



## “A Lesson in Wildness”

By  
Earth Day Network

*"In wildness is the preservation of the world." –H.D. Thoreau*

**Topic:** Using Thoreau's experience and writings, this unit will examine how humans define and perceive themselves in relation to nature with an emphasis on Henry David Thoreau's "Walking."

**Class and Level:** This lesson was configured for an 11<sup>th</sup> grade American Literature class, but can be acclimated to an American Studies, Environmental Science, Philosophy, or other classes that incorporate Deep Ecology, English, or History.

**Unit Length:** Several days.

### **Goals and Objectives:**

- Students will examine their natural surroundings as a way to begin thinking about an abstract idea.
- Students will analyze and compare/contrast the rhetorical strategies of an essayist.
- Students will interpret and evaluate images culled from nature, popular culture, art history, and other sources.
- Students will synthesize their own definitions of an abstract idea using models from Thoreau.
- Students will conduct independent research on the historical context of Thoreau's writing and then organize and present that information in a useful format.

### **Assessment:**

- Analytical take-home essay (see assignment description below)
- In-class writing on a chapter from *Walden* (see assignment description below)
- Journal writing (take-home) on an observation of at least two places.

### **Opening Question/Activity**

How does one define something as "wild?" What does it really mean to be "wild?" Have you ever experienced the "wild?" What does Thoreau mean by "Walking?" What does "Walking" mean to you? In the classroom setting, tell students they will spend the rest of the period in search of things that are "wild" as part of an attempt to define this category. Leave open-ended the definition(s) of "wildness" at this time, but it is okay to allude to

searching in nature for the answer (so remember to plan this on a sunny day!). Follow the class as they make their way outside. Students may search together or individually. Each group or individual must choose one area, object, or image to be photographed with the digital camera or catalogued in their notes or journal. As the teacher takes the digital photograph, each group or individual should explain briefly what is "wild" in the chosen setting. If a digital camera does not exist, have the students remember and catalogue the item, sentiment, or image for future reference in class. Another idea is to audio record nature sounds or locate them on the web, such as Cornell's Lab of Ornithology that has recorded bird songs for every bird in North America.

*For homework:* Read Thoreau's "Walking" (1862) in selective parts. A free, online copy can be found at: <http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Walking> in addition to a more detailed copy at <http://thoreau.eserver.org/walking.html> (Teachers may choose to assign "Walking" in two parts or over a weekend depending on the class' reading habits and proficiency.)

## **Day 2**

Class discussion of what is "wild" from the images of yesterday and Thoreau's definition of the "wild." What is the "wild?" Is it a place? Is it a metaphor? How can a direction (West) be "wild?"

Significant quotations and concepts for discussion:

- Nature is "absolute freedom and wildness" (1)
- "Man should inhabit nature, not society" (2)
- "Man should be equally at home everywhere"
- "I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking" (2)
- "Half the walk is but retracing our steps" (3)
- "I am alarmed when it happens that I have walked a mile into the woods bodily, without getting there in spirit...But it sometimes happens that I cannot easily shake off the village" (13)
- There's a "subtle magnetism in Nature" that will guide us (1)
- "Eastward I go only by force, but westward I go free" (2)
- West = Wild (18)
- "How near to good is what is *wild*" (23)
- "Life consists with wildness" (23)
- "Hope and the future for me are not in lawns and cultivated field, not in towns and cities, but in the impervious and quaking swamps" (24)
- "In Literature, it is only the wild that attracts us. Dullness is but another name for tameness." (31)
- "American Liberty has become a fiction of the past, — as it is to some extent a fiction of the present, — the poets of the world will be inspired by American Mythology." (36)
- "My desire for knowledge is intermittent, but my desire to bathe my head in atmospheres unknown to my feet is perennial and constant" (12)
- "I live a sort of border life" (17)

*For homework:* 1. Finish reading, and if completed, reflect on today's discussion as well as research for upcoming essay. 2. Also, bring four images of North, South, East, and West for tomorrow's class. These can be any images from any kind of source(s). Write a

1-2 page journal entry explaining your selections. Be prepared to display and justify your selections, perhaps by reading from your journal entry.

