

A Closer Look

Transcendentalism: The Seekers

Ralph Waldo Emerson Searched for the Nature of Truth and Revolutionized American Literature

For the Transcendentalists, the loose-knit group of writers, artists, and reformers who flourished in the 1830s and 1840s, the individual was at the center of the universe. For them, no institution, whether political or religious, was as powerful as the individual. So it is fitting that the most influential literary and philosophical movement in American history began with the struggles of one man.

A Crisis of Confidence In the early 1830s, a young Boston pastor found himself wrestling with his faith. His wife of less than two years had died of tuberculosis, and the grieving pastor began questioning his beliefs. At the time, many religious and scholarly institutions downplayed the importance of the individual. The Industrial Revolution, which introduced mass production, had shown that machines could actually replace people. Individuals, it seemed, did not matter.

The pastor was troubled by this notion. He did not believe that individuals were insignificant. On the contrary, he felt that the human mind was the most important force in the universe. The pastor was so passionate about his search for a new way of thinking that he resigned his position and traveled to Europe to visit with some of the great philosophers of the day.

That pastor was Ralph Waldo Emerson, and what seemed like one man's crisis of confidence became a revolution in American thought. When Emerson returned to the United States in 1833, he helped forge the Transcendentalist movement.

The Individual Is the World In practical terms, the Transcendentalist movement was a ripple in history, lasting a mere ten years and producing only two major books—Emerson's *Nature* (1836) and Thoreau's *Walden* (1854). Nevertheless, the influence of the Transcendentalists on American life and letters continues to this day.

According to Emerson, the human mind is so powerful it can unlock any mystery, from the intricacies of nature to the wonder of God. To Emerson, "the individual is the world." This was a radical thought in an age that gave all authority to the organized institutions of government, religion, and education.

Emerson first proposed his ideas in 1833 in a speech at Harvard University. His audience responded with great enthusiasm. Then, he took his ideas further, proposing that every soul and all of nature was part of an "Over-Soul," a universal spirit to which all beings returned after death. In other words, every being was part of the mind of God. In an 1842 lecture, Emerson noted that,

▼ Critical Viewing

Judging from this image of a replica of Thoreau's cabin, what do you think life was like on Walden Pond?



“The Transcendentalist . . . believes in miracle, in the perpetual openness of the human mind to new influx of light and power; he believes in inspiration, and in ecstasy.”

Meetings of Great Minds Many found Emerson’s ideas blasphemous and denounced him as a heretic. Emerson’s supporters, however, flocked to Concord, Massachusetts, to visit with him. During the height of Transcendentalist activities, Emerson’s Concord house attracted so many great minds that it was dubbed the “Athens of America.”

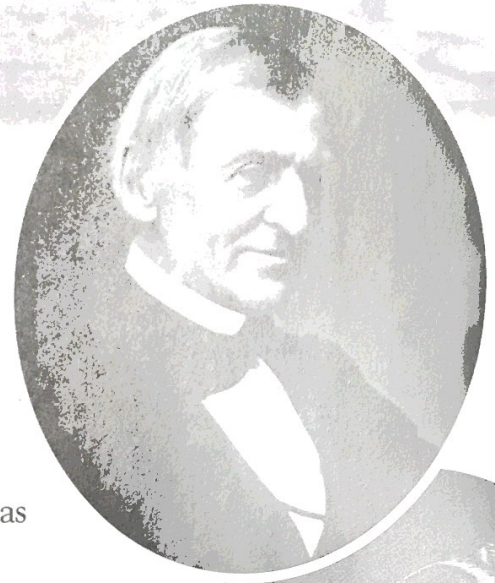
Amos Bronson Alcott Among Emerson’s admirers were teacher and philosopher Amos Bronson Alcott, whose beliefs about education revolutionized American schools. Alcott insisted that students should not be taught through routine memorization, a practice common at that time. Instead, students should be challenged to think, to debate, and to discuss.

Margaret Fuller Feminist author and editor Margaret Fuller was another eminent Transcendentalist. Along with Emerson, Fuller was the driving force behind the Transcendentalist journal *The Dial*.

Henry David Thoreau Emerson’s most famous protégé was Henry David Thoreau. As a twenty-year-old student, Thoreau heard Emerson speak at Harvard and was thrilled by his ideas. Not content to merely discuss Transcendentalist philosophy, Thoreau wanted to put it into action. In 1845, he built a rough cottage in the woods at Walden Pond and went there to live alone. He sought to experience life on a simpler level, in harmony with nature, untied to material things. Thoreau lived at Walden Pond for two years and wrote about his experiences. The result was his classic collection of essays, *Walden*.

A Lasting Legacy Like other Transcendentalists, Thoreau was a fierce abolitionist. In protest against slavery and the Mexican War, he refused to pay taxes and was imprisoned. Although Thoreau spent only a single night in jail, the experience gave him insights into the relationship of individuals to government. The theory of nonviolent civil disobedience that he developed as a result has had a profound effect on society, both in the United States and around the world. During India’s struggle for independence in the 1940s, Mahatma Gandhi adopted Thoreau’s ideas. Here in America, nonviolent civil protest served as the guiding principle for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., during the civil rights movement.

