Thoreau of Walden Pond Study Guide

Thoreau of Walden Pond by Sterling North

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Overview

Thoreau espoused a simple way of life that exemplifies the American spirit of self-sufficiency and thrift advocated by Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. The true measure of Thoreau's success is the influence he had on the moral and social philosophy of scores of famous Americans, as well as intellectuals in other parts of the world. North's biography seeks to inform its readers how unique this stoic New Englander truly was.

The book incorporates Thoreau's own lively and vivid prose to describe his tour of the Concord and Merrimack rivers and his simple existence at Waiden Pond. This technique gives readers a personal view of Thoreau's philosophy and encourages readers to delve into the author's original works.

About the Author

Although best remembered for his nature books for young children and young adults, Sterling North also wrote a number of biographies of American literary and historical figures that added to his reputation as one of the most popular twentieth-century writers for young adults. He was born on November 4, 1906, on a small farm overlooking Lake Koshkonong, near Edgerton, Wisconsin. North first found literary fame through his poetry, which he sold to literary magazines throughout his high school and college years. After graduating from the University of Chicago in 1929, North worked as a reporter for the Chicago Daily News. In 1932 he became the newspaper's literary editor, a position he later held at the New York Post and at the New York World Telegram and San. In 1957 he accepted a post with Houghton Mifflin, his primary publisher, as editor of North Star Books, a series of historical books for children. Sole author of twenty-six novels, biographies, and children's books, North edited over twenty other books and anthologies as well. He also contributed poems, articles, and stories to a variety of national publications, including the Atlantic, Harper's, Poetry, and the Nation.

Critical acclaim for North's work has centered on its appeal to all generations.

This is especially true in the case of North's most famous works, Rascal: A Memoir of a Better Era and Raccoons Are the Brightest People, both set near the author's rural home in New Jersey. Rascal was a Newbery Medal runner-up in 1964 and received the Dorothy Canfield Fisher Award and the Dutton Animal Book Award. The Wolfling also won a Dutton Animal Book Award. Sterling North died in Morristown, New Jersey, on December 22, 1974, after a series of strokes.

Plot Summary

This non fiction biography, first published in 1959, tells the life story of Henry David Thoreau through the eyes of admiring author Sterling North. The narrative begins when Henry is about six and progresses through time, with occasional flashbacks or foreshadowing of events to come.

Henry grows up in Concord, Massachusetts a town that has seen its share of hardship and challenge. According to North, Thoreau feels great respect for rugged outdoorsmen, loves nature and desperately wants to live wild and free like Native Americans or riverboat sailors. His family are poor, honest and hardworking people, well liked in the community. He has two sisters, and one brother, John, probably his best friend in the world. Thoreau learns to work very hard on the family farm and in his father's pencil factory, yet he always makes the time to read books about eras long past, heroic adventures, exotic lands and especially to explore the nearby woods.

North next jumps ahead in time to focus on Thoreau's life as a college student at Harvard. The author believes that Henry is very lonely at college, homesick, and a bit of a joke to the other students with more money and time for recreation. Another famous thinker and author of the era, Ralph Waldo Emerson, notices the young Thoreau at Harvard and urges the university to give Henry a grant of money to assist his studies. In turn, Thoreau is so excited by the thoughts expressed in Emerson's writings that he quotes them in his graduation speech. The two men later become close, lifelong friends.

Thoreau's fiery independence begins to show itself after college. He has not studied anything which will suit him for a professional job such as law or medicine, so his only option is teaching school. Yet, he disagrees with his contemporary teachers that children should be whipped. He is fired from his first job as a teacher for not beating students, so he and his brother John start their own academy where students are never physically punished, and where they learn as much inside the classroom as they do outside on many nature walks. Thoreau is a frequent guest at Ralph Waldo Emerson and his wife Lidian's home, where thinkers, writers poets and others known as the Transcendentalist gather to discuss new and challenging philosophies and ideas. Thoreau proves to be the most argumentative of the group, but is loved and respected for his earnestness and wild enthusiasm. About this time he begins keeping a journal which becomes the basis of many of his future essays and books.

John and Henry fall in love with the same woman, propose to her and both are turned down. This does not prevent the brothers from building a boat and sailing down the Concord Merrimac Rivers together. Journals Thoreau keeps on the one week trip inspire one of his most important books. Not long after this John dies, and the heartbroken Thoreau goes to live with Emerson working as a handyman and private tutor for the Emerson children. A few years later his mentor, Emerson, encourages Thoreau to go to New York and try to get a publisher to print his writings. Thoreau sees the rough and terrible side of "modern" society in New York. He can't bear the crowds,

cruelty, poverty and overworked lifestyle many residents suffer. Still unpublished, he returns to Concord to be with his family.

In the spring of 1845 Henry picks a spot on Walden Pond and begins building a cabin there. For two years he lives by the lake observing nature first hand, testing his skills as a woodsman and farmer, and finding ways to write about his belief that most people are unaware of the beauty and wonder surrounding them because they are too busy struggling for comforts they do not need. The resulting book, "Walden, Or Life in the Woods," is eventually published, but does not meet with worldwide success until after Thoreau is long dead. Finally, Thoreau leaves the pond.

He gives lectures and continues to write in his journal every day. Thoreau takes several trips deep into Maine, which is unexplored wilderness at the time. His journals reveal the wonders of a lost frontier. Such rugged living takes its toll on Thoreau, he catches a fever and dies a young man. The book ends with a group of actual quotes from Thoreau's great work, "Walden, Or Life in the Woods," arranged according to the seasons he has spent on Walden Pond.

The author, Sterling North writes this book early in the 20th century, so many of his remarks and comments may seem odd or old fashioned to modern audiences. For instance, he calls local people "Indians" and "savages" instead of Native Americans, and he can not accept various ideas proposed by Thoreau. North is writing for elementary school and Jr. High school aged students, so the language is quite simple and direct.

Prologue

Prologue Summary and Analysis

This one page note from the author, North, is very important. North says that his own childhood resembles Thoreau's. He too builds a boat and a cabin in the woods. Growing up in rural Wisconsin, he also enjoys the sounds of wildlife and the distant hoot of a far off train whistle. However, once he reads Thoreau's writings, North becomes even more fascinated with the life cycles and details of plants and animals around him. He even quits hunting in order to spare wildlife.

North urges his audience to take a copy of "Walden, Or Life in the Woods" into a wilderness setting and read it slowly. This, he claims, will give the reader a sense of peace and well being.

This introduction helps us to understand why North later skips or eliminates aspects of Thoreau's life. His goal is to awaken readers to the glories of nature. He does not mention any of the more controversial aspects of Thoreau's philosophy or behavior.

Chapter 1, Boyhood on the River

Chapter 1, Boyhood on the River Summary and Analysis

The story opens as the boys of Concord, Massachusetts excitedly pass the word that a canal boat is coming down the river, loaded with lime and bricks. The river men who push the boats are heroes to the children because they they know every inch of the river, living on the huge rafts called "scows."

Inspired by the river men, Henry David Thoreau and his brother John decide to build a boat of their own. It is a small, rough little boat, but good enough to take their older and younger sisters out for rides on the Concord River. More often the brothers row out on the boat by themselves and explore nearby woods where they pretend to be Native Americans. (The author refers to Native Americans as Indians or Savages in this section, and throughout the book.) Later, as adults, the brothers look back fondly on the time they spent playing like they were members of the Massachusetts tribe. John is three years older than Henry, so he teaches his brother everything he knows about local wildlife. John's knowledge isn't enough to satisfy Henry, though. When he sees plants and animals that John can't recognize, the younger Thoreau decides to spend the rest of his life learning all he can about nature.

The book goes on to give a little background about the place and time where Henry grew up. He is born on July 12, 1817, a little after Lincoln's birth and during the presidency of James Monroe. The Thoreau family is not wealthy money, even though they descend from wealthy ancestors. Henry's mother, Cynthia, has a reputation for talking a lot, which is fine by his father, John, who is a bit hard of hearing. The parents move briefly to a nearby town and then to Boston, but they still have trouble making a living. Years later Henry remembers other, richer children making fun of his pathetic wooden sled. The family moves back to Concord when Henry is six years old and Henry's father starts a pencil making business which improves the family's income a little bit. He is even able to take both his sons into the business with him when they are old enough.