3. For a standing journal entry assignment, make detailed observations of places (both indoors and outdoors) where you belong. These two journal entries are due by the end of this unit.

### **Day 3**

Display and discuss images of direction. Each student should display his or her images and then provide a brief explanation. When all the images have been explained, ask students to look for commonalities: what kinds of images or colors or figures or landscapes signify North, South, East, and West? Why?

*For homework:* In "Walking," Thoreau notes that "sometimes, no doubt, we find it difficult to choose our direction, because it does not yet exist distinctly in our idea" (1). Pick a direction and make it "exist distinctly"--define it. Do cite lines from Thoreau that support your ideas. You may experiment with some of Thoreau's, or you may head in your own direction, literally. For example, the Sioux Indians believe that they are 5 directions, not four. The fifth was the inward direction, always available and present like the other four. Even if you adopt some of Thoreau's strategies, the effort here is to create your own way.

Length: 4-5 pages, accustomed to grade level, class, and experience.

Due: on Day 8

Point Value: 100

### **Day 4**

Use library resources to conduct research on specific aspects of Thoreau: personal experience and early writing career, Transcendentalists, influence of Emerson, history of Concord as a literary community, Civil Disobedience, abolitionism. Students should work in small groups to locate information and determine which aspects of their findings will be useful to the rest of the class. Have each student report one new fact about Thoreau that they did not know previously.

*For homework:* Continue to conduct research. Continue to work on direction essay.

### **Day 5**

In-class writing based on the opening pages of Thoreau's "Conclusion" to *Walden*, or the opening of "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For," specifically the quote: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived." Explain how Thoreau's call to "Explore thyself," in reference to Emerson's "Know Thyself," is related to a sense of place. Or, if one chooses the "What I Lived For," section, ask students what they live for and does it relate to any of Thoreau's statements, and why? Emphasis here is on a discovery-based and cooperative class interaction.

*For homework:* Read "Where I Lived and What I Lived For" from *Walden*. Continue to work on research and direction essay.

## Day 6

Discussion of Thoreau's "Conclusion" and "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For." What does it mean to "be awake" and to "live deliberately"? What are the "necessar[ies] of the soul"? Did Thoreau accomplish his "experiment"? Could you live this way, why or why not? Should we as a society be living more in regard to nature? What do you live deliberately for, if anything, and why?

Significant lines from "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For" (Page numbers are from the Norton Critical Edition of *Walden* and *Resistance to Civil Government*):

- "...for a man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone" (55)
- "As long as possible live free and uncommitted. It makes but little difference whether you are committed to a farm or the county jail" (57)
- "Though the view from my door was still more contracted, I did not feel crowded or confined in the least. There was pasture enough for my imagination." (59)
- "The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred millions to a poetic or divine life. To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite awake." (61)
- "We must learn to reawaken and to keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn" (61)
- "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived." (61)
- "I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life" (61)
- "Simplify, simplify, simplify." (62)
- "Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life?" (63)
- "a Realometer" (66)

Significant lines from "Conclusion" (Page numbers are from the Norton Critical Edition of *Walden* and *Resistance to Civil Government*):

- "The universe is wider than our views of it" (213)
  - "Nay, be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought." (214)
  - "...Explore thyself" (215)
  - "It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves." (215)
  - "How worn and dusty, then, must be the highways of the world, how deep the ruts of tradition and conformity!" (216)
  - "If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them." (216)
- From "Wildness:"
- "The fault finder will find faults, even in paradise." (219)

-“Cultivate poverty like a garden herb, like sage. Do not trouble yourself much to get new things, whether clothes or friends. Turn the old; return to them. Things do not change; we change. Sell your clothes and keep your thoughts.” (219)

-“Money is not required to buy one necessary of the soul.” (220)

*For homework:* Read "Economy" chapter and annotate as usual. Focus on what Thoreau identifies as social problems, and how he identifies them while making efforts to also solve them personally. Think about not only what he is saying here, but how he is saying it (rhetorical strategies). (One may choose to assign "Economy" in two parts or over a weekend depending on the class's reading habits and proficiency.)

