

Henry David Thoreau Notes



A Little Bit about Henry David Thoreau & Walden

- On July 4, 1845 Thoreau moved to the woods at Walden Pond.
 - Statement of personal independence
 - Two years of living there
 - Work now considered as important as Karl Marx's Communist Manifesto, published in 1848
- Thoreau's Impact in Life
 - During his life, little. He was not well known outside Concord, Mass.
 - A few books with weak sales (A Week on the Concord & Merrimack Rivers and Walden)
 - Emerson's funeral speech about Thoreau: *"I so much regret the loss of his rare powers of action, that I cannot help counting it a fault in him that he had no ambition. Wanting this [that is, lacking ambition] instead of engineering for all America, he was the captain of a huckleberry party. Pounding beans is good to the end of pounding empires one of these days; but if, at the end of years, it is still only beans!"*
 - Emerson was wrong; his misunderstood Thoreau's purpose. His goal was not to engineer for America, but to re-engineer her.
 - Emerson failed to see the lasting impact that Thoreau would have; now Thoreau is probably more influential than Emerson.
- Thoreau's Later Impact
 - Authors and Artists: Willa Cather, Marcel Proust, William Butler Yeats, Sinclair Lewis, Ernest Hemmingway, E. B. White, Frank Lloyd Wright, and others
 - Nature Lovers and Naturalists: John Burroughs, John Muir, Aldo Leopold; Edwin Way Teale, Joseph Wood Krutch, David Brower, and others
 - Political Reformers: Leo Tolstoy, Emma Goldman, Norman Thomas, Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and others
 - Ken Kifer *"Today, Thoreau's words are quoted with feeling by liberals, socialists, anarchists, libertarians, and conservatives alike. But I think Thoreau's words will be even more important in the future than they are now."*



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Themes of Thoreau's Walden

1) Simplicity

- Eliminate material complexity
- Complexity exists for its own sake—a cycle that never ends
- Desire for complexity comes from desire for status, a belief that it is actually more simple, and to fill emptiness
- Complexity stems from artificial desire, contrasted with real desire—food, air, transcendence, shelter
- Cornerstone of HDT's philosophy: *"Simplify, Simplify!"*
- *"The necessities of life for man in this climate may, accurately enough, be distributed under the several heads of Food, Shelter, Clothing, and Fuel; for not till we have secured these are we prepared to entertain the true problems of life with freedom and a prospect of success."--HDT*

2) HDT's View on Technology/Progress

- The Railroad Argument
 - Technology/Progress is Built on the Backs of the Poor
 - Equating industry with human success/transcendence is wrong
 - Railroads built on graves of the past
- It's wrong to believe that Progress=enough
- Technology=alienation from selves/nature
- Answers to HDT
 - Progress=livelihoods, better conditions of life
 - Progress=longer lives
 - HDT says, "Who cares?" They will be meaningless.
- Other critics argue that HDT was an advocate for increased technology, because it would eliminate the need for tedium and labor

3) Loneliness

- Loneliness=stuff/material wants
- He didn't experience loneliness in nature
- *"Yet I experienced sometimes that the most sweet and tender, the most innocent and encouraging society may be found in any natural object, even for the poor misanthrope and most melancholy man. There can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of nature and has his senses still."--HDT*
- *"I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude"--HDT*
- HDT's Philosophy
 - Physical closeness does not mean a real connection, a real reduction in loneliness
 - Somewhat Hindu approach. We are all connected, sense of the shared soul.
 - "Why should I feel lonely? is not our planet in the Milky Way? This which you put seems to me not to be the most important question. What sort of space is that which separates a man from his fellows and makes him solitary? I have found that no exertion of the legs can bring two minds much nearer to one another."--HDT
- Another book worth looking at from contemporary perspective: Bowling Alone

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4) Work

- *"The twelve labors of Hercules were trifling in comparison with those which my neighbors have undertaken; for they were only twelve, and had an end; but I could never see that these men slew or captured any monster or finished any labor. They have no friend Iolaus to burn with a hot iron the root of the hydra's head, but as soon as one head is crushed, two spring up."* —H.D.T
- We spend so much energy in labor—unnecessary effort and work, for the sake of material acquisition that we don't have time for the more important things.
- Transcendentalists did not argue that all work and toil were bad, merely that in excess, it deprived us of the opportunity to grow.
- Why do Americans work more hours today than a generation ago?

5) War

- HDT uses the episode of the Ants to illustrate feelings about war.
- *"Holding a microscope to the first-mentioned red ant, I saw that, though he was assiduously gnawing at the near fore leg of his enemy, having severed his remaining feeler, his own breast was all torn away, exposing what vitals he had there to the jaws of the black warrior, whose breastplate was apparently too thick for him to pierce; and the dark carbuncles of the sufferer's eyes shone with ferocity such as war only could excite."*—HDT
- War is a largely meaningless struggle over territory.
- Savagery: Ant trying to kill another while it is being killed
 - Contrast with our views on war movies—we would see that as heroic
 - Culture connection to savagery: WWF, football hits.
- Thoreau finds himself excited about the battle. He understands the passionate depiction of battles in the past
 - Argument that human nature is still savage; Transcendence the key to overcoming?

6) Nature

- Spend one day as deliberately as nature—don't answer bells, whistles, alarms. Nature is calm, its music soothing, and its rhythms not artificial. Human needs and desires can wait.
- The rush and noise of our lives is what separates us from ourselves.
- Nature is more than beautiful; it is pure. The pond has the characteristics of The Creator, a person can get no closer to heaven than by being in Nature
- *"Nature has no human inhabitant who appreciates her."*—H.D.T

"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."—HDT

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7) Purpose of Existence

- *"The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation." --H.D.T*
- Most of us are so convinced that the lives we have are all that we will ever have, so we give in. When we accept our fate (resign ourselves to it) we are really in the depths of desperation.
- What, then, is the purpose of life?
 - Learn to understand life for ourselves. Don't accept the old answers, the old ways, the old beliefs just because they have been passed down. Create your own world, your own views.
 - Here's the trick: You need to do it after examining your own biases, your own resignation, and your own despair. Start fresh, and create a life that is your own.
 - *"Undoubtedly the very tedium and ennui which presume to have exhausted the variety and the joys of life are as old as Adam. But man's capacities have never been measured; nor are we to judge of what he can do by any precedents, so little has been tried."--HDT*
 - *"We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep. I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor. It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts."--HDT*
- Challenge conformity. Challenge the old assumptions "Every generation laughs at the old fashions, but follows religiously the new."--HDT
- Wake up! Focus our energy on the world around us, and not devote our energy to things that are not real. *"By closing the eyes and slumbering, and consenting to be deceived by shows, men establish and confirm their daily life of routine and habit everywhere, which still is built on purely illusory foundations. Children, who play life, discern its true law and relations more clearly than men, who fail to live it worthily, but who think that they are wiser by experience, that is, by failure."--HDT*
- HDT says we prefer to be deluded, because it means we don't need to think.
- Be aware of the problems in the world—and take action to solve them.
- *"Direct your eye right inward, and you'll find
A thousand regions in your mind
Yet undiscovered. Travel them, and be
Expert in home-cosmography."--HDT*

Happiness is like a butterfly;
the more you chase it,
the more it will elude you,
but if you turn your attention
to other things, it will
come and sit softly
on your shoulder...

(Thoreau)