To help make ends meet, Cynthia rents rooms to people, many of them relatives. Henry's uncle Charlie does all kinds of delightful tricks for the boys, such as running up a 12 foot ladder, balanced on its tip, and then running down the other side before it can fall.

Henry loves his aunt Mary Emerson, a nice woman with a sharp, sarcastic wit, and he also likes to listen to the stories told by traveling salespeople called "peddlers."

Thoreau spends large part of his day caring for the family farm animals. He takes great joy in watching the family's many cats at play. He is also a talented young fisherman who stands barefoot in the water of the Concord River and fishes until he catches

enough sunfish or pickerel for the family dinner. This is very helpful because during this era in history, the people like the Thoreau family who live near the Atlantic Ocean struggle economically. They are a tough group who have survived The Pequot War, King Philip's War, battles against the French, the American Revolution and the War of 1812, all the while working hard to grow their food in the stony soil near the sea. Concord farmers are a little more fortunate than their neighbors because their land is slightly more fertile. Additionally, the first European settlers who come to Concord make peace with the local Native Americans in order to get the land for their crops instead of fighting with them. The word Concord means friendly, harmonious relationships.

On April 19, 1775 that harmony is shattered when The British Redcoats march into town to take over. A group of farmers called the Minute Men rush out and fight them back.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, a famous poet who will become Thoreau's best friend and champion, writes a poem about this important Minute Man episode containing the famous line "Here once the embattled farmers stood, and fired the shot heard round the world." Many times in his youth, Thoreau walks past the place where "the shot" was fired.

The only strangers who come to this town of a couple of thousand people are travelers called teamsters who transport goods in wagons and sometimes stop in Concord to drink or refresh themselves. The community is small. There is a church, a few businesses, a bell for calling people to action, some cannon, and a fire engine.

Thoreau's parents are respected in town, but not busy with fancy social engagements. This means Henry has lots of free time to wander around climbing trees, looking for arrowheads in the woods, hiking, fishing and especially reading. He isn't the top student in school, but even at a young age he does love to write about nature, a hint of his passion later in life. As an adult he remembers the yearly fall cattle fair when many cows and bulls are brought to town for sale. He remembers thinking that the diverse and interesting people who come to buy cattle remind him of leaves blown into the city.

As he grows older, Henry learns interesting new ideas at lectures given at a meeting called a "Lyceum." His parents hope he will go to Harvard like so many of the respected lecturers, so they send him to a school that will prepare him for Harvard, the Concord Academy. At this school he learns to love reading Latin and Greek.

The author Sterling North believes that everything Henry David Thoreau is to become begins in his youth. His love of the sea, his near worship of the Native Americans and his close family connections create a balance between fondness of adventure and delight in staying home that will be reflected in his writings and the way he lives his life. North clearly hopes to grab the interest of his young readers by showing what they may have in common with the grade school aged Thoreau.

Because Thoreau comes from a hard-working poor family that is respected by the community, he learns to appreciate the simple pleasures of life and yet to live a bit outside the hustle and bustle of fast-paced society. He becomes a keen observer and

even a critic of people, like a strange wild animal circling around a small town watching the curious behavior of the people in it.

The selection of details about Concord shows that it is a city caught between the early primitive world and the quickly developing industrial world. Thoreau lives at a time when the tough farmers are rejecting the struggle with nature and rapidly embracing a more comfortable but possibly less fulfilling lifestyle.

Chapter 2, Harvard and After

Chapter 2, Harvard and After Summary and Analysis

Henry David Thoreau starts school at Harvard in September of 1833 with a feeling that he is not quite as educated as others in his freshman class. He is embarrassed about his homemade clothing, his country habits, and the fact that he doesn't have much money to spend on luxuries and extras. In addition, he is a shy young man, and not nearly as confident as more privileged students.

No one can be certain if he enjoys the picturesque university because he does not comment on it. This seems to surprise the author because he mentions many other famous writers who have been mightily impressed by the quaint school, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

To pay for his schooling, Thoreau makes pencils and picks wild berries during the off season and relatives contribute what they can. Ralph Waldo Emerson hears of the young Thoreau and urges the school to offer him money to help with his studies. Thoreau stretches the grant that Harvard gives him by eating at a community table, sharing a room and not buying any new clothes, although sometimes at church he looks unsophisticated and out of place.

The other Harvard boys have a wonderful time socializing at traditional dinner parties, but Henry keeps to himself and concentrates on math, and languages. He does fairly well in school, but he is no A student, possibly because he's so often daydreaming of traveling to exotic lands. Although he's not fond of cities, he takes short trips to Boston to see the wharfs where his grandfather made a small fortune acting as a sort of pirate during the revolutionary war. Henry loves the sea and enjoys imagining his Viking ancestors as he walks along the harbor, absorbing the sights and sounds of cargo being unloaded from far away ports like China and India.

Of course, he cannot afford to travel to any place so distant, but can and does check books out from the Harvard library that take him on journies of the mind to such countries. He learns about rough and brave heroes of the Trojan War, Columbus and Marco Polo and their amazing adventures. Other students scoff at Henry for walking around with his eyes downcast. They do not understand that he is lost in thought and carefully noting the beauty of nature.

Thoreau goes camping with a friend, becomes ill and takes some time off from his studies. During this difficult period he discovers a book written by Ralph Waldo Emerson entitled "Nature." "Nature" urges readers to become inspired by the living world around them and become brave enough to control their own destiny. This kind of thinking excites Thoreau so much that he mentions the book in his class graduation speech. In fact, he says Emerson's ideas are just a starting point and suggests that people should

spend most of their time in nature and only work one hour a week. The author, North, laughs off this idea.

Upon graduation Thoreau refuses to accept his sheepskin diploma because he feels sheep should keep their own skin. After college, he spends more time in nature, writing poems and thinking about his future.

Because his studies have been very general, Thoreau is not prepared for life as a lawyer, doctor or clergyman, and he's not very interested in the one job that he is suited for, teaching school. During this era in history, teachers are expected to hit their students frequently, and Thoreau thinks this is wrong. When he finally does land a job as a teacher he quits after his boss, the Deacon, insists he whip a pupil. (That pupil dislikes Thoreau for the rest of his life.)

Now, nobody will hire him. Thoreau wishes he could become a soldier or whaler or trader in China, but has no way to achieve his dreams. At last he starts his own school, with his beloved brother, John. Twenty-five children are sent to the young Thoreaus, and these students behave admirably without physical punishment of any kind. The students get to go out exploring nature with the brothers in their boat, and on these trips they learn about the habits and knowledge of the Native Americans who used to live around Concord. They become so good at guessing where Native Americans might have made their camps that one student recalls digging down and finding remains of the campsite just where Henry predicts it will be. Many parents are amazed that this "radical" method of teaching without whipping works, and they send their children to the Thoreaus' school.

Ralph Waldo Emerson and his wife Lidian are already acquainted with Henry David Thoreau from Harvard, so they begin inviting him over to their house for dinner. This popular and prosperous couple often host brilliant contemporary thinkers of the time who discuss important new ideas. Among the frequent guests are Bronson Alcott, a philosopher, Margaret Fuller, an early feminist and Jones Very, a poet.

Henry David Thoreau is one of the youngest guests, but he's very sure of his opinions and he argues a great deal. He has a sharp nose, gray blue eyes and a restless wild quality, although he tries to dress and behave like his idol, Emerson. He keeps coming back to discuss important current thoughts, like the need for liberation for women and slaves, the rights of workers, rethinking history and learning about new religions. The word "Transcendentalists" is used to describe these thinkers who meet at Emerson's house, because transcend means to "rise above" and they discussed ideas that rose above the normal way of thinking.

Through all this, Henry is less concerned than the others about changing the thoughts or behavior of friends and strangers around him in the world. He believes he is only responsible for making himself a better person, and to do this, he begins writing a diary and keeping track of whatever new ideas occur to him. Most of these journals are a simple contemplation on the beauty and perfection of nature. These diaries stretch from

October in 1837 to November in 1861, about a year before he dies. The journals are his proudest achievement in life.

