

# WORLDVIEW GUIDE

## WALDEN



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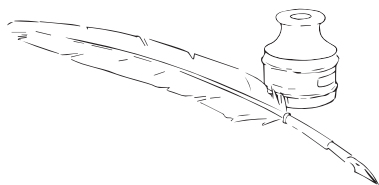
## INTRODUCTION

Love your life, poor as it is.<sup>1</sup>

*Walden* is a book that defies traditional classification. Thoreau moves nimbly between social commentary, political critique and vivid descriptions of the parenting behavior of wood-cocks. His assessment of his modern society is at once insightful and boorish. He identifies with piercing accuracy the enslavement of his fellow citizens to the complexities of modern life while neglecting the many gifts that are given to us in and through the City of Man. *Walden* offers the insight of a man who sees the beauty of the world and the growing ugliness of an emerging modern American society.

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1. All citations are to *Walden: 150th Anniversary Edition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 328.



## THE WORLD AROUND

Thoreau published *Walden* in 1854, almost a decade after beginning his experiment in the woods. Rationalism and the Enlightenment had given birth to a whole new world of discontent as the new American republic began to define itself. The foment of numerous social reform movements, such as abolitionism, was just one way that the young nation was attempting to break free from the old world of Europe. The young nation had grown over its first 50 years into an adolescent struggling to figure out exactly what she would be socially, philosophically and culturally. In a few years the outbreak of the Civil War would bring the divergent cultures of North and South into conflict, raise the great evil of slavery to the forefront of our nation's consciousness and forge a new national identity.

The philosophical movement of the Enlightenment had begun to transform the way Americans and Europeans



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Henry David Thoreau was born in the middle of these historical and social movements in Concord, Massachusetts in 1817. His childhood was spent in and around Concord, including in the woods surrounding the small town. Boarders frequented his home while his father ran a moderately successful pencil factory. He studied at Harvard College where he focused on Greek and Latin. After school he helped his brother start a school and worked with his father in the pencil factory. Neither career stuck. He moved on from both school and industry towards a life of philosophy, leisure and writing. He soon found his way to the tutelage of Ralph Waldo Emerson and was immersed in the ideas of transcendentalism. Transcendentalism was a philosophical and literary movement grounded in a theology that placed the divine within the confines of the natural world and each human individual.



## SETTING, CHARACTERS AND PLOT SUMMARY

*Walden* is Thoreau's account of what he termed an "experiment" during which time he lived in the woods surrounding Walden Pond for 2 years, 2 months and 2 days. It doesn't fit well under any particular genre. It addresses philosophy on one page and walks through the costs of building a house on the next. It addresses the woes of society while debating the depth and area of a pond. It attempts to represent the lived experiment of transcendentalist philosophy in the mundane realities of everyday life in nature. *Walden* sits nowhere neatly. It presents a distinctive worldview, but it eschews excessive philosophical explanation and instead gives practical descriptions of a self-reliant life.

Much of the book reads as a sort of journal entry. Thoreau loosely follows the seasons of a year as an outline for his book, using those seasons as way of observing the world





## WORLDVIEW ANALYSIS

*Walden* sets out to live an experiment. Thoreau moves to the woods outside of Concord to put a worldview into practice. What one finds of theory in *Walden* is so intricately tied to the actual practice of living described in its pages that there is little opportunity to meditate too long without immediately getting to the business of day-to-day life. Before we evaluate Thoreau's worldview, we should take time to admire the strength of his commitment to it. This is no theoretical treatise. It is an experiment, described, reflected on and *lived*. As those who hold to a Christian worldview, we should feel powerfully the challenge laid at our feet by Thoreau. Many of his problems with Christianity were not simply objections to its ideas, but to the failure of its proponents to truly embody those ideas in practice. Thoreau's emphasis on a real and lived philosophy is vital to understanding his work in *Walden*.

Thoreau was steeped in the transcendentalist belief that the natural world provides a lens, perhaps the only lens, through which divine reality can be seen and known. But in *Walden* Thoreau goes further and approaches the natural world as actually indwelt by the divine. For Emerson and his followers, one looks to the trees to learn something of the ways of god and the world. But in Thoreau, one looks to the trees to see something of god himself. While the transcendentalists embraced a kind of natural revelation closely related to the Christian worldview, Thoreau's Christianity is swallowed up by a Hindu-influenced pantheism. Thoreau's thought was heavily shaped by the Bhagavad Gita and other Hindu writings that had been recently translated into English and made accessible to a broader European and American readership. Thoreau's pantheism reduced god to a kind of bland aesthetic and philosophical ideal. There was no person creating and acting and moving in the world. There is, for Thoreau, only an impersonal principle—vague and illusive, often hidden from view by the society we labor so hard to build.

It is here in Thoreau's most problematic philosophical assumptions that we encounter some of his most insightful writing. He observes the world with an attentiveness that Scripture calls us to. This attentiveness to the world runs through the whole of *Walden*, often appearing in the most interesting of places. In Thoreau, observing nature is an end unto itself. This leads to an implicit tension between the poetic and the "scientific." The transcendentalists