The influence of the Transcendentalists is so woven into the fabric of American culture that it is almost invisible, like the air—so bountiful we take it for granted. Yet, whenever writers celebrate the individual, whenever they look to the natural world as a mirror of human lives, whenever they state a belief in the power of intuition to grasp fundamental truths, they owe a debt to the great, brief meeting of minds in Concord.




▲ **Critical Viewing** What personality traits are conveyed in these images of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller? Explain your responses. **[Interpret]**

Prepare to Read

from Nature ♦ from Self-Reliance ♦
Concord Hymn ♦ The Snowstorm

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882)



Individuality, independence, and an appreciation for the wonders of nature—these are just a few of the principles that Ralph Waldo Emerson helped to ingrain in our nation's identity. Although his ideas were sometimes considered contro-

versial, he had a tremendous influence on the young people of his time, and his beliefs have continued to inspire people to this day.

Throughout his life, Emerson's mind was constantly in motion, generating new ideas and defining and redefining his view of the world. His natural eloquence in expressing these ideas—in essays, lectures, and poetry—makes him one of the most quoted writers in American literature.

A New England Childhood The son of a Unitarian minister, Emerson was born in Boston. When Emerson was eight, his father died. The boy turned to a brilliant and eccentric aunt, Mary Moody Emerson, who encouraged his independent thinking. At fourteen, Emerson entered Harvard, where he began the journal he was to keep all his life. After postgraduate studies at Harvard Divinity School, he became pastor of the Second Church of Boston.

Finding His Niche Emerson's career as a minister was short-lived. Grief-stricken at the death of his young wife, and dissatisfied with what he saw as the spiritual restrictions in Unitarianism, Emerson resigned after three years. He then went to Europe, where he met the English writers Thomas Carlyle, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Wordsworth. On his return to the United States, Emerson settled in Concord, Massachusetts. He married again and began his lifelong career of writing.

Emerson's second wife, Lydia Jackson of Plymouth, provided a supportive and secure family life. Emerson was now receiving money from his first wife's legacy and, for the first time in his life, was not living in poverty. The Emerson household welcomed a slowly widening circle of friends and admirers that included many of the country's most important thinkers.

In time, Emerson became widely sought as a lecturer throughout the nation. In fact, many of his essays began as lectures. Emerson kept working on the ideas until he had honed them into essay form. His talks attracted people of many ages and social classes, but it was the young people of his time who were most receptive to the thoughts of this often controversial philosopher.

An Independent Thinker Emerson was a soft-spoken man, given to neither physical nor emotional excess. Beneath his calm, sober demeanor existed a restless, highly individualistic mind that resisted conformity. "Good men," he once wrote, "must not obey the laws too well."

Emerson first achieved national fame in 1841, when he published *Essays*, a collection based on material from his journals and lectures. He went on to publish several more volumes of nonfiction, including *Essays, Second Volume* (1844), *Representative Men* (1849), and *The Conduct of Life* (1860).

Though Emerson was known mostly for his essays and lectures, he considered himself primarily a poet. "I am born a poet," he once wrote, "of a low class without doubt, yet a poet. That is my nature and my vocation." He published two successful volumes of poetry, *Poems* (1847) and *May-Day and Other Pieces* (1867). Like his essays, Emerson's poems express his beliefs in individuality and in humanity's spiritual connection to nature.

from **Nature**

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Background

During the 1830s and 1840s, Emerson and a small group of like-minded friends gathered regularly in his study to discuss philosophy, religion, and literature. Among them were Emerson's protégé, Henry David Thoreau, as well as educator Bronson Alcott, feminist writer Margaret Fuller, and ex-clergyman and author George Ripley. The intimate group, known as the Transcendental Club, developed a philosophical system that stressed intuition, individuality, and self-reliance. In 1836, Emerson published *Nature*, the lengthy essay (excerpted here) that became the Transcendental Club's unofficial statement of belief.

Nature is a setting that fits equally well a comic or a mourning piece. In good health, the air is a cordial of incredible virtue. Crossing a bare common,¹ in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear. In the woods, too, a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough, and at what period soever of life is always a child. In the woods is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life—no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism

Literary Analysis

Transcendentalism

According to this passage, what is the relationship between Emerson and nature?

blithe (blith) *adj.* carefree

1. **common** *n.* piece of open public land.

vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in the streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature.

The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me, and I to them. The

Sunset, Frederick E. Church, Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute Museum of Art, Utica, New York



waving of the boughs in the storm is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise, and yet is not unknown. Its effect is like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me, when I deemed I was thinking justly or doing right.