This chapter reveals Thoreau's early development as a pacifist, a loner and a rebel. It's not surprising that the poor country boy would reject the things he can't have, such as material wealth. What is perhaps more unusual is that his kind spirit prevents him from becoming jealous and raging against people who have more than he does. He embraces his simple, rugged life of poverty and looks for reasons to love the world as it is. His rebellion against society comes in quieter ways, such as refusing the diploma because the sheep should keep it's own skin. To put this in perspective, there are very few vegetarians at the time in America. The thought that a sheep should keep his own skin is terrifically novel and even strange and surprising enough to make others around him uncomfortable and perhaps wake them up to the possibility that animals have feelings too.

North chooses to contrast Thoreau's love of nature with his love of the library because he wants to show us that Henry is more than a man obsessed with plants and animals. Many other men of the time walk around classifying creatures and insects, but Thoreau is also thrilled and fascinated by classic writings by ancient Greeks, Romans and others. Clearly, he's trying to understand what has made humans happy over the centuries and how we fit into the grander scheme of nature.

In this chapter North mentions that the young Thoreau is argumentative, but he never quotes any of the negative or disagreeable comments made by his hero. It's seems North wants to be sure his readers will come away with a warm, positive impression of Thoreau rather than seeing him as an angry or hostile person.

Chapter 3, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers

Chapter 3, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers Summary and Analysis

John and Henry build a very efficient boat in 1839. It's shaped like a fishing boat, but also has the ability to sail, so the two men say it is "half fish half bird." They name the craft "Musketaquid," a word which means "river in the meadow" in the local Native American language.

John and Henry have a wonderful time exploring the river with this boat and soon use it to impress a spunky young lady named Ellen Sewall. Ellen has come to stay with her aunt at the Thoreaus' home, and all three go sailing frequently. Both brothers fall in love with Ellen, but because John is older, Henry steps aside and lets John court her.

This love triangle doesn't seem to get in the way of the brother's deep affection for one another. They plan a difficult adventure downstream which Thoreau later describes in a book he writes, "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers."

First, they push their boat out through the rushes on the Concord River, wave goodbye to everyone who's come to see them off and move away from their village. The water is slow and lovely, filled with fish and sleepy turtles. They float under Carlisle Bridge and sail slowly past many meadows and pastures. That night they camp around a fire, appreciating the stars and night sounds. At one point they have to chase off a muskrat who tries to steal their food supplies. The only interruption in the calm night is the sound of a far off fire alarm.

The next day, Sunday, they listen to the sound of bells calling people to church mingled with the call of birds and the croak of frogs. On this beautiful Sunday, Henry writes a poetic tribute to his beloved Ellen in his journal. When the brothers reach a waterfall the only way to continue is to take a canal through the locks down through to the Merrimack River. Once on the river, they must row hard upstream against the current to follow the traditional Native American route they want to take.

As they go, Henry and John tell one another stories of early settlers, like that of Hannah Dustin and the bloody incident in which her baby is killed by Indians. She is kidnapped, but when the natives go to sleep, she kills them all and escapes. She and another kidnap victim bring home Indian scalps as proof of their fight.

For a few more days the Thoreaus go down rapids and falls past saw mills, water wheels and barge men, swimming, rowing, fishing and sailing day in and day out. Finally, they turn around and head the opposite direction.

On Thursday the cold sets in. The men enjoy the way the cold breeze pushes the boat along at a fast clip, past orchards on the way back to the Concord River. Once they reach the lock, the man who tends it lets them back onto the Concord River where the warmer weather and placid water gives them renewed joy. They row quietly looking at a beautiful blue heron flying above them.

Home again, they both long to see Ellen. Henry writes sad poems to her, but when summer comes and she returns for vacation, he steps aside and lets John ask for her hand in marriage. At first she says "Yes" but changes her mind, possibly because her family objects to her marriage to this strange, socially unacceptable Thoreau boy. Now Henry writes a shy, indirect proposal letter to Ellen, but she also turns him down, marries someone else and settles in to raise a family.

A little later John becomes ill, possibly with TB, and Henry decides he doesn't want to continue running the school and closes its doors. Less than a year later John gets lockjaw from cutting his hand on a rusty nail, and dies horribly. Henry is heartbroken and writes a poem to his brother. He then sells the boat they built together. The man who buys the boat is the soon-to-be famous author, Nathanial Hawthorne.

It may be hard to understand how a short boat ride down a nearby river could be a great adventure in any man's life, but this chapter seeks to show how it is possible. The curious mind of Henry David Thoreau leads him to see and hear familiar sights and sounds from a new perspective and to gain new appreciation for them. For example, one normally hears the church bells as a loud call to meeting. From his vantage point on the boat, far away from the human hustle and bustle, the peel of the bells becomes softer and more pleasant, no more or less important than the call of birds. This passage points out that we too are part of the natural scheme of things. As the brothers move away from the works of humankind, their campfire stories become more fierce and primitive. It is as if they are moving backward in time and becoming more like the early frontier settlers or even primitive man.

In some ways, their trip resembles a small, safe version of "The Odyssey," part of the Trojan War story Henry reads. In "The Odyssey," a smart Greek hero meets many strange and wonderful challenges and outmaneuvers many hazards as he returns home from his adventures at Troy.

The generous and calm spirit of Thoreau comes through in this chapter. He holds no grudge against his brother for pursuing the woman he loves. He never becomes discouraged or angry when the weather turns brisk and uncomfortable. Instead he takes change as it comes and tries to live every moment to the fullest.

Another theme in this section is Yankee ingenuity. The brothers build a boat with the best old world features combined in a new and effective way. As they travel, they see the results of American hard work and science, including tidy farms, productive fields and a series of useful locks.

North ends the chapter with John's death in order to illustrate Henry's tragic nobility. Henry deeply loves his brother and writes a beautiful tribute to him. North implies that John's death is one more thing that will drive Thoreau toward a life of quiet, isolated contemplation.

Chapter 4, Handy Man and Private Tutor

Chapter 4, Handy Man and Private Tutor Summary and Analysis

Henry seems to be at loose ends after John dies. He builds fences for people, helps others garden, makes pencils with his father, drives horses and does surveying. Emerson admires his friend's manly and scholarly ways and invites Henry to stay at his home tutoring the children and doing odd jobs around the house while he is away on lecture tours.

Emerson's wife Lidian suffers from a lingering illness, and really appreciates having someone around who is competent in emergencies. It's a great arrangement for Thoreau, too, because he receives free room and board and can spend as much time as he likes roaming the woods and writing about what he sees.

Many other interesting people come stay at Emerson's home during this time, including

Margaret Fuller who edits the magazine that eventually publishes Thoreau's first poem. Nathaniel Hawthorn is also a frequent guest. He "borrows" Henry to help him with the garden near his mansion. Watching the care and dedication Thoreau takes with his work, Hawthorn muses that Henry cares so deeply for nature that the plants and animals around him love and protect him as one of their own.

Hawthorn, Emerson and Thoreau spend a great deal of time at healthy play. When they ice skate together, the others marvel at Thoreau's natural athleticism. This comfortable life goes on for two years, but then wise old Emerson thinks it would be best for Thoreau to go out and apply himself more directly to becoming a writer.

So, Henry sets off for New York with lots of recommendations and letters of endorsement from his famous friends in hand, but from the very first hates the city. He simply cannot understand why anyone would prefer mobs, crowds, pavement and Wall Street to the silence of the woods. To support himself in New York he takes up a job tutoring Emerson's brother's children part-time. This provides him extensive free time to pursue publishers, but he makes no headway. Publishers simply don't seem to understand his writings. He hates the filth, the crowds, the fancy clothing worn by city women, the noise and gangs of New York. He writes to Lidian Emerson about the dark side of the city with violence, drunkenness, disease and filth, saying that the pigs are the best quality citizens in the place. Without much money in his pocket, he can't afford to visit museums and isn't invited to the fancy mansions around him. Horace Greeley who publishes a paper called the "Tribune" offers to help Thoreau sell his work if he will only behave more civilly to others. Thoreau has a hard time pretending affection or respect for anyone, even people who can help him publish a book. He is a solitary sort who makes emotional connections with individuals one at a time. Miserable and alone in a vast crowd, the only things he really enjoys during this period are going to Staten

Island to watch boats come in and visiting the library. Finally in November he gives up and goes home to spend Thanksgiving with his family and friends.

