Henry David Thoreau (1817-62): A life of principle

- An American author, essayist, poet, Transcendentalist and naturalist. He is best known for his book *Walden*, a reflection upon simple living in natural surroundings, and his essay, *Civil Disobedience*, an argument for individual resistance to civil government in moral opposition to an unjust state.
LIFE

• Born in a common family in Concord, New England
• Graduated from Harvard, but only stayed at home and helped family business
• A friend of Emerson
• Active in social life and had a strong sense of justice. His essay "Civil Disobedience“, which advocated passive resistance to unjust laws, influenced Gandhi in India and Martin Luther King
• Not successful as a writer and lived in obscurity all his life
Relationship with Emerson

- 14 years younger than RWE
- Friendship bloomed in late 1830s, after Thoreau’s graduation from Harvard
- Throughout the 1840s, Emerson encouraged Thoreau as a writer, particularly praising his poetry and getting him started on the great topic of nature
- Shared political attitudes about slavery and reverence for nature
- Friendship cooled some in the 1850s, with Thoreau resenting Emerson’s patronage & Emerson being critical of what he saw as Thoreau’s lack of ambition
- At Thoreau’s funeral Emerson claimed that “No truer American existed than Thoreau.”
The Walden experiment

- On 4th of July 1852 Henry David Thoreau moved to the woods, near Walden Pond
- Built his own cabin on property owned by Emerson
- Lived economically for two years and two months
- Experiment in self-reliance
- In 1854 *Walden; or Life in the Woods* was published
“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life....”
The cabin and the book...

- Matter is expressive of spirit, and conversely, the spiritual is reflected in the material.
- Like the cabin, the book unites a rustic style with a highly articulated transcendental agenda and expresses the desire of returning to a life of Pastoral simplicity, albeit with very high expectations.
Simplify, simplify

- Growing his own food and building his own shelter gave him freedom to work productively as a writer and thinker.
- Profound connection between self reliance, physical labor in nature, thought and writing.
Walden

• Autobiographical account, a journey of spiritual discovery, a manual for self-reliance, a treaty of moral philosophy, a book on natural history, a critique of Western values...
Structure of *Walden*

- Economy
- Where I lived, and what I lived for
- Reading
- Sounds
- Solitude
- Visitors
- The Bean-Field
- The village
- The Ponds
- Baker Farm
- Higher Laws
- Brute Neighbors
- House Warming
- Winter Animals
- The Pond in Winter
- Spring
- Conclusion
“I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine.”

• While living at Walden Pond, Thoreau was arrested and briefly jailed for not paying his poll tax.

• His essay on the experience, “Civil Disobedience,” explores the question of what a person should do when he or she feels that his government is acting immorally.
“Civil Disobedience”

• Published in 1849, in a tense political moment (slavery, and the Mexican-American War)

• One of the most influential pieces of literature: Gandhi, Martin Luther King would later adopt his language of passive resistance
Civil Disobedience: main ideas

1) Thoreau prefers a laissez-faire government that does not interfere with individual lives

“That government is best which governs least”

“I ask for, not at once no government, but at once a better government.”
2) Most men serve the state mechanically and do not exercise moral judgment about their service
3) It is man’s duty not to give support to any wrongs perpetrated by the state
4) Order and the rule of the majority (democracy) sometimes prevents people from doing the right thing
5) An honest man can change the state by standing up to it
6) A man can change an unjust system by refusing to be unjust, and by being willing to make a sacrifice
7) The state should respect the individual
Bibliography


___, *Transcendentalism: A Reader*. Oxford University Press, 2000


- **Study resource for Walden**
- **Comprehensive summary and analysis of the text**
- [http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3a40169](http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3a40169)