘arrogance’ and another as his ‘bullying tone.’ How can he criticize others’ desire for material success and social acceptance when he himself failed to experience either?, some students ask. Related problems are his apparent hypocrisy (living in the woods but taking dinner with his mother or the Emersons), his emphasis on chastity, and what students perceive as his philosophical complexity. There is also the problem of his style: the sometimes complex syntax, the allusions and puns, and the unfamiliar or archaic words....

According to the survey, the formal structure of *Walden* as perceived by college instructors is essentially a three-part structure that focuses on the symbol of the pond. In the ‘plot’ of *Walden* (undergraduates often view it as if it were a novel) there appear to be three crucial chapters: ‘Where I Lived, and What I Lived For,’ ‘The Ponds,’ and ‘Spring’; interest in other chapters clustered around these three. The further Thoreau strays from the central symbol of the pond into his cabin or into the world of human affairs, the less interest instructors seem to anticipate in their students. The three chapters least-often selected are ‘Visitors,’ ‘Housewarming,’ and ‘Former Inhabitants and Winter Visitors.’ When Thoreau steps inside his cabin, few seem inclined to follow him. The exception is ‘Economy,’ which might best be viewed as a special case, a prologue like Hawthorne’s ‘Customs House’ chapter in *The Scarlet Letter*, which establishes thematic motifs but is not really a part of the ‘main plot.’ Alternatively, ‘Economy’ might be seen as a diagnosis of social and spiritual problems for which the rest of the book suggests cures....

One survey respondent said bluntly that students ‘hate the “Economy” chapter at first.’ Such comments suggest that instructors should work carefully on these two chapters to ensure that student interest continues into the rest of the book. A large part of students’ difficulty with the early chapters of *Walden* is Thoreau’s purposeful establishment of a dialogic strategy: Everything his neighbors think is good he will demonstrate is bad.... Most undergraduates have probably not ventured beyond dialogic thinking in their educations by the time they read *Walden*, so they cannot resist taking sides. Some find Thoreau’s criticism of society’s values reprehensible and hypocritical, some admire his rebellious spirit, but few are indifferent. Without

careful guidance and encouragement, even fewer go beyond complete rejection or acceptance to follow Thoreau into a questioning of both sides of the dialogue as the book progresses.

Perhaps, then, one of the most important things a teacher can do in introducing *Walden* or any of Thoreau's other works is to nudge students into considering Thoreau's struggle to achieve what cognitive psychologists call multiplistic thinking: the recognition that there may be some value to both sides of a dialogue and that there may be no absolute right or wrong view of an issue. For this purpose the chapter 'Higher Laws' provides the most obvious example. How can Thoreau say, 'I love the wild not less than the good'...when several pages later he also says, 'Nature is hard to be overcome, but she must be overcome,' thus seeming to assert an opposition between the 'wild' (nature) and the 'good' (the impulse to transcend nature)? The struggle to accept, even to love, both sides of such a basic opposition is what *Walden* is about....

Until recently, feminist critics have mostly ignored Thoreau perhaps because he is a pitifully easy target given the scarcity of women in his writing and his frequently negative comments when they do appear.... The [Leigh] Kirkland and [Laura Dassow] Walls essays make a particularly teachable pair, the first chiding Thoreau for not transcending the sexism of his time and the second defending *Walden* as a 'feminist manifesto'."

Richard J. Schneider, ed.

Introduction

Approaches to Teaching Thoreau's Walden and Other Works

(MLA 1996) 1-4, 16

"One common pattern is that students find the first two chapters of *Walden* far more difficult than the rest of the book. In general, they consider 'Economy' and 'Where I Lived, and What I Lived For' intense, argumentative, and full of complex ideas and sophisticated rhetorical strategies impossible to understand without a teacher's help. Thoreau often puzzles them with his paradoxes and allusions, while he sometimes insults them with his aphorisms. The syntax and vocabulary often seem archaic to them. For many students these two chapters are a test, a barrier that indicates how far and how deeply they will read.... Generally students respond much more positively to the remaining sixteen chapters. They conceptualize the book into two parts—the intense two initial chapters and the longer, more poetic, more imagistic ones that follow. They feel that in chapters 3 through 16 Thoreau is less argumentative, more humane, more poetic, and more visual. In this second part, they can slow down, enjoy the woods, and view the fish....