One of the strangest things about this book is how little North explains the ideas and values of transcendentalism hotly debated by Thoreau and his friends at Emerson's house.

Is this because North does not want to distract from the personality profile of Thoreau? Because he is afraid he will make Thoreau look grouchy and negative? Perhaps he finds these ideas strange and unacceptable. In an earlier chapter North ridicules Thoreau's notion that people should work only on hour per day, warning that society would fall apart if everyone were to adopt this method. It is likely that the author feels that transcendentalism is interesting mental exercise but not as important or as appealing as Thoreau's love of nature. We may suppose that North's own mid 20th century values influence what he does and does not include in this book about his hero.

We are told that Thoreau argues with guests, but we don't know why or with whom. Whatever the situation, many of his contemporaries clearly love him because when he leaves for town they give him recommendations. The subtext, or hidden idea, North is hinting at throughout this chapter is that Thoreau has a kind of magic that charms humans and animals alike. Although the book is set in a time before electric lights and indoor plumbing, the rest of society feels disconnected from the natural world. Friends of Thoreau remark time and time again about how mysteriously connected to that natural world Thoreau seems. Those who get to know him admire him for this.

This chapter reflects Thoreau's view that New York society is too wrapped up in its own fast-paced and blind ambition to recognize his writing. They cannot look past his rough manners and shabby clothes to imagine he has something readers are yearning for. Thoreau sees the harsh, disappointing behavior of people living poor and desperate in crowded cities as something below the existence of animals meant for slaughter. This is why he compares them to pigs. The description he gives of the streets of New York is that of a wilderness far more hostile than any jungle or forest.

Chapter 5, Walden Pond

Chapter 5, Walden Pond Summary and Analysis

Walden Pond is a deep and mostly unspoiled body of water near Concord. Thoreau has always loved it, so one day decides to build a cabin on the shore and see how simply and naturally he can live.

In March of 1845, he picks a spot and begins to cut down white pine trees for the walls. He writes in his journal of the fog and snow melting away and the lovely birdsongs penetrating the morning mist. He explains in detail how he cuts the logs to interlock for walls and how he sits down and eats a simple lunch of bread and butter while enjoying the smell of the pines. Work on the cabin goes on for weeks. He transforms a woodchuck burrow into the start of his cellar, and invites some hard-working friends over to help him set up the frame of the house. Later he nails some cheap boards to the sides of the new house, and then proudly calculates that his new home cost him a total of $28.12. He settles in to live a life of complete simplicity.

The only things he owns at the time are some pans and forks, a spade, wheelbarrow, oil lamp, books, paper, 3 chairs and fishing gear. For dinner he eats garden vegetables, berries, rice and corn cakes. He doesn't bother to fill in the cracks between the logs during the summer because he likes the breeze and the smell of fresh cut pine and the view he gets through these cracks at dawn. In this very simple new life he feels much more cozy and less lonely than he did in the city. He scribbles away daily at his journal, writing about his friends who drop by, the birds, the progress of his garden bean patch, and local animals.

The experience proves what he has always believed; that so many people work back breaking hours for luxuries they don't really want or need. It may sound as if he is lounging during these years, but in fact he's constantly active, growing or collecting his food, getting firewood, studying several languages, thinking deeply and writing his journal and books. Even with all this activity, he has a great deal of time to sit in the sun on the porch and contemplate life.

Thoreau makes detailed notes about the change of seasons, but he also appreciates some manmade works. He likes hearing the sound of the wind going through telegraph wires, or the train whistle at night. To amuse himself, he plays his flute. He tries to phonetically describe the sounds of birds. He imagines himself the last man in the world, but does not feel lonely for it.

When woodchoppers, children, poets or philosophers stop by his cabin on the lake, he's happy to talk to them one-on-one. One day he bravely helps a runaway slave make it to freedom! Thoreau does not like it when worldly, sophisticated or judgmental people come nosing around his cabin. He prefers the company of the hardworking villagers. Shy as he is, Thoreau begins to make frequent stops in town to get a little bit of gossip

and to watch the behavior of people up close, the same way he might watch a colony of prairie dogs.

The Emersons still invite their young friend to dinner. Usually he stays late and walks home in total darkness finding his way his way through the dark woods with ease like a cat. One morning a woodchuck gets into his bean field and eats the crops that Thoreau has meant to sell for cash. He kills the woodchuck, but later he feels sorry he's done this because he realizes the creature had as much right to nature's bounty as he does. In the end this bean field only produces around nine dollars in profit, but this is enough for Henry. In fact, he's rather proud of his success.

Thoreau's description of Walden Pond in autumn paints it as a deep, green lake with a mirror-like surface full of haunting beauty. With winter coming on, he talks about how the colors of autumn are replaced by darker, somber colors. He knows its time to plaster his walls to keep out the winter chill.

Once the walls are plastered, winter hits with a deep frost. Cozy in his cabin, Thoreau enjoys sitting next to the fire hearing owls and geese outside. In December, he wakes one day to a frost and a completely frozen lake. He goes outside to skate and delights in watching how each frozen bubble turns into a magnifying glass that melts holes around itself when hit by the sun. Because Thoreau enjoys chipping into the ice to get drinking water, he decides to cut holes all over the pond and measure its depth. He's amazed to find that the pond is over a hundred feet deep at one point.

Because few visitors come to him in the winter, he spends more time talking to squirrels, birds and a little mouse that isn't afraid to climb all over him. When the ice cracks at night with a booming sound, Thoreau compares the lake to a man restless in his bed. All in all, the cheerful sting of cold on his cheeks, brisk walks and comfy nights by the fire make him very happy. On many occasions he tromps out to visit ice fishermen and is amazed at the lovely colors of the fish they catch. When men come to cut large, clear pieces of ice to send off to India and China, Thoreau thinks how wonderful it is that the eastern religions have helped him accept life, and now the messages of the beauty of nature will go back to India and China in the form of ice cubes.

When Spring arrives, Thoreau feels so free that he wonders how jailers can bear to keep their prisoners inside in the springtime. Thoreau spends another wonderful year at Walden Pond, but then decides there is still much more he must learn about living in the ordinary world, so he abandons his cabin. He has no regrets about the months he has spent in the woods but instead feels lucky that unlike other people, he has taken the time to look at the wonders of nature around him. His notes from this experience form the basis of his most well-respected book, "Walden, Or Life in the Woods."

Several themes run through this chapter and through the book, "Walden, Or Life in the Woods." These themes include the true difference between wealth and poverty, awe for the forces of nature, the real meaning of neighborliness and the idea that self-sufficiency breeds security.

Thoreau claims that giving up material things makes him feel rich. Nature offers all he needs to survive, and discarding the desire to buy unnecessary things awakens him to the wealth around him.

His detailed and beautiful descriptions of the environment and its seasonal changes convey his sense of reverence for the forces of nature. In "Walden, Or Life in the Woods," this shy man finally reveals his need to visit people in the village, to exchange news with them and to appreciate those who come help him build his house. Thoreau also redefines neighbors to include all the forest creatures he observes. Thoreau's sense of fair play and respect for these animals is revealed when he translates the sounds made by birds into human-sounding syllables written on a page, and when he feels sorry for the woodchuck that he kills.

As a person who knows how to be totally self-sufficient, he's eager to share how hard work can lead to a deep sense of security. He describes how safe he feels sitting by his fire with wood he has chopped just outside.

There is a youthful joy in this chapter. It is as if Thoreau has built a wonderful playhouse and he's asking every man, woman and creature to come play with him in it.

Chapter 6 Under Thoreau's Hat

Chapter 6 Under Thoreau's Hat Summary and Analysis

No publisher is interested in Thoreau's writing, but he must make a living. Luckily, once again, Emerson offers him a job taking care of the children while he is off on a lecture tour of England. Thoreau helps Lidian through her bouts of illness, and he helps Bronson Alcott build a laughably weird summer house in the Emerson garden.