Yet it is certain that the power to produce this delight does not reside in nature, but in man, or in a harmony of both. It is necessary to use these pleasures with great temperance. For nature is not always tricked² in holiday attire, but the same scene which yesterday breathed perfume and glittered as for the frolic of the nymphs is over-spread with melancholy today. Nature always wears the colors of the spirit. To a man laboring under calamity, the heat of his own fire hath sadness in it. Then there is a kind of contempt of the landscape felt by him who has just lost by death a dear friend. The sky is less grand as it shuts down over less worth in the population.

2. **tricked** v. dressed.

Review and Assess

Thinking About the Selection

1. **Respond:** Which of your experiences have made you “glad to the brink of fear”? Explain.
2. (a) **Recall:** Under what circumstances, according to Emerson, does “mean egotism” vanish? (b) **Define:** How would you define Emerson’s idea of “mean egotism”? (c) **Analyze Cause and Effect:** In nature, with what emotional state does Emerson suggest that “mean egotism” is replaced?
3. (a) **Recall:** When does Emerson become a “transparent eyeball”? (b) **Analyze:** What are the characteristics of this experience? (c) **Connect:** In what ways does this description reflect the Transcendentalist belief in an Over-Soul?
4. (a) **Recall:** Where does the power to produce nature’s delight come from? (b) **Define:** In stating that there is a harmony between human beings and nature, do you think Emerson means the relationship is always serene, or not? Explain.
5. (a) **Infer:** According to Emerson, is our experience with nature the same every time we go to the woods? Explain. (b) **Interpret:** What does Emerson mean when he says that “Nature always wears the colors of the spirit”?
6. (a) **Evaluate:** What is Emerson’s main point in this essay? (b) **Assess:** Do you find Emerson’s message convincing? Explain why you do or do not accept his ideas about nature.
7. **Take a Position:** Do you find any evidence of Emerson’s reverence for nature in American culture today? Explain.

from

Self-Reliance

Ralph Waldo Emerson

There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till. The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried. Not for nothing one face, one character, one fact makes much impression on him, and another none. This sculpture in the memory is not without preestablished harmony. The eye was placed where one ray should fall, that it might testify of that particular ray. We but half express ourselves, and are ashamed of that divine idea which each of us represents. It may be safely trusted as proportionate and of good issues, so it be faithfully imparted, but God will not have his work made manifest by cowards. A man is relieved and gay when he has put his heart into his work and done his best; but what he has said or done otherwise, shall give him no peace. It is a deliverance which does not deliver. In the attempt his genius deserts him; no muse befriends; no invention, no hope.

Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you; the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events. Great men have always done so and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying their perception that the absolutely trustworthy was stirring at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being. And we are now men, and must accept in the highest mind the same transcendent destiny; and not minors and invalids in a protected corner, but guides, redeemers, and benefactors. Obeying the Almighty effort and advancing on Chaos and the Dark. . . .

Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company in which the members agree for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue

Literary Analysis Transcendentalism

What does the passage beginning "Trust thyself" tell you about Emerson's belief in the importance of the individual?

chaos (kā'ās') *n.* disorder of matter and space, supposed to have existed before the ordered universe

Reading Check

What does Emerson believe about being true to oneself?

in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs.

Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world. . . .

A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said today. “Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood?”—is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton,¹ and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood. . . .

1. **Pythagoras . . . Newton** individuals who made major contributions to scientific, philosophical, or religious thinking.

aversion (ə vər' zhən) *n.*
object arousing an intense
or definite dislike

suffrage (suf' rij) *n.* vote
or voting

divines (də vīnz') *n.* clergy

Review and Assess

Thinking About the Selection

1. **Respond:** Which aspects, if any, of today's American culture reflect Emerson's belief in self-reliance?
2. (a) **Recall:** What terms does Emerson use to describe society?
(b) **Interpret:** According to Emerson, what is society's main purpose?
(c) **Draw Conclusions:** In what ways does Emerson believe people should be affected by the way others perceive them?
3. (a) **Recall:** According to Emerson, what do Pythagoras, Socrates, Jesus, Luther, Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton have in common?
(b) **Support:** What evidence does Emerson use to support his claim that “to be great is to be misunderstood”?
4. (a) **Make a Judgment:** How important is Emerson's use of the adjective “foolish” in his discussion of consistency?
(b) **Speculate:** Do you think there would be any circumstances in which Emerson would advocate the benefits of consistency? Explain.
5. (a) **Interpret:** According to Emerson, what role does the “divine” have in determining each person's circumstances?
(b) **Generalize:** What would Emerson say is each person's reason for living? Explain.
6. **Apply:** Which of Emerson's statements, if any, would you choose as a guideline for personal conduct? Explain.

Prepare to Read

from *Walden* ♦ from *Civil Disobedience*

Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862)



From the time he was a child, Henry David Thoreau was known by his Concord, Massachusetts, neighbors as an eccentric. He rarely followed rules. He was independent and strong-willed but casual about

his studies. It was his

mother's drive and encourage-

ment that convinced him to pursue an education. Thoreau attended Concord Academy, a college preparatory school. Five years later, he enrolled at Harvard, where he pursued his studies in his own unique style. Although Harvard University's code called for students to wear black coats, Thoreau wore a green one.