Another group of readers is alienated by Thoreau's message and aggressively anti-commercial tone. These readers—about twenty-five to thirty percent of the sample—tend to claim majors other than English. They feel that Thoreau—with his anti-materialist and anti-conformist thrust—attacks their values.... In direct contrast to the group of alienated readers is another group—about ten percent of the sample—that agrees with most of Thoreau's ideas. Because these students agree with Thoreau, they allow him all his excesses and unproved assertions. They tend to share his vision, tending also to take a moralistic view of life. They often see American consumer capitalism as excessive, decadent, or unfair to Third World countries.... Many of these 'true believers' are strong environmentalists holding firm commitments to the preservation or restoration of ecological balance in America.... Still others read *Walden* as though it were a religious text or a piece of scripture, seeing the book as a guide to life. These readers seem to feel that virtually any section of *Walden* will yield instrumental pearls of wisdom....

Some readers bring a feminist perspective to their reading of *Walden*, judging it to be a book written for men because it involves stereotypically male activities like fishing, boating, and camping. They see Thoreau's woodsy emphasis as pitched at men and reflecting male experience. Such a response, however, has been expressed infrequently, and often as many women express enthusiasm for *Walden* as men. Another feminist criticism of Thoreau centers on his attitude toward women in the text, on the absence of women in the *Walden* experience, and on the author's seeming lack of sexuality....

Another pattern appearing throughout my study is the lack of close-reading skills: too many students lack the ability to interpret metaphors, images, and unconventional language, and they are often unwilling to look up the meanings of unfamiliar terms.... Too few readers are equipped to focus on evidence within

the text. Students also show a readiness to read contemporary politics into *Walden*, seeing Thoreau, for example, as anti-capitalist (he was anti-socialist as well) or viewing him as one who would have been a 1960s-style counterculture radical or an ally of Greenpeace.... My study of responses to *Walden* illustrates a reluctance on the part of students to become active readers who probe, question, and interact constructively with the text.”

Richard Dillman
“Reader Responses to *Walden*: A Study of Undergraduate Reading Patterns”
Approaches (1996) 71-73, 76-77

“Like the water of Flint’s Pond...most students’ knowledge of Thoreau is ‘comparatively shallow, and not remarkably pure’.... For too many students, Thoreau remains little more than a caricature, an odd hermit who went to live in the woods, a man who spent a night in jail for not paying his taxes.... His influence on how Americans have confronted environmental issues would be charted in Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac*, Loren Eiseley’s *The Night Country*, and Annie Dillard’s *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, as well as in statements by Greenpeace and the Sierra Club....

[Some] students that day were offended by what they perceived as Thoreau’s arrogance. They had loved the seeming gentleness of *A Week* and the passionate advocacy for the wild in *The Maine Woods*, but ‘Economy’ disturbed their idealized sense of Thoreau, and so they came to class armed with quotes from the biography that ‘proved’ he was a hypocrite who exaggerated his isolation and self-reliance.... Pacifists were shocked by his support of John Brown, feminists objected to criticism that Dillard was writing watered-down Thoreau, environmentalists decided Leopold was a more reliable role model.”

Robert Francisosi
“Teaching Thoreau as a Visionary Thinker”
Approaches (1996) 78, 80

“Figures of geometry—line, parabola, angle, arc—often recur in Thoreau’s prose after 1847, when he began to work as a land surveyor.... In pursuing his ideas about land, Thoreau replaced the old mind-matter dualism of Western thought with an elastic monism in which reality is the environs, or full surroundings, of conscious life. The sources of his vision were varied and eclectic. Raised in a Unitarian family, he knew Eastern religions and transcendentalism, yet in time rejected their supraspatial ideas. The observation and experimentation of science attracted him, but Thoreau was never a strict logical positivist. A practical man, skilled at carpentry and gardening, he stubbornly clung to his common-sense mysticism. His mind embraced European Romanticism as well as the animism of Native Americans. Ultimately he saw reality as both fact and idea: hence he called time a line to toe and life a spiritual way through actual places....

Thoreau’s advocates see *Walden* as a defiant manifesto, which urges us to drop out and seek our private arcadia. His detractors say *Walden* is a bitter diatribe, written by a hermit who was a misanthrope and bad economist. Both views are literal and reductive; both concur in the view that *Walden* is antisocial.... The word *environment* means surroundings and enfolds the old nature-culture dichotomy into a biocentric union. In *The Maine Woods* Thoreau wrote that he and a pine tree might one day go to the same heaven, a bit of heresy that anticipates the ecological concept of nature as a self-sustaining aggregate, containing diverse yet related organisms and conditions. Thoreau anticipated ecology by exploring and analyzing Concord, which he saw as both an actual landscape and the ideal of common ground, a place of natural community....