He's happy taking care of Emerson's orchard, his children and Lidian, whom he thinks of as an older sister. When little Emerson's child Eddy asks if Thoreau will become his father, Henry tells Emerson it's time to come home. Thoreau moves home with his own parents and begins a job as a surveyor. It's a good job for him because it allows him to get up early and go tromping around the countryside. Every night he goes home to work on his journals.

Because Thoreau is finding it impossible to impress a publisher, he invests his own money in printing "A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers" at this time. Few buy the book, and Thoreau has to work doubly hard selling pencils to make back the money he has spent. His second book "Walden, Or Life in the Woods" about the years he lived on the pond is finally published by Ticnor and Fields in 1854.

Sales didn't pick up right away, so no second edition is published. In fact, he is long dead before people realize it as a classic of American literature. Another author, named Ellery Channing, describes Thoreau at this time as a thin, leggy active man with intense energy, and piercing eyes, walking around the woods collecting plants, spotting birds and taking notes.

On his many hikes, Thoreau wears a big hat that he uses to collect anything especially interesting. He takes such detailed notes about what he sees that he claims he could wake up anywhere in Concord, at any time, and tell you what day it was, based on which flowers and plants are blooming.

North writes this short chapter to help readers understand what it would feel like to walk with his hero. He gives a mythic quality to Thoreau by showing the man through the perspective of another admirer, instead of recording what Thoreau is thinking at this time.

It is as if Thoreau has finally become the mythical Native American guide that he has always admired. North shows how ironic it is that this man, so knowledgeable about every tiny woodland detail, fails to impress publishers with his nature writing.

Thoreau uses a large, battered hat to collect specimens. The hat is a symbol of his great intelligence. Others may look at Thoreau as a crazy man too poor to buy a better hat, but underneath that hat is a huge brain.

Chapter 7, The Maine Woods

Chapter 7, The Maine Woods Summary and Analysis

Although Thoreau suffers homesickness when he is in large cities, he does like to travel and even to visit with people. Over the years he goes backpacking or surveying across New England, Minnesota, Cape Cod and Canada. The Concord region by this time is relatively urban. Big predators like cougar and large mammals like moose have disappeared from the woods, and he badly wishes to see these interesting animals, so in 1853 he goes on a boat and hiking trip through Maine, where unspoiled wilderness can still be found. On the first trip a guide and boatman named Uncle George McCauslin shows Thoreau and others in the group how to use long iron-tipped poles to get around rapids. They have to carry the boat around other rough water. Among the amazing sights he sees are predatory birds (eagles and hawks) and trout that practically tumble out of a stream so fast one man can catch them with his bare hands. Thoreau sees dreamy images of fish streaking by in the moonlight and amazing quantities of wild berries everywhere.

Henry makes two more trips to Maine with another white man and a Native American guide. This gives Thoreau a chance to gain firsthand knowledge of the woods from a real Native American. He learns how to use birch bark to make, torches, pipes, dishes, paper and even a wonderful canoe. He is disappointed on the1853 trip when his companions insist on killing a moose. Thoreau doesn't care for hunting, and although he finds the tracking process interesting and exciting, he is heartbroken when the team shoots a mother moose and her big calf. All they take from these beautiful horse-like animals is the skin, the tongue and a bit of meat. To Thoreau it seems that most people go into nature for low and mean reasons, only to kill or deforest it.

This chapter is devoted to sharing the wonders of primitive, unspoiled America with readers. North is following Thoreau's advice and attempting to awakw his young readers to the world's beauty. North focuses less on Thoreau the man and more on what Thoreau sees so that readers can come to view the world through the woodsman's eyes.

When this book is written, and when Thoreau writes his journals, the concept of opposing hunting is strange and radical. North is choosing details of Thoreau's life that will surprise his readers and get them thinking in new ways.

Chapter 8, To Make a Better World

Chapter 8, To Make a Better World Summary and Analysis

This is a flashback chapter. One day while Thoreau is still living at Walden Pond, he goes into town to have a shoe repaired and is thrown in jail by his friend Sam Staples. This jailkeeper has to arrest Henry because he has refused to pay a tax. He refuses because he fears that some of his money will go toward fighting the Mexican American War. Like Abraham Lincoln, Thoreau sees no reason to fight the Mexicans and is afraid new Mexican land will become slave territory.

Emerson comes to visit him in jail and asks, "Henry, why are you there?" And Henry answers, "Waldo, why are you not here?"

An unidentified woman wearing a veil comes and pays the tax Henry owes, but once he's free he writes and article called "Civil Disobedience" which champions the idea that small government is best.

As he gets older Thoreau starts to learn to cooperate better with others on social causes. A famous phrase he writes at this time is "the mass of men live lives of quiet desperation." The line means that Thoreau believes that the drive for material goods is part of the reason for human sadness. Still, Thoreau understands that people need some basic necessities to live. He begins to pity those who are so poor as to be cold or hungry. For example, he buys a coat and warm shoes for a little boy.

Thoreau works in many ways to improve the lives of people around him. He begins to give lectures at the Lyceum where he used to hear lectures as a child, and as a surveyor he continues to help farmers and others plan their land and fight unfair usage of the river water.

After "Walden, Or Life in the Woods" is published, local people begin to understand and care about Thoreau. He starts to feel closer to many of his neighbors, too. His favorite people include an old farmer named Minott, who refuses to die until he sees the spring again, and the hardworking Irish immigrants, especially the little Irish boys who only think they are in control of the family horse. (In fact, the horse is taking care of them.) He writes about pleasant walks with intelligent friends like Ellery Channing and the sharp wit of Aunt Mary Emerson, the famous naturalist Louis Agassiz and the fine British author, Henry James. Thoreau even meets wild John Brown who is one of the people who will help touch off the civil war with his violent protest against slavery.

Long before other people have started to think about nature reserves, Thoreau suggests that every town should keep some wild space free of buildings. The author says that slowly people have come to see that Thoreau is one of our "wisest prophets."

Here North wants to summarize the many political actions and thoughts which have helped to make Thoreau famous. Up until this point in the book, he has been painting a picture of Thoreau as a loner who loves nature and accepts the world as it is. Now he explains why Thoreau seeks to change the world.

North's answer is that Henry begins to soften toward people at this point in his life because they have come to understand him better. He indicates that Thoreau has grown wiser, not more stubborn or opinionated.

Instead of explaining the theories about poverty, slavery and civil disobedience that Thoreau writes about, North describes his political behavior in terms of individual acts of kindness: a friendly exchange with a kind jailer, a gift of shoes to a child, long talks with important thinkers.

Thoreau of Walden Pond is written before many 20th century political leaders were born. Many of these leaders use Thoreau's philosophy to help them win civil rights struggles. Of course, North has no way of knowing about any of this writing in 1959.

Chapter 9, The Autumn Years

Chapter 9, The Autumn Years Summary and Analysis

Thoreau has developed a process for grinding the graphite in pencils to a very fine quality. This process could make him rich, but he never focuses on making big profits. He spends hours in the family pencil shop, especially after his father dies, and is a good manager, but the graphite begins hurting his lungs. Over and over he climbs Mount Monadnock to clear his congestion and breathe the fresh air. He continues to wear himself down by sleeping in the cold night air and walking around in the chilly rain.

In December of 1860, Henry takes a walk to count tree rings and catches bronchitis. The medicine of the day is useless, so he goes to Minnesota for his health, but it does no good. His last journal entry is on November 3, 1861. Finally he collapses and is brought home to a simple bed where, dying, he continues to work on his magazine articles. He manages to write a few very good essays, including "Walking," "Autumnal Tints," about fall colors, and "Wild Apples."

The man who once put him in jail for refusing to pay a tax comes to visit him Henry on his deathbed, and remembers having one of the best conversations of his life with Thoreau. On May 6, 1862, Thoreau asks to be propped up so he can see out the window, and he dies quietly and probably painlessly. He is 44, and he passes without expressing any opinion about the after-life.

Emerson gives the funeral speech, calling it a privilege to have taken a walk with Thoreau. Louisa Alcott writes a beautiful poetic tribute to him, and the Emersons are buried next to Thoreau in the Sleepy Hollow Cemetery upon their death.