Questioning Authority Thoreau always questioned the rules that were presented to him. When his objection to corporal punishment forced him to quit his first teaching job, Thoreau and his older brother John opened their own school in Concord. The school was quite successful, but they had to close it when John became ill.

In 1841, Thoreau moved into the house of another famous Concord resident, Ralph Waldo Emerson. He lived there for two years, performing odd jobs to pay for his room and board. While there, Thoreau became fascinated by Emerson's Transcendentalist beliefs. Soon, Thoreau became Emerson's close friend and devoted disciple. Deciding not to go back to teaching and refusing to pursue another career, Thoreau dedicated himself to testing the Transcendentalist philosophy through personal experience. By simplifying his

needs, Thoreau was able to devote the rest of his life to exploring and writing about the spiritual relationship between humanity and nature and supporting his political and social beliefs.

On Walden Pond From 1845 to 1847, Thoreau lived alone in a cabin he built himself at Walden Pond outside of Concord. Thoreau's experiences during this period provided him with the material for his masterwork, *Walden* (1854). Condensing his experiences at Walden Pond into a single year, Thoreau used the four seasons as a structural framework for the book. A unique blend of natural observation, social criticism, and philosophical insight, *Walden* is now generally regarded as the supreme work of Transcendentalist literature.

Thoreau wrote throughout his life, but only *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and some poems were published—at Thoreau's own expense—during his lifetime. *The Maine Woods*, *Cape Cod*, and *A Yankee in Canada* were published posthumously. Carefully and deliberately crafted, Thoreau's work reflects the economy for which he strove throughout his life and about which he wrote in *Walden*.

A Noble Soul When Henry David Thoreau died of tuberculosis at the age of forty-four, his work had received little recognition. Yet he had achieved an inner success that few others have experienced. Speaking at Thoreau's funeral, Ralph Waldo Emerson commented, "The country knows not yet, or in the least part, how great a son it has lost. . . . But he, at least, is content. His soul was made for the noblest society; he had in a short life exhausted the capabilities of this world; wherever there is knowledge, wherever there is virtue, wherever there is beauty, he will find a home."

Thoreau's reputation has steadily grown since his death. His work has inspired writers, environmentalists, and social and political leaders. It has made generations of readers aware of the possibilities of the human spirit and the limitations of society.

from Walden

Henry David Thoreau

from Where I Lived, and What I Lived For

At a certain season of our life we are accustomed to consider every spot as the possible site of a house. I have thus surveyed the country on every side within a dozen miles of where I live. In imagination I have bought all the farms in succession, for all were to be bought, and I knew their price. I walked over each farmer's premises, tasted his wild apples, discoursed on husbandry¹ with him, took his farm at his price, at any price, mortgaging it to him in my mind; even put a higher price on it—took everything but a deed of it—took his word for his deed, for I dearly love to talk—cultivated it, and him too to some extent, I trust, and withdrew when I had enjoyed it long enough, leaving him to carry it on. This experience entitled me to be regarded as a sort of real-estate broker by my friends. Wherever I sat, there I might live, and the landscape radiated from me accordingly. What is a house but a sedes, a seat?—better if a country seat. I discovered many a site for a house not likely to be soon improved, which some might have thought too far from the village, but to my eyes the village was too far from it. Well, there might I live, I said; and there I did live, for an hour, a summer and a winter life; saw how I could let the years run off, buffet the winter through, and see the spring come in. The future inhabitants of this region, wherever they may place their houses, may be sure that they have been anticipated. An afternoon

1. **husbandry** (huz' ben drē) *n.* farming.

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Reading Check

Did Thoreau truly intend to purchase a farm?

◀ **Critical Viewing** Based on this picture of Walden Pond, what do you think it would be like to live in such a place? [**Speculate**]

sufficed to lay out the land into orchard woodlot and pasture, and to decide what fine oaks or pines should be left to stand before the door, and whence each blasted tree could be seen to the best advantage; and then I let it lie, fallow² perchance, for a man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone.

My imagination carried me so far that I even had the refusal of several farms—the refusal was all I wanted—but I never got my fingers burned by actual possession. The nearest that I came to actual possession was when I bought the Hollowell Place, and had begun to sort my seeds, and collected materials with which to make a wheelbarrow to carry it on or off with; but before the owner gave me a deed of it, his wife—every man has such a wife—changed her mind and wished to keep it, and he offered me ten dollars to release him. Now, to speak the truth, I had but ten cents in the world, and it surpassed my arithmetic to tell, if I was that man who had ten cents, or who had a farm, or ten dollars, or all together. However, I let him keep the ten dollars and the farm too, for I had carried it far enough; or rather, to be generous, I sold him the farm for just what I gave for it, and, as he was not a rich man, made him a present of ten dollars, and still had my ten cents, and seeds, and materials for a wheelbarrow left. I found thus that I had been a rich man without any damage to my poverty. But I retained the landscape, and I have since annually carried off what it yielded without a wheelbarrow. With respect to landscapes:

“I am monarch of all I *survey*,
My right there is none to dispute.”³

I have frequently seen a poet withdraw, having enjoyed the most valuable part of a farm, while the crusty farmer supposed that he had got a few wild apples only. Why, the owner does not know it for many years when a poet has put his farm in rhyme, the most admirable kind of invisible fence, has fairly impounded it, milked it, skimmed it, and got all the cream, and left the farmer only the skimmed milk.