The pond’s lower depths may contain ‘a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call *reality*,’ like the mysterious actuality he saw in Maine. The two planes, surface and depth, become his means of charting both literal and figurative dimensions. Thoreau’s task is not just to personify Walden, as he does with analogies to lips, eyes, and brows, but also to see it as alien, beyond his power to understand. The passages that merit close discussion in class all trace Thoreau’s shift from surface views of Walden to what lies below. His guides are creatures who know the depths, from fish who tug at lines to the loon who plays ‘a pretty game’ of hide-and-seek, always evading capture by heading to the widest and deepest water’.”

William Howarth

“Where I Lived’: The Environs of Walden”
Approaches (1996) 57-59, 62

“In my book *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing: Henry Thoreau, Annie Dillard, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, Barry Lopez*, I argue that the main function of Thoreau’s personal Journal was to test the Swedenborgian-Emersonian notion of correspondence through constant scrutiny of the rhythms and changes in the natural world and through the effort—often unsuccessful—to match up those rhythms with the author’s moods. The rhetorical modes of rhapsody and jeremiad in *Walden* often mirror the discussions of the corresponding states of mind. For instance, in the chapter ‘Solitude,’ Thoreau writes rhapsodically of the sense of correspondence (‘something kindred to me’) he feels when alone in nature.... Both of these rhetorical modes, one aimed to inspire positive enthusiasm and the other to dash cold water in our faces, contribute to Thoreau’s project of awakening.... Annie Dillard...in nearly all her books demonstrates many of the key Thoreauvian ideas mentioned above; I used *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, Teaching a Stone to Talk, and An American Childhood*.”

Scott Slovic
“*Walden* and Awakening: Thoreau in a Sophomore American Literature Survey Course”
Approaches (1996) 108, 111

“*Walden* was in some ways easier to teach and met with a generally more receptive audience in the 1960s and early 1970s than now. Recent students—especially those who are not majoring in the liberal arts—are often put off or threatened by such chapters of *Walden* as ‘Economy.’ Many see themselves striving for the very economic security and material rewards that Thoreau criticizes so sharply there. I sometimes discover myself defending Thoreau’s ideas about success and material wealth to angry or uneasy students who see Thoreau challenging their premises, values, and goals. (In the early 1970s, however, I often had to play devil’s advocate against Thoreau, since more students then seemed to accept what he wrote)... Yet I add that if they were transplanted into the 1980s or later, they would probably feel just as threatened....

I try to present a differentiated point of view on Thoreau, indicating that I question or feel uncomfortable about much in *Walden* (some concerns the students often raise themselves): the argument that philanthropy is ‘greatly overrated’ by humankind; the apparent lack of compassion and the arrogance that seem to characterize Thoreau’s response to John Field; the discussion of sexuality in ‘Higher Laws’; the overemphasis on individualism and the relative lack of concern for community and human interdependence; the potential that Thoreau’s philosophy has for legitimizing a conservative mentality...”

Richard Lebeaux
“The Many Paths to and from *Walden*”
Approaches (1996) 67-68

“What I did not expect in my first presentation was a dash of resistance—of animosity, even—toward our nation’s most persistent gadfly: Thoreau...may still rub as many the wrong way as he does the right way. ‘What good did he ever contribute?’ one gentleman stridently queried, seeing in Thoreau as exemplar of the unproductive, even as Emerson had. Some students may have had painful encounters with such challengers of the establishment as Thoreau inspired or gave sustenance to, especially in the late 1960s and early 1970s, perhaps in their own families...”

Women in these groups—typically there are more women than men—seem more sympathetic to Thoreau, especially for his love of nature. Still, one particularly contentious woman was incensed at Thoreau; she called him a phony who never strayed beyond the range or aroma of Emerson’s kitchen. ‘Was he gay?’ she asked. ‘Was his mother domineering?’ “Was he a...”—here she hung fire over the most damning charge—‘a hippie?’ The spirit of Lowell and Holmes still has its proponents concerning Thoreau’s reputation, even in Concord.... A five-foot-seven, 127-pound societal nemesis who had chopped off one toe as a child, who had false teeth and piercing blue eyes, who had once—by accident or negligence—set a woods afire, and who after graduating from Harvard—which, he affirmed, taught ‘all of the branches but none of the roots’—had tried to reduce the necessity of working to six weeks out of the year....

His remarks about women, not tempered for late-twentieth-century sensibilities, drew such scornful hoots during the class that I uneasily calculated the distance and trajectory to the nearest exit. For example: 'In the east women religiously conceal that they have faces—in the west that they have legs. In both cases it is evident that they have but little brains'."

Gordon V. Boudreau
"Something after Sixty: Thoreau in the Elderhostel Program"
Approaches (1996) 193, 195, 197

Michael Hollister (2015)