The two main themes of this chapter are tragic irony and heroic dignity. A writer is killed by making pencils, a writing implement. A nature lover dies because he spends too much time in the wilderness. These are real-life ironic twists that North points out.

However, the tone of this chapter is not altogether sad. North emphasizes the fact that Henry David Thoreau keeps writing about things he loves up until the very end. He does not seem worried about death, he never expresses regret for any part of his life, and friends come to see him on his death bed. This kind of dedication to his beliefs and to the craft of writing is heroic.

North mentions that Thoreau dies painlessly to point out that nature, in the end, is kind to its special child.

Chapter 10, The Walden Calendar

Chapter 10, The Walden Calendar Summary and Analysis

The final chapter of this book is a collection of famous quotes by Thoreau. Mr. North feels that the best way to understand Henry is to read excerpts from "Walden, Or Life in the Woods" presented in order that they were written: spring, summer, fall and winter.

The first quote is about how Thoreau has lost a horse, a dog and a bird. He asks people to look out for these pets and a few people are always on the lookout for these animals as if they had lost them themselves.

The next quote is about the day Thoreau goes down to the wood by the pond and begins his cabin. He talks about the early birds and ice which is just thawing out. He says "the winter of man's discontent was thawing," a twist on a famous line by Shakespeare.

Henry goes on to talk about his progress in April. His house frame is up, and he has dug the root cellar where he will put his root vegetables to prevent rotting or freezing. He brags that the digging took only about two hours. He says the animals help him build his home.

He moves into his home on the 4th of July, having made a fireplace and chimney out of river stones. He hasn't bothered about curtains because nobody looks in but the moon and sun. All types of birds are everywhere, including thrush, the very scarlet tanager, sparrow and whip-poor-will. Thoreau looks out at the hills and pond through an area that has been cut down.

Each morning Thoreau says he gets up early and worships Dawn like the ancient Greeks by taking a dip in the lake. He finds this one of the best things ever.

"Time is but the stream I go a fishing in," he famously says. Thoreau continues that his own life and time move on but, like a beautiful streambed, eternity and the stars remain.

Thoreau muses that the written word is like a precious discovery of an ancient artifact.

He talks about how much he loves his free, solitary time and says he's glad he is not a slave to time clocks. He doesn't mind that the others think him lazy or crazy.

He also enjoys doing his housework. This s a very simple matter with a wood floor. He throws sand and water on the wood and scrubs it until it's clean.

During the summer he watches hawks circling, listens to the sound of trains and frogs and watches minks and reed birds slip in and out of the bushes around the water.

He compares the sound of the evening calls of Whip-poor-wills to priests singing evening mass. He describes the owls as sounding like mourning women and the frogs like drinking men singing.

The tiniest animals of the woods come to trust Thoreau so much that a mouse climbs over his shoes, a partridge brings her chicks as close as a tame chicken might.

Autumn memories include the sound of the loon laughing like a crazy person. Thoreau tries to follow the loon in his boat, but the bird dives under the water and bobs back up elsewhere. It's a game he plays with the bird all day long.

Sometimes in autumn he picks grapes just because they are beautiful and fragrant. He doesn't take many of the wild cranberries, because he objects to the way the farmers destroy the bushes just to get a few cents from selling the berries. He gets excited picking a few wild apples and chestnuts. Henry is stunned by the beauty of the maples turning red and the thousands of wasps that come to his door.

Winter hits just as he is finished with his plastering. It is as if the wind has waited for him. The far-off honk of the geese migrating to Mexico penetrates his warm cabin. He records the first freeze of the year. When the pond completely freezes over, he lies on his stomach and looks deep into the pool.

During the bitterest winter storms he huddles in his home, tying to keep his spirits up. He only goes out for a few hours at a time to collect fire wood, and yet he imagines his life must be so much more interesting than that of an ordinary man's.

Thoreau does not complain about his hard life. He claims that the wood he chops has warmed him twice, once while he is splitting it, and once while it is burning. Although they are eating his potatoes, the famous woodsman shows sympathy for some moles who have nested in his root cellar. He talks about happy evenings all alone in his cabin and the fun of walking out during the day to look at a favorite tree. The foxes bark like little dogs and the squirrels wake him up in the morning searching for food. He throws some corn out and watches as all the squirrels and jays dive for the goodies. Chickadees actually land on the wood he's carrying to pick through it for bugs.

Spring comes at last, and now the squirrels are so unafraid of Henry that they climb under his house and make strange noises. Even when he stomps his foot they won't go away. He compares new grass to green flames shooting up, and he carefully lists the bird songs of sparrows, pretending this song is helping to break up the ice on the pond.

Spring seems to Thoreau like the sun that first created the world. The flight of a hawk, the jewel colors of fish and the sunlight seem to prove that immortality exists.

The author ends the book talking about how Thoreau's many fans best remember him as the man playing his flute by moonlight near Walden Pond, and each year they come to the lake to pay tribute to this great man.

North might have sprinkled these quotes throughout the book, but he chooses not to.

Instead, North has structured this book to place actual quotes at the end so that his young readers will better understand them. By this time he has fully explained to his audience how and why Thoreau came to the pond in the first place.

North has saved the best for last. Thoreau's language is smooth and fairly simple, but much more beautiful and poetic than North's. Although some of the phrases are old fashioned, the straightforward style feels surprisingly modern.

Each quote is selected to emphasize a point North has already made about his hero. Fears and complaints are not present, although the actual book "Walden, Or Life in the Woods" is packed with criticisms and worries. This chapter is meant to inspire readers to learn more about Thoreau. The included quotes add up to a picture of Thoreau as a warm-hearted, hardworking, forgiving, playful and kindly child of nature.

Characters

Henry David Thoreau

Ralph Waldo Emerson

John Thoreau

Ellen Sewall

Nathaniel Hawthorne

The Transcendentalists, Thoreau's Family, Villagers

Objects/Places

Walden Pond

The famous setting for the book, "Walden, Or Life in the Woods" is deep, beautiful lake near Concord, Massachusetts. Even at the time of Thoreau's writing, many of the original pine and hardwood trees have already been cleared and much of the wildlife has been driven off by urbanization. The deer are gone, the water has been "fished out" and only a few water birds, such as the loon Thoreau mentions, have remained. Squirrel, woodchucks, mice and common birds still roam the woods, but these are animals that commonly coexist with humans. It's a relatively tame place. It is as if Henry David Thoreau has decided to build a house in a local park. This outrageous behavior helps to make the point that even in a modern world, nature goes on. We have a duty to nurture it and opportunities to enjoy it.

Concord

A medium-sized town on the eastern seaboard, this birthplace of Henry David Thoreau has long been known as a haven for independent thinkers and hardy farmers. The land is stony but slightly more fertile than surrounding farmland. Unlike their neighbors, the citizens of Concord have purchased their land in friendly negotiations with the Native Americans. This means they don't need to spend time fighting the "Indians" so they are able to focus on survival and building their little society. During the Revolutionary War, these independent and clever farmers organize volunteer fighters called "minute men" who beat back the better-trained British troops.

During Thoreau's lifetime the town is a picturesque and prosperous, self sufficient little berg. The town has all the basic necessitates, such as a blacksmith, a church, a jail, a large gun for defense, shops and a few businesses such as the Thoreau family pencil factory. Everybody knows everybody, and it is this kind of modest community Thoreau thinks is best.

Emerson's Home

Though not described in detail, Emerson's home must be fairly large and comfortable because he often invites people to stay with him for extended periods. There is enough "handyman" work on the grounds to keep Thoreau busy for many years. Gardening, working on the orchard and other 'fix it" projects are assigned to the young Thoreau. The brilliant thinkers who gather here tremendously influence Henry, and together they develop a radical new philosophy called "Transcendentalism."

The Concord and Merrimack Rivers

John and Henry Thoreau sail down these two connected rivers in a memorable trip on a boat which they make with their own hands. The Concord River is placid, with slow, predictable currents. It drifts past woodland meadows and picturesque, well-developed farm land. To cross into the Merrimack River, they must get around waterfalls by pulling their boat through manmade canals. The Merrimack River is swifter, and riddled with waterfalls which the young men cross with the help of locks, a series of cement chambers that can be filled with water to lift boats to a new river level.