The real attractions of the Hollowell farm, to me, were: its complete retirement, being about two miles from the village, half a mile from the nearest neighbor, and separated from the highway by a broad field; its bounding on the river, which the owner said protected it by its fogs from frosts in the spring, though that was nothing to me; the gray color and ruinous state of the house and barn, and the dilapidated fences, which put such an interval between me and the last occupant; the hollow and lichen-covered apple trees, gnawed by rabbits, showing what kind of neighbors I should have; but above all, the recollection I had of it from my earliest voyages up the river, when the house was concealed behind a dense grove of red maples, through which I heard the house-dog bark. I was in haste to buy it, before the proprietor finished getting out some rocks, cutting down

Reading Strategy

Evaluating the Writer's Statement of Philosophy

Do you think this philosophical statement about a man's wealth applies in today's world? Can Thoreau support it?

Literary Analysis

Style What point does Thoreau make through his use of repetition in his description of the Hollowell farm?

dilapidated (dɪ ləp' ɪ dāt' id) *adj.* in disrepair

2. **fallow** (fal' ō) *adj.* left uncultivated or unplanted.

3. "I . . . **dispute**" from William Cowper's *Verses Supposed to Be Written by Alexander Selkirk*.

the hollow apple trees, and grubbing up some young birches which had sprung up in the pasture, or, in short, had made any more of his improvements. To enjoy these advantages I was ready to carry it on; like Atlas,⁴ to take the world on my shoulders—I never heard what compensation he received for that—and do all those things which had no other motive or excuse but that I might pay for it and be unmolested in my possession of it; for I knew all the while that it would yield the most abundant crop of the kind I wanted if I could only afford to let it alone. But it turned out as I have said.

All that I could say, then, with respect to farming on a large scale (I have always cultivated a garden) was that I had had my seeds ready. Many think that seeds improve with age. I have no doubt that time discriminates between the good and the bad; and when at last I shall plant, I shall be less likely to be disappointed. But I would say to my fellows, once for all, As long as possible live free and uncommitted. It makes but little difference whether you are committed to a farm or the county jail.

Old Cato,⁵ whose “De Re Rustica” is my “Cultivator,” says, and the only translation I have seen makes sheer nonsense of the passage, “When you think of getting a farm, turn it thus in your mind, not to buy greedily; nor spare your pains to look at it, and do not think it enough to go round it once. The oftener you go there the more it will please you, if it is good.” I think I shall not buy greedily, but go round and round it as long as I live, and be buried in it first, that it may please me the more at last. . . .

I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer⁶ in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up.

When first I took up my abode in the woods, that is, began to spend my nights as well as days there, which, by accident, was on Independence Day, or the fourth of July, 1845, my house was not finished for winter, but was merely a defense against the rain, without plastering or chimney, the walls being of rough weatherstained boards, with wide chinks, which made it cool at night. The upright white hewn studs and freshly planed door and window casings gave it a clean and airy look, especially in the morning, when its timbers were saturated with dew, so that I fancied that by noon some sweet gum would exude from them. To my imagination it retained throughout the day more or less of this auroral⁷ character, reminding me of a certain house on a mountain which I had visited the year before. This was an airy and unplastered cabin, fit to entertain a traveling god, and where a goddess might trail her garments. The winds which passed over my dwelling were such as sweep over the ridges of mountains, bearing the broken strains, or celestial parts only,

Reading Strategy

Evaluating the Writer's Statement of Philosophy

What difference do you see between a person's commitment to a farm and to a jail?

Reading Check

What was the state of Thoreau's house in the woods when he first took up residence?

4. **Atlas** (at' ləs) from Greek mythology, a Titan who supported the heavens on his shoulders.

5. **Old Cato Roman statesman** (234–149 B.C.). “De Re Rustica” is Latin for “Of Things Rustic.”

6. **chanticleer** (chan' tə kliər) *n.* rooster.

7. **auroral** (ô rôr' əl) *adj.* resembling the dawn.

of terrestrial music. The morning wind forever blows, the poem of creation is uninterrupted; but few are the ears that hear it. Olympus⁸ is but the outside of the earth everywhere. . . .

