

# Primary Sources: Thoreau's Walden Pond, Why he Went into the Woods

By Henry David Thoreau, adapted by Newsela staff on 01.10.17

Word Count **824**



Thoreau's statue stands near a replica of his cabin near Walden Pond in Massachusetts. Photo from Wikimedia Commons.

*Editor's Note: Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) was an American author, poet and philosopher. He was one of the major figures of the Transcendentalism movement. Transcendentalists believed that all mankind is good and felt a strong connection with nature. They were against slavery and were for women's rights. The text below is taken from Thoreau's most famous book, "Walden," which was published in 1854. It is about his two years spent living in the wilderness near Walden Pond in Massachusetts. This section is from Chapter 2: Where I Lived, and What I Lived For.*

## **"The Poem Of Creation Is Never Interrupted"**

When I first started living in the woods, and began to spend my nights as well as days there - which, by accident, began on the Fourth of July, 1845 - my house was not prepared for winter. It protected me from the rain, but there was no plaster for warmth and no chimney. The walls were weather-stained boards with wide cracks, which made it cool at night. The freshly smoothed door and window frames gave the house a clean and airy look, and in the morning the wood boards were soaked with so much dew that by noon I

thought some sweet sap might ooze out of them. To my imagination, the house seemed to shimmer all day. It reminded me of a certain house on a mountain which I had visited a year before, an airy log cabin fit for a traveling god. The winds which passed over my home were the same as those that sweep over the ridges of mountains, carrying broken bits of heavenly music. The morning wind forever blows, and the poem of creation is never interrupted, but few can hear it.

### **"I Wanted To See If I Could Learn What Life Had To Teach Me"**

I went to the woods because I wished to live with purpose and to experience only the essential parts of life. I wanted to see if I could learn what life had to teach me. I did not want, when finally dying, to realize that I had not really lived. Life is so short, and I did not want to suffer through it - not unless suffering was absolutely necessary. I wanted to live meaningfully and minimally. I wanted to reduce life to its lowest, simplest terms. If life proved to be mean and difficult, I wanted to understand its meanness, and write about it for the world to read. If, however, life turned out to be perfectly wonderful, I wanted to know this from my own experience and to be able to give a true account of it. Most men, it seems to me, are uncertain about whether life is bad or good and have too quickly decided that the solution is to simply be religious.

### **"Our Life Is Wasted Away Worrying About Unimportant Things"**

Still, many of us live miserably, like ants. We live a life made up of error upon error and beating upon beating. Our life is wasted away worrying about unimportant things. An honest man has hardly any need to count more than his 10 fingers; in extreme cases, he may add his 10 toes. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! Let your responsibilities number two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand. Keep accounts so simple that you could list them on your thumbnail. Simplify, simplify. Instead of three meals a day, eat one; instead of a hundred dishes, own five; and reduce other things in the same way.

Modern life is like a country made up of small states, the boundaries of which are forever changing, so that a person cannot tell where they are at any moment. The nation itself, with all its so-called improvements, is ruined by luxury, waste and overspending. It lacks a worthy goal for its future. The only cure for this is spending less, living simply and finding a higher purpose in life. Men think that it is necessary that the nation have big businesses, export ice, talk through a telegraph and travel at speeds of 30 miles an hour. If we do not devote time to building railroad ties and tracks, they wonder, how will the railroads get built? And if the railroads are not built, they wonder, how will we get where we're going more quickly?

But if instead we stay at home and mind our business, who will even want railroads? We do not ride upon the railroad; it rides upon us. Did you ever think of what those railroad ties really are, that lie under the railroad? Each one represents a man who spent time to build

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it. The railroad tracks are laid on these ties and the railroad cars run smoothly over them. And every few years, a new lot is laid down and run over; so that, if some have the pleasure of riding on a rail, others have the only the bad luck to be ridden upon.

### Quiz

- 1 Read the sentence from the section "The Poem Of Creation Is Never Interrupted."

*To my imagination, the house seemed to shimmer all day.*

How does the word "shimmer" affect the TONE of the sentence?

- (A) It shows Thoreau's desire to have many candles in his house.
- (B) It shows Thoreau's impression of heavenly light in the house.
- (C) It shows that Thoreau's eyesight was poor.
- (D) It shows that Thoreau's house was too bright.

- 2 Read the sentences from the section "The Poem Of Creation Is Never Interrupted."

*The winds which passed over my home were the same as those that sweep over the ridges of mountains, carrying broken bits of heavenly music. The morning wind forever blows, and the poem of creation is never interrupted, but few can hear it.*

Which option BEST explains what Thoreau meant by "poem of creation"?

- (A) sounds of nature
- (B) writing about mountains
- (C) musical instruments
- (D) rhyming words

- 3 Which option below is an accurate summary of the section "I Wanted To See If I Could Learn What Life Had To Teach Me"?

- (A) Thoreau believed that people lived miserable lives worrying about too many things. He wanted to limit the amount of meals he ate and friends he had.
  - (B) Thoreau believed that people wasted their lives building new technology. He compared them to ants and to railroad ties that were being run over.
  - (C) Thoreau went to the woods because he wanted to make sure he was living a meaningful life. He wanted to know if struggling was really necessary.
  - (D) Thoreau went to the woods because he was afraid he was dying. He wanted to escape from the people who were mean to him and enjoy simplicity.
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