The land and wildlife around both of these rivers is familiar to the men, but they are better able to focus on these during their short, free-spirited voyage. The notes Henry takes will become the basis of one of his books.

The Maine Woods

At this point in history, Maine is primarily still a wilderness area. Henry goes there hoping to spot large north American mammals such as moose, cougar panther, lynx, wolverine, wolf, bear, deer and beaver which are still plentiful in these woods. The terrain is rocky and mountainous, but a great variety of berries and medicinal plants cling to the land. Eagles and other predatory birds make their nests in pine forests and hunt for their dinner in streams burgeoning with fish.

Traveling with a real Native American guide teaches Thoreau a great deal about the real wilderness, including the fact that even the "Indians" he so admires can be greedy and cruel.

Harvard

Thoreau works hard to scrape up the funds to attend this university near Boston, but, once there, is unhappy. The college campus is graced by stately elms, white granite and brick colonial style buildings covered with ivy and one striking clock tower. North remarks that Henry has nothing to say about this pretty and peaceful campus, so it is impossible to know if he is impressed by his surroundings. Thoreau is an average student at Harvard, mostly a lonely outcast. He does love the college library, and enjoys stealing off to Boston harbor to watch boats sail into port.

New York City

On the verge of the industrial revolution, New York is crowded with immigrants who have come here to find jobs. The very wealthy live in luxury, while the poor live in filthy slums. Violence is rampant as the poor desperately struggle to escape their misery. Early factories are dangerous and workers have no rights to demand breaks or shorter work hours, safety procedures or fair pay. Thoreau simply can not understand why so

many people would leave farms and natural surroundings to live in New York. After staying in New York for a few months he comes to blame urban society and the struggle over material wealth for much of the unhappiness in human existence.

Setting

Born on July 12, 1817, Thoreau lived in one of the most intellectual communities of any era in American history, mid-nineteenth-century Concord, Massachusetts. He was friends with many of the authors and philosophers associated with the movement called New England transcendentalism, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bronson Alcott, William Ellery Charming, and Margaret Fuller.

Emerson, Thoreau's friend and mentor, is considered the father of New England transcendentalism, which championed nature over the city, the individual over the masses, and intuition over reason. Although Thoreau's literary philosophy is distinctly his own, it reflects the ideas of the transcendentalists. North emphasizes the influence of nature on Thoreau, describing the beauty and splendor of the region surrounding Concord, specifically Walden Pond. North also provides vivid descriptions of the Maine wilderness, where Thoreau developed into an ardent naturalist and conservationist.

Social Sensitivity

A few of North's remarks in the book seem directed exclusively to young males, but this does not occur so frequently that readers of both sexes cannot relate to Thoreau's life and philosophy. Thoreau was a man of great conscience who was deeply concerned with the ills that plagued the society of his day, and North objectively and thoroughly recounts his subject's responses to social problems, particularly Thoreau's involvement in the abolitionist movement. North portrays Thoreau's love of solitude not so much as antisocial behavior but as evidence of his strong bond with the natural world. Overall, readers should find a positive example in Thoreau's strong principles and abiding respect for the worth of the individual.

Literary Qualities

Perhaps the greatest literary value of Thoreau of Walden Pond is that it covers Thoreau's entire life. The biography does not concentrate on the circumstances surrounding the composition of Thoreau's greatest work, Walden, but instead devotes considerable space to Thoreau's journey up the Concord and Merrimack rivers, his Harvard education, and his journeys to the Maine wilderness toward the end of his relatively short life. Such an overview of Thoreau's life is vital to an understanding of his work, for Thoreau's personal beliefs and experiences have a particularly profound effect on his writing.

In Thoreau of Walden Pond, North incorporates lively, crisp prose and succinct paragraphs that make even relatively complex ideas or situations easy to grasp. To further liven the narrative, North makes frequent use of quotations from Walden, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, and Thoreau's fascinating journals.

The life and works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau's friend, occasional employer, and frequent philosophical model, play an important part in North's biography. From the prefatory poem to the excerpt from the transcendentalist's great funeral oration for his friend, simply entitled Thoreau," the biography takes great pains to depict the influence that Emerson has on Thoreau.

Themes

Better understanding nature leads to a deep sense of happiness.

In the prologue North urges readers to use Thoreau's writing to help them get in touch with nature because this will lead to lifelong happiness. The details he chooses about his hero's existence seem to bear out the idea that Thoreau finds such happiness. From childhood, Henry is always most at peace when he escapes the confines of society and flees to the woods on his little boat. The simple act of watching nature's creatures, such as playful kittens, fascinates young Henry for hours at a time. Later, the Thoreau brothers prove that taking children out of the classroom and into nature improves their behavior and attitude.

Eventually, on Walden Pond, Thoreau describes each sight, sound or event in nature carefully and thoughtfully. Then he explains how this experience directly and positively influences his feelings. Signs of spring make him feel free. Summer brings a lazy generosity that allows him to forgive a woodchuck who is "stealing" from him. Fall's beauty leaves him awestruck. And truly understanding the cycles of season helps Thoreau weather the terrible winter storms. He knows spring will return soon.

As the book progresses, Thoreau becomes more knowledgeable about nature and wiser as a person. As he wanders around the woods collecting specimens, he appears almost like a mystic eastern holy man, peaceful and self-assured.

In the end, the unnatural process of making pencils kills Thoreau. However, he is able to die peacefully and without a single word of concern about the afterlife because he can see nature through his bedroom window.

Individualism is good.

Thoreau spends most of his time alone. Obviously he must have a certain charm because he makes many life long friends, so his soliture is is not due to being disliked. It's clear that Thoreau chooses to behave in a way that isolates him. He stubbornly refuses to live like other people in crowded towns, struggling for material wealth, and this is what sets him apart.

The quality of Thoreau's writing is superb, so one must also conclude that publishers reject him because of the content of his work. They don't understand how articles about nature will appeal to their audience. Yet, Thoreau refuses to start writing on more popular topics. Even though this means he remains poor and obscure, he refuses to join the crowd and write about other things. He steadfastly continues to make nature notes until the day he dies.

Another brilliant example of his individuality is when Thoreau goes to jail over the issue of slavery. Building a cabin on Walden pond is also an act of extreme individualism. Odd as it may seem, Thoreau literally walks alone, usually through the woods with a hat full of feathers, rocks and plants. Having no desire for society's approval, he's free to concentrate on his powerful beliefs.

Perhaps this individualism comes from Thoreau's Concord upbringing. The settlers do the right thing by the Indians, even when their neighbors are fighting and attacking the Native people. Their struggle to cling to mediocre land and create an independent self-sufficient community shows a determined individualism that must have influenced him greatly.

Conservation is important.

In a general sense, "to conserve" means to avoid waste. Thoreau hates waste in all its forms.

He does not buy a fancy new coat when his old jacket still keeps him warm. He doesn't cut down trees to make boards when some second hand ones are available at a low price. Unlike his neighbors, he refuses to pick cranberries that he doesn't need just to sell them for a few dollars. Thoreau believes that the pursuit of social status symbols like fine carriages, gorgeous tableware, huge mansions and fancy clothes is a complete waste of human energy and natural resources. Chasing after these things makes some wealthy and bored while trapping others in the dark and uncomfortable world of urban slums.

More importantly Thoreau begins to see a wonderful economy, or lack of waste, in nature itself. The right balance of different plants and animals leads to a healthy forest where all have a chance to survive. When humans step in and take more than they need, every creature suffers. He often criticizes humans for foolishly destroying the environment and wasting resources, such as when he expresses outrage because his companions slaughter two moose but take only the tongue and a bit of meat. He calls for the creation of nationally protected wild places. Writing during the era of "the great white hunter" when most people see nothing wrong with "taming" the wilderness, Thoreau's ideas about conserving nature are revolutionary indeed.

Themes/Characters

North's biography of Henry David Thoreau concentrates on the theme of human interaction with nature and, as a corollary, on individualism. The book recounts Thoreau's quiet, pensive nature and his appreciation of the outdoors. Although he is a good student, Thoreau receives his real education from nature, which the transcendentalists called "the Academy of the Universe." North shows how Thoreau's individualism puts him closer to the natural world more than it pulls him away from society.