### Day 7

Class discussion of "Economy" chapter for its social commentary and rhetorical strategies. Selections from James Gleick's 1999 *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything* and/or *Stuff: The Secret Lives of Everyday Things* by John C. Ryan and Alan Durning are prudent here, thus ask students how much Thoreau's lament resonates with Gleick's, Ryan and Durning's, and ours. Significant lines from "Economy" (Page numbers are from the Norton Critical Edition of *Walden* and *Resistance to Civil Government*):

-“He has no time to be anything but a machine.” (3)

-“The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” (5)

-“But man's capacities have never been measured; nor are we to judge of what he can do by any precedents, so little has been tried.” (6)

-“The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad, and if I repent of anything, it is very likely to be my good behavior.” (6)

-“One generation abandons the enterprises of another like stranded vessels.” (7)

-“...at night we unwillingly say our prayers and commit ourselves to uncertainties” (7)

-“It would be some advantage to live a primitive and frontier life, though in the midst of an outward civilization” (7)

-“Most of the luxuries, and many of the so called comforts of life, are not only indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind.” (9)

-“My purpose in going to Walden Pond was not to live cheaply nor to live dearly there, but to transact some private business with the fewest obstacles; to be hindered from accomplishing which for want of a little common sense, a little enterprise and business talent, appeared not so sad as foolish.” (13)

-“In the long run men hit only what they aim at. Therefore, though they should fail immediately, they had better aim at something high.” (18)

-“It would be well perhaps if we were to spend more of our days and nights without any obstruction between us and the celestial bodies” (19)

-“...the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run” (21)

-“While civilization has been improving our houses, it has not equally improved the men who are to inhabit them. It has created palaces, but it was not so easy to create noblemen and kings.” (23)

-“But lo! men have become the tools of their tools.” (25)

-“Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end, and end which it was

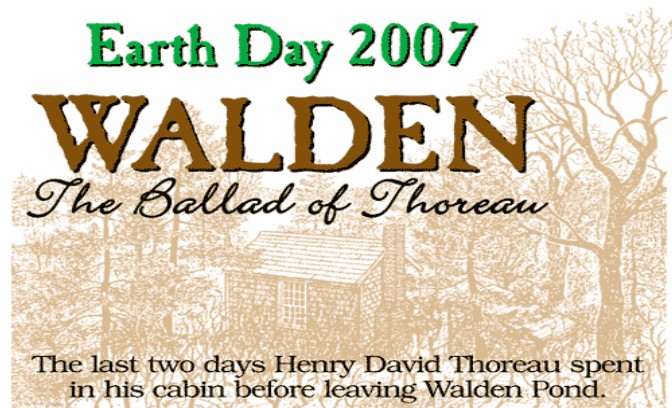
already too easy to arrive at; as railroads lead to Boston or New York. We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate." (35)

*For homework:* Essays are due and students should be prepared to present your conclusions, or perceptions, to the class.

### **Day 8**

Concluding discussion on image of self, nature, and their relation. Show students a variety of images (from landscape painters, nature photographers, a specific ad campaign, or postcards of a particular place). Discuss what values/ideas/assumptions/"truths" about nature and our relationship to it are represented in these images? When we look *at* nature, are we looking *through* it to something else? Is there an accurate perception? The idea of anthropomorphism and social construction are important here, since we always see nature through the window of human perception.

**Culminating activity:** Fieldtrip to Walden Pond in Concord. If not feasible, take our online tour of Walden Pond with our Education Director. Do not forget to perform *Walden* the play at your school ([www.waldenplay.com](http://www.waldenplay.com))! Or, click the picture to discover more:





Walden Pond at Sunset, December 31, 2006