

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

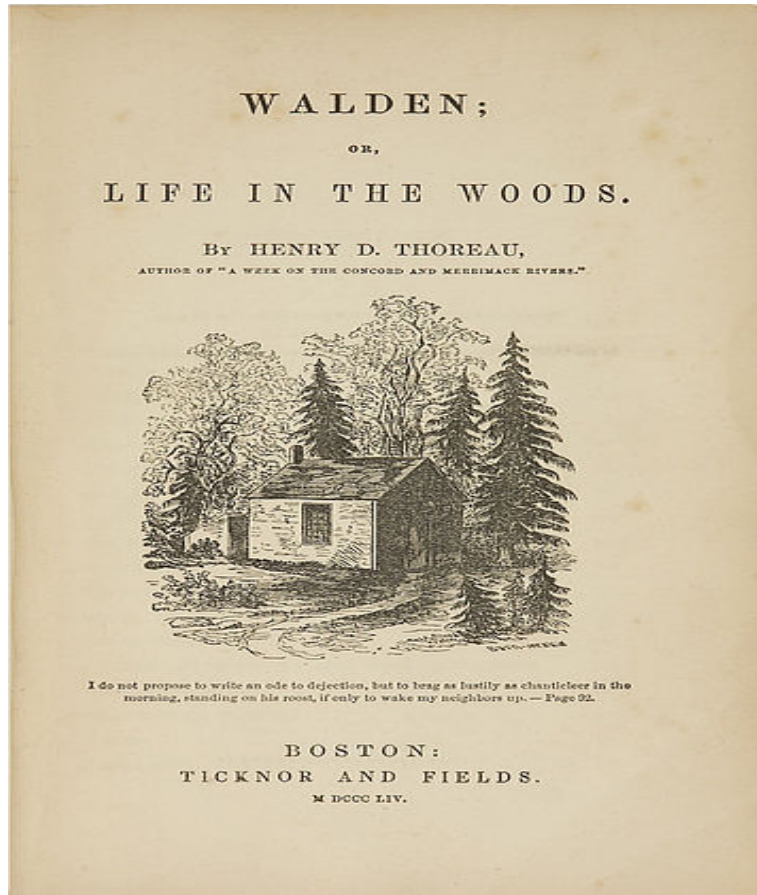
Relationship with Emerson

- 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...

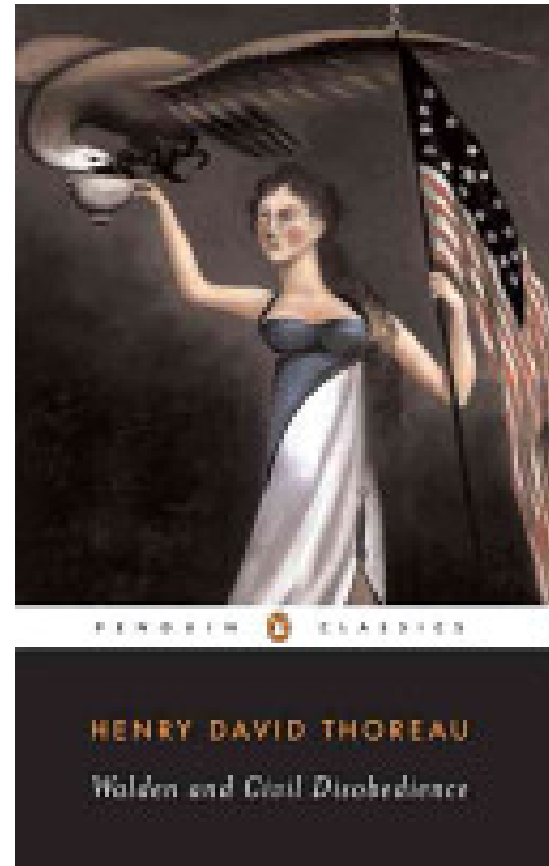
Structure of *Walden*

- 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

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Chandler, Marilyn, *Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Fiction*, U of California P, 1995.

Myerson, Joel. *The Cambridge Companion to Henry Thoreau*. Penguin, 1981.

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Links: <http://thoreau.eserver.org/>

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