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartanlike⁹ as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God, and have *somewhat hastily* concluded that it is the chief end of man here to “glorify God and enjoy him forever.”⁹

Still we live meanly, like ants; though the fable tells us that we were long ago changed into men; like pygmies we fight with cranes:¹⁰ it is error upon error, and clout upon clout, and our best virtue has for its occasion a superfluous and evitable wretchedness. Our life is frittered away by detail. An honest man has hardly need to count more than his ten fingers, or in extreme cases he may add his ten toes, and lump the rest. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumbnail. In the midst of this chopping sea of civilized life, such are the clouds and storms and quicksands and thousand-and-one items to be allowed for, that a man has to live, if he would not founder and go to the bottom and not make his port at all, by dead reckoning,¹¹ and he must be a great calculator indeed who succeeds. Simplify, simplify. Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one; instead of a hundred dishes, five; and reduce other things in proportion. Our life is like a German Confederacy,¹²

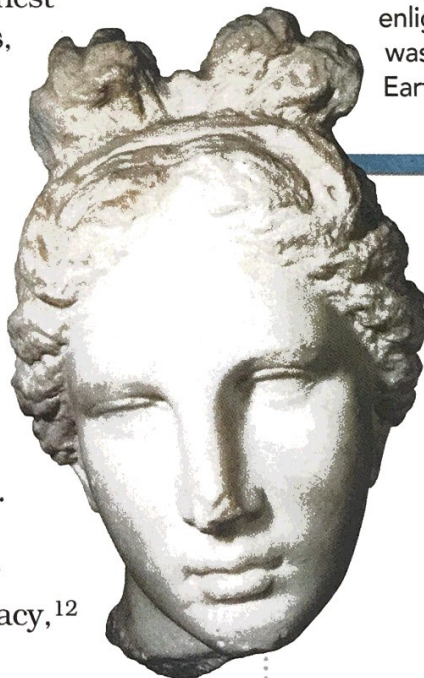
Literature in context History Connection

◆ Olympus

When he describes his home in the woods, Thoreau rhapsodizes about another mountain cabin he had seen, an airy place where a “goddess might trail her garments.” Thoreau goes on to say, “Olympus is but the outside of the earth everywhere.”

Mount Olympus, to which Thoreau is referring, is both a real mountain in northern Greece and an important setting in ancient Greek mythology. Described as the home of the gods, Olympus was off-limits to mortals. From it, Zeus ruled the twelve gods who governed the world. Ancient Greeks pictured their gods in human form with human flaws, so Olympus was far from perfect.

But as a place of relative beauty, harmony, and enlightenment, it was better than Earth.



sublime (sə blīm') *adj.*
noble; majestic

superfluous (soo pār' flōō əs) *adj.* excessive; not necessary

evitable (ev' i tə bəl) *adj.*
avoidable

8. **Spartanlike** like the people of Sparta, an ancient Greek state whose citizens were known to be hardy, stoical, simple, and highly disciplined.

9. “**glorify . . . forever**” the answer to the question “What is the chief end of man?” in the Westminster catechism.

10. **like . . . cranes** In the *Iliad*, the Trojans are compared to cranes fighting against pygmies.

11. **dead reckoning** navigating without the assistance of stars.

12. **German Confederacy** At the time, Germany was a loose union of thirty-nine independent states, with no common government.

made up of petty states, with its boundary forever fluctuating, so that even a German cannot tell you how it is bounded at any moment. The nation itself, with all its so-called internal improvements, which, by the way, are all external and superficial, is just such an unwieldy and overgrown establishment, cluttered with furniture and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense, by want of calculation and a worthy aim, as the million households in the land; and the only cure for it as for them is in a rigid economy, a stern and more than Spartan simplicity of life and elevation of purpose. It lives too fast. Men think that it is essential that the *Nation* have commerce, and export ice, and talk through a telegraph, and ride thirty miles an hour, without a doubt, whether *they* do or not; but whether we should live like baboons or like men, is a little uncertain. If we do not get out sleepers,¹³ and forge rails, and devote days and nights to the work, but go to tinkering upon our *lives* to improve *them*, who will build railroads? And if railroads are not built, how shall we get to heaven in season? But if we stay at home and mind our business, who will want railroads? We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us. . . .

Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars. I cannot count one. I know not the first letter of the alphabet. I have always been regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born. The intellect is a cleaver; it discerns and rifts its way into the secret of things. I do not wish to be any more busy with my hands than is necessary. My head is hands and feet. I feel all my best faculties concentrated in it. My instinct tells me that my head is an organ for burrowing, as some creatures use their snout and forepaws, and with it I would mine and burrow my way through these hills. I think that the richest vein is somewhere hereabouts; so by the divining rod¹⁴ and thin rising vapors I judge; and here I will begin to mine. . . .

from The Conclusion

I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one. It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves. I had not lived there a week before my feet wore a path from my door to the pondside; and though it is five or six years since I trod it, it is still quite distinct. It is true, I fear that others may have fallen into it, and so helped to keep it open. The surface of the earth is soft and impressible by the feet of men; and so with the paths which the mind travels. How worn and dusty, then, must be the highways of the world, how

13. **sleepers** (slē' pərz) *n.* ties supporting railroad tracks.

14. **divining rod** a forked branch or stick alleged to reveal underground water or minerals.

Reading Strategy

Evaluating the Writer's Statement of Philosophy

Evaluate this statement of philosophy about progress. Do you agree that railroads and other technology "ride upon us"?