Ralph Waldo Emerson exerts a profound influence on Thoreau and his philosophy. Emerson, Concord's most prominent citizen, does more than just allow Thoreau to live on his land and become involved in the Concord Lyceum; he encourages and inspires young Thoreau to live a life of thrift and utility. North credits Thoreau's fascination with Emerson's Nature (1836) as the motivation behind the 1837 Harvard commencement address in which Thoreau proclaims that people should spend most of their days enjoying the "sublime revelations of nature."

Content to wander about the Concord countryside, Thoreau has few, if any, opportunities to develop intimate relationships besides the one that he maintains with Emerson; hence, few other characters appear in the book.

The tragic death of Thoreau's older brother John in 1842 seems to make him wary of establishing close relationships. But North mentions as minor characters some of the famous Concordians who admire Thoreau, among them Louisa May Alcott, Bronson Alcott, William Ellery Channing, and Margaret Fuller.

Style

Perspective

This tale is told from the point of view of an omniscient narrator who subtly inserts his own opinions into the biography. This author knows the full story of Thoreau's life, so he is able to move backwards and forward in time in order to link and emphasize various events which he considers important. In addition, North uses words and sentence structure he hopes will be easy for young readers to understand.

From time to time North "steps back" and tries to show Thoreau the way others in the village of Concord might have seen him, as quirky, odd and strange, but also strong and competent.

The book begins with a one page author's note, or prologue, in which North explains why he is interested in his subject.

Tone

The author takes an avuncular tone in the book, which means he speaks like a friendly nurturing way like a favorite uncle might speak to his nieces and nephews. The tone is warm, gentle and full of admiration for Thoreau. Occasionally, he uses humor to make a point. The only time this positive tone changes is when North attempts to excite young readers with adventure tales. Because the book is dated, these may seem insensitive, especially when he's talking about murdering Native Americans.

In the prologue, the author reveals that Thoreau's writing has helped him learn to appreciate nature better. North also takes on the manner of a kindly teacher throughout the book. He restates the thoughts and writings of Thoreau in order to simplify them for young readers. Wording is direct and straightforward.

Structure

The structure is mostly linear, but occasionally moves back or forward in time. "Thoreau of Walden Pond" begins with a short author's note, and is written in nine chapters followed by a list of quotes. These quotes are taken from Thoreau's book "Walden, Or Life in the Woods" and move from spring to winter. In a sense the book also moves according the seasons of Henry David Thoreau's life, from the spring of his youth to the winter of his death. Many illustrations are also included.

Quotes

"Near the end of March 1845 I borrowed an axe and went down to the woods by Walden pond nearest to where I intend to build my house and began to cut down some tall, arrowy white pines." A Walden Calendar, p. 157.

"At length in the beginning of May with the help of some of my acquaintances... I set up the frame of my house. No man was ever more honored in the character of his raisers than I." A Walden Calendar, p.159.

"...it costs me nothing for curtains for I have no gazers to shut out but the sun and the moon and I am willing they should look in." A Walden Calendar, p.160.

"Time is but the stream I go 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." A Walden Calendar, p.161.

"My days were not days of the week ...nor were they minced into hours and fretted by the ticking of a clock... .This was sheer idleness to my fellow townsmen no doubt; but if the birds and flowers had tried me by their standard I should not have been found wanting." A Walden Calendar, p.163.

"In the fall the loon...came, as usual...making the woods ring with his wild laughter." A Walden Calendar, p.165.

"The first ice is especially interesting and perfect being hard, dark and transparent ...you can lie at your length and study the bottom at your leisure." A Walden Calendar, p.169.

"I withdrew yet farther into my shell and endeavored to keep a bright fire both within my house and within my breast." A Walden Calendar, p.170.

"Every man looks at his wood pile with a kind of affection." A Walden Calendar, p.171.

I frequently tramped eight or ten miles through the deepest snow to keep an appointment with a beech tree or a yellow birch or an old acquaintance among the pines." A Walden Calendar, p.172 .

"Walden is melting apace... . A great field of ice has cracked off the main body. I hear a song sparrow singing from the bushes on the shore - olit, olit, olit - chip, chip, chip che char—che wiss, wiss, wiss. He too is helping crack it." A Walden Calendar, p.176.

Topics for Discussion

1. Why do you think that Thoreau is considered not merely a great American writer, but also a great American?

2. Describe Thoreau's personality. Is he an outcast? An introvert? Antisocial?

Thoreauof Walden Pond How does Thoreau's personality match his ideas concerning humankind's relationship with nature?

3. Is Thoreau wrong in not paying the poll tax? Is such "civil disobedience" justified and perhaps even necessary in certain situations? Explain. Can you think of any individuals in more recent history who have taken similar stances against what they felt was the infringement of government on their personal lives?

4. Why does Thoreau "abandon" civilization for almost two years and live at Walden Pond? What does he learn from the experience? What does he propose in Walden concerning nature?

Economy? Materialism? Individualism?

5. Thoreau's attitude toward the killing of wild animals is unique for his time. Why does he object to such activity? Does Thoreau believe that there are situations in which hunting is justified? Explain.

Essay Topics

How might North have adapted this biographical story if he had been writing today? List several examples of things the author said or did not say which he might have changed or updated for a contemporary audience.

Read "between the lines" to come up with five or ten words describing Thoreau's personality.

What might the Native Americans have thought of Henry David Thoreau? What might the rich people in the town and the publishers have thought about him?

North calls Thoreau a prophet which means a person who challenges the status quo and foretells the future. Which of Thoreau's ideas really are accepted by many people today?

What is your favorite description of nature in the book? What words or images strike you as beautiful or exciting?

What questions would you have asked Thoreau if you went on a walk with him?

Which quote by Thoreau surprises you the most? Why?

Have you ever gone camping or taken a long hike? Discuss interesting observations you have made about animals or plants that live near you.

Describe Thoreau's feelings about animals. Support what you have to say with specific examples from the book.

How does North feel about Henry David Thoreau? What does he most admire about the early American writer and thinker?

Do your feelings about Thoreau differ from North's? How do you feel?

Do you wish to read any of Thoreau's writing now? Which of his works do you think would interest you most? Why?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What was Thoreau's philosophy toward humankind's interaction with nature? Was nature a resource to be used to benefit humankind or was it something to be left alone, spared of all human intervention?

2. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote a short philosophical book entitled Nature.

Emerson and Thoreau shared many similar ideas concerning human interaction with nature. What examples of Emersonian philosophy as depicted in Nature can you find in Thoreau's own life?

3. Prepare a short biography on one or two of Thoreau's Concord friends, such as Bronson Alcott, Nathaniel Hawthorne, or Ralph Waldo Emerson. How did they differ from Thoreau in their attitudes and way of life? How were they similar?

4. Thoreau wrote poetry as well as prose. Select a few of his poems, decide on the main idea in each, and find similar ideas in Walden or A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers. Suggested poems: "My Prayer," "The Inward Morning," "The Summer Rain," "Inspiration," and "The Fall of the Leaf."

5. Read Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and compare King's and Thoreau's ideas on civil disobedience.

Further Study

Harding, Walter. The Days of Henry Thoreau. New York: Knopf, 1965.

Harding's biography remains the most accurate and representative treatment of Thoreau.

Harding, Walter, ed. Thoreau: Man of Concord. New York: Holt, Rinehartand Winston, 1962. Harding has compiled a selection of assessments of Thoreau by his Concord contemporaries. An excellent source for a good picture of this enigmatic individual.

Thoreau, Henry D. The Illustrated Wdlden. Edited by J. Lyndon Shanley.

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973. This edition of Thoreau's greatest work contains photographs by Herbert Wendell Gleason, a nineteenth-century photographer who journeyed to Walden Pond and Concord a few short decades after Thoreau lived there. His photographic journal, reproduced in the pages of this popular edition, gives the student a wonderful pictorial view of Walden as Thoreau might have seen it.

A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers. Edited by Carl Bove, et al. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980. A marvelously reproduced facsimile of the original edition.

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