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Literature Teaching Unit

Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



Walden

by Henry David Thoreau

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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Walden

Note to the Teacher

In his world-renowned classic, Henry David Thoreau wrote some of the most often-quoted sentiments in American literature. His premise was to record his daily thoughts and philosophical theories about the world around him; he built a cabin in the woods on Ralph Waldo Emerson's property near Concord, Massachusetts, and lived a simple, solitary lifestyle for two years.

During these two years, Thoreau recorded his ruminations on subjects ranging from the clothing a man wears to why he lives. His writing style depicts a deep philosophical inquiry about the world surrounding him and an acute understanding of human nature.

Henry David Thoreau was born in Concord, Massachusetts, on July 12, 1817. He attended Harvard from 1833 to 1837. A few years after graduating, Thoreau met Ralph Waldo Emerson, the founder of the Transcendentalist Movement, and they became close friends. Emerson was a patron of Thoreau's, encouraging him to write and helping him publish; Thoreau even became a tutor to Emerson's children.

During Thoreau's lifetime, the United States would go through a turbulent time of war, slavery, and expansion. Thoreau himself was fervently against slavery; he also chose to be incarcerated rather than pay taxes that would support the United States' war with Mexico. He explains some of his reasoning in his 1948 essay *Civil Disobedience*, which deals with defiance against unjust laws and acts by government.

During the year of Thoreau's death, 1862, the United States was in the middle of the Civil War. Thoreau's writings would become part of the canon of American literature that deals with the subject of what freedom means and who should be free. The number of people Thoreau has influenced through his writings is beyond count.

Note to Teacher: Thoreau uses the term *Indian*, rather than the more-modern, but still not universally accepted, *Native American*. To avoid any potential issues, this Teaching Unit uses Thoreau's original phrasing. Interestingly, though, a United States Census survey in 1995—there is no more up-to-date survey—indicated that 49% of Native people preferred being called *American Indian*, and 37% preferred *Native American*.

All references come from the Dover Thrift edition of *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, Copyright 1995 (New York).

Walden

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. give an example of an allusion to a mythological or historical figure in *Walden*.
2. identify a still-existing social problem which *Walden* describes.
3. dispute ideas that *Walden* espouses and explain their own opinions.
4. write a journal essay in “Thoreau-esqe” style.
5. choose which of Thoreau’s essays is their favorite and explain why they identify with it.
6. give an example of metaphor in reference to an inanimate object.
7. provide an example of anthropomorphism.
8. agree or disagree that most people live lives of quiet desperation and explain your opinion.
9. chose a quote from the concluding essay and give an example of its application to life today.
10. define and cite examples of the following terms:
 - allusion
 - figurative language
 - allegory
 - parable
 - personification
 - simile
 - imagery
 - theme
 - metaphor
 - anthropomorphism
11. argue for or against a life of solitude by providing quotations and examples from the text.
12. discuss Thoreau’s stance on nature in regard to the value it can have in one’s life.

Walden

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Write a short essay in which you discuss the central theme of this entire work. What point is Thoreau trying to make?
2. Give examples of three metaphors in the book and state whether they effectively express the image Thoreau is trying to convey.
3. Cite three examples of personification in which Thoreau attributes life-like qualities to objects.
4. How would you describe Thoreau's beliefs about various world religions such as Christianity and Hinduism? He seems to be well read. Does he subscribe to any of these world religions, or is he merely a skeptic?
5. Interpret and describe Thoreau's political beliefs. Would he be characterized as a liberal or as a conservative today?
6. Discuss whether you think you could live alone with few possessions and work for food, as Thoreau did. Do you think it would make you a better person if you could do it? How would it do that?
7. Did reading *Walden* give you a new respect for the people who lived and worked in that era? What aspects of life then were better than life today?
8. Choose one sentence from the Conclusion and give an example of something in your life that supports the truth of the sentence.
9. Dispute something that Thoreau says and explain your reasoning.
10. Do you like Thoreau as a person? If he were alive today, would you care to be his friend? Why or why not?
11. What value does Thoreau see in traditional schooling, such as attending universities? What does he see as a better alternative? Is one truly superior, or do they supplement and complete each other?

nigh – near
obscurities – the things that are vague and distant
observatory – a place where nature may be viewed and studied
obtrude – to push out
palatable – appetizing
penance – an act done to show sorrow over committing a sin
perchance – perhaps; maybe
praetors – ancient roman magistrates
precedents – the acts that justify later acts of the same kind
profess – to state openly
progenitors – ancestors
resignation – the act of giving oneself over, without resistance, to hopelessness or despair
reverencing – treating with honor or respect
sinecure – a paying job requiring no work
slough – a shed
subdue – to bring under control
superfluously – exceeding what is necessary
superintend – to have charge over; to direct or to manage
trifling – not important
valiant – brave
vigilant – alertly watchful

1. Why do you think Thoreau singles out individual groups of readers as he begins his first essay?

2. What does Thoreau mean when he says that the “mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation”? Is this still true today?

3. What does Thoreau’s story about the Indian basket weaver illustrate about his views on capitalism?

Essay 5: Solitude

VOCABULARY

congenial – agreeable
conspicuous – noticeable
imbibes – absorbs
misanthrope – someone who hates other people
panacea – a cure-all
passably – tolerably
prevailed – triumphed
remunerate – to pay the equivalent
repose – a rest, relaxation
sanctify – to make holy
subtile – subtle
surety – a certainty
wearisome – tiresome
wholesome – morally, physically, and mentally healthy

1. How does Thoreau feel about being alone?

2. How do you think Thoreau's understanding of loneliness differs from the commonly understood definition?

3. To what does Thoreau compare the morning air?

Essay 17: Spring

VOCABULARY

atoning – making amends
befell – happened
debauched – corrupted
epitome – embodiment
expeditious – acting with efficiency
fetters – chains or shackles
hummock – a rounded mound of earth; a knoll
imbricated – overlapped at the edges
influx – a coming in; an increase
oscillation – the act of swinging back and forth
pirouetting – whirling around
precursors – forerunners
rectitude – virtue, morality
resounded – reverberated
rivulets – small streams
stalactites – hanging mineral deposits in a cave
suppliant – a petitioner
transient – short-lived
tumult – uproar
untenable – incapable of being held or maintained

1. What is Thoreau referring to when he writes about the “*grotesque vegetation*”?

2. What are some of the examples that Thoreau gives of the everyday metamorphoses that occur on a daily basis in front of our eyes?