Reading Check

Why did Thoreau go to the woods?



deep the ruts of tradition and conformity! I did not wish to take a cabin passage, but rather to go before the mast and on the deck of the world, for there I could best see the moonlight amid the mountains. I do not wish to go below now.

I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and interpreted in his favor in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings. In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness. If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them. . . .

Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed, and in such desperate enterprises? If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away. It is not important that he should mature as soon as an apple tree or an oak. Shall he turn his spring into summer? If the condition of things which we were made for is not yet, what were any reality which we can substitute? We will not be shipwrecked on a vain reality. Shall we with pains erect a heaven of blue glass over ourselves, though when it is done we shall be sure to gaze still at the true ethereal heaven far above, as if the former were not? . . .

▲ Critical Viewing

What elements in this aerial photograph of Walden Pond reveal conventional notions of progress? What details suggest that the community has applied some of Thoreau's ideas? [Analyze]

Literary Analysis Style and Metaphor

What metaphor does Thoreau use in the sentence beginning "If a man does not keep pace with his companions . . . "?

However mean your life is, meet it and live it; do not shun it and call it hard names. It is not so bad as you are. It looks poorest when you are richest. The faultfinder will find faults even in paradise. Love your life, poor as it is. You may perhaps have some pleasant, thrilling, glorious hours, even in a poorhouse. The setting sun is reflected from the windows of the almshouse¹⁵ as brightly as from the rich man's abode; the snow melts before its door as early in the spring. I do not see but a quiet mind may live as contentedly there, and have as cheering thoughts, as in a palace. The town's poor seem to me often to live the most independent lives of any. Maybe they are simply great enough to receive without misgiving. Most think that they are above being supported by the town; but it oftener happens that they are not above supporting themselves by dishonest means, which should be more disreputable. Cultivate poverty like a garden herb, like sage. Do not trouble yourself much to get new things, whether clothes or friends. Turn the old; return to them. Things do not change; we change. Sell your clothes and keep your thoughts. God will see that you do not want society. If I were confined to a corner of a garret¹⁶ all my days, like a spider, the world would be just as large to me while I had my thoughts about me. The philosopher said: "From an army of three divisions one can take away its general, and put it in disorder; from the man the most abject and vulgar one cannot take away his thought." Do not seek so anxiously to be developed, to subject yourself to many influences to be played on; it is all dissipation. Humility like darkness reveals the heavenly lights. The shadows of poverty and meanness gather around us, "and lo! creation widens to our view."¹⁷ We are often reminded that if there were bestowed on us the wealth of Croesus,¹⁸ our aims must still be the same, and our means essentially the same. Moreover, if you are restricted in your range by poverty, if you cannot buy books and newspapers, for instance, you are but confined to the most significant and vital experiences; you are compelled to deal with the material which yields the most sugar and the most starch. It is life near the bone where it is sweetest. You are defended from being a trifler. No man loses ever on a lower level by magnanimity on a higher. Superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only. Money is not required to buy one necessary of the soul. . . .

The life in us is like the water in the river. It may rise this year higher than man has ever known it, and flood the parched uplands; even this may be the eventful year, which will drown out all our muskrats. It was not always dry land where we dwell. I see far inland the banks which the stream anciently washed, before science began

15. **almshouse** *n.* home for people too poor to support themselves.

16. **garret** (*gar' it*) *n.* attic.

17. "and . . . view" from the sonnet "To Night" by British poet Joseph Blanco White (1775–1841).

18. **Croesus** (*krē' səs*) King of Lydia (d. 546 B.C.), believed to be the wealthiest person of his time.

Reading Strategy Evaluating the Writer's Statement of Philosophy

Thoreau has strong opinions about how people should live, as shown in his advice to "cultivate poverty." Has he convinced you? Explain.

magnanimity (*mag' nə nīm' ə tē*) *n.* generosity

Reading Check

What does Thoreau feel about superfluous wealth?

to record its freshets. Everyone has heard the story which has gone the rounds of New England, of a strong and beautiful bug which came out of the dry leaf of an old table of apple-tree wood, which had stood in a farmer's kitchen for sixty years, first in Connecticut, and afterward in Massachusetts—from an egg deposited in the living tree many years earlier still, as appeared by counting the annual layers beyond it; which was heard gnawing out for several weeks, hatched

▼ **Critical Viewing**

In what ways does this replica of Thoreau's cabin reflect his desire to "front only the essential facts of life"? [Interpret]



perchance by the heat of an urn. Who does not feel his faith in a resurrection and immortality strengthened by hearing of this? Who knows what beautiful and winged life, whose egg has been buried for ages under many concentric layers of woodenness in the dead dry life of society, deposited at first in the alburnum¹⁹ of the green and living tree, which has been gradually converted into the semblance of its well-seasoned tomb—heard perchance gnawing out now for years by the astonished family of man, as they sat round the festive board—may unexpectedly come forth from amidst society's most trivial and handselled furniture, to enjoy its perfect summer life at last!

I do not say that John or Jonathan²⁰ will realize all this; but such is the character of that morrow which mere lapse of time can never make to dawn. The light which puts out our eyes is darkness to us. Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star.

19. **alburnum** (al bur' nem) *n.* soft wood between the bark and the heartwood, where water is conducted.

20. **John or Jonathan** average person.

Review and Assess

Thinking About the Selection

1. **Respond:** From your point of view, what would be the advantages and disadvantages of spending two solitary years in a natural setting?
2. (a) **Recall:** What advice does Thoreau offer to his “fellows” about ownership of land or property? (b) **Interpret:** What does Thoreau mean by his comment, “It makes but little difference whether you are committed to a farm or the county jail”?
3. (a) **Recall:** What advice does Thoreau offer to those who live in poverty? (b) **Analyze:** What does this advice suggest about Thoreau’s definition of true wealth?
4. (a) **Recall:** According to Thoreau, by what is our life “frittered away”? (b) **Interpret:** What does Thoreau mean by his advice to “Simplify, simplify.”?
5. (a) **Deduce:** What did Thoreau hope to achieve by living at Walden Pond? (b) **Make a Judgment:** Do you believe Thoreau felt his time at Walden was well spent? Explain.
6. (a) **Apply:** How would you define those things that are necessary to the soul? (b) **Take a Position:** Do you agree with Thoreau that “Money is not required to buy one necessary of the soul”? Explain.

from CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Henry David Thoreau

Background

The Mexican War was a conflict between Mexico and the United States that took place from 1846 to 1848. The war was caused by a dispute over the boundary between Texas and Mexico, as well as by Mexico's refusal to discuss selling California and New Mexico to the United States. Believing that President Polk had intentionally provoked the conflict before gaining congressional approval, Thoreau and many other Americans strongly objected to the war. In protest, Thoreau refused to pay his taxes and was forced to spend a night in jail. After that experience, Thoreau wrote "Civil Disobedience," urging people to resist governmental policies with which they disagree.

I heartily accept the motto, "That government is best which governs least";¹ and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe: "That government is best which governs not at all"; and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have. Government is at best but an expedient; but most governments are usually, and all governments are sometimes, inexpedient. The objections which have been brought against a standing army, and they are many and weighty, and deserve to prevail, may also at last be brought against a standing government. The standing army is only an arm of the standing government. The government itself, which is only the mode which the people have chosen to execute their will, is equally liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act through it. Witness the present Mexican war, the work of comparatively a few individuals using the standing government as their tool; for in the outset, the people would not have consented to this measure.

This American government—what is it but a tradition, though a recent one, endeavoring to transmit itself unimpaired to posterity, but each instant losing some of its integrity? It has not the vitality and force of a single living man; for a single man can bend it to his will. It is a sort of wooden gun to the people themselves; and, if ever they should use it in earnest as a real one against each other, it will surely split.

Reading Strategy

Evaluating the Writer's Statement of Philosophy

Before you read Thoreau's supporting arguments, do you think you will agree with his philosophy about government? Explain.

expedient (ik spē' dē ənt)
n. resource

posterity (päs ter' ə tē) n.
all succeeding generations

1. "That . . . least" the motto of the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, a literary-political journal.

But it is not the less necessary for this; for the people must have some complicated machinery or other, and hear its din, to satisfy that idea of government which they have. Governments show thus how successfully men can be imposed on, even impose on themselves, for their own advantage. It is excellent, we must all allow; yet this government never of itself furthered any enterprise, but by the alacrity with which it got out of its way. *It* does not keep the country free. *It* does not settle the West. *It* does not educate. The character inherent in the American people has done all that has been accomplished; and it would have done somewhat more, if the government had not sometimes got in its way. For government is an expedient by which men would fain succeed in letting one another alone; and, as has been said, when it is most expedient, the governed are most let alone by it. Trade and commerce, if they were not made of India rubber,² would never manage to bounce over the obstacles which legislators are continually putting in their way; and, if one were to judge these men wholly by the effects of their actions, and not partly by their intentions, they would deserve to be classed and punished with those mischievous persons who put obstructions on the railroads.

But, to speak practically and as a citizen, unlike those who call themselves no government men, I ask for, not at once no government, but *at once* a better government. Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it. . . .

2. **India rubber** a form of crude rubber.

alacrity (ə lak' rə tē) *n.*
speed

Review and Assess

Thinking About the Selection

1. **Respond:** What kind of government commands your respect? Why?
2. (a) **Recall:** What motto does Thoreau accept? (b) **Analyze:** How would he like to see that motto implemented?
3. (a) **Recall:** How does Thoreau define the best possible kind of government? (b) **Draw Conclusions:** According to Thoreau, when will Americans get the best possible kind of government?
4. (a) **Summarize:** What is Thoreau asking his readers to do? (b) **Evaluate:** Does Thoreau present a convincing argument for acting on one's principles?
5. (a) **Criticize:** What arguments might you use to counter Thoreau's objections to the idea of a standing government? (b) **Support:** What examples might you provide to support an argument that government benefits individuals?