

## **“Walden” by Henry David Thoreau**

### **Discussion Questions**

1. In a speech from the early 1940s, the poet Ezra Pound dismissed Thoreau's project in less than twenty-five words. Pound viewed it as Thoreau's first intellectual reaction to the approach of industrialization. Would you agree with Pound that the experiment Thoreau takes up at Walden Pond demonstrates his indifference to other humans?
2. Walden Pond was only a mile and a half away from the center of town. Would Thoreau's story be different if he went somewhere really "wild," without a sign of civilization in sight?
3. Thoreau makes it very clear at the opening of Walden that his stay in the wilderness was not a lifestyle choice but rather a temporary experiment, and that "At present I am a sojourner in civilized life again." Does the short duration of Thoreau's stay at Walden undercut the importance of his project?
4. Thoreau repeatedly praises the simplicity and industriousness of the working poor, but disdains popular books, implying that everyone should be able to read the Greek tragedian Aeschylus in the original. His allusions to world literature are quite lofty, including Chinese philosophers and Persian poets. Is Thoreau a snob? If so, is his democratic populism undermined by his disdain for popular culture? Or, does Thoreau show socialist tendencies, though he is writing before socialism is a recognized idea?
5. What would Thoreau make of the fact that Walden is one of the most commonly assigned texts in high school and college literature courses across the country? Would he welcome the fact that he has become part of the mainstream culture that he was criticizing?
6. Is Thoreau's vision representative of fundamental American ideals, or is it basically a reaction against them?
7. Thoreau occasionally forces a long series of tedious details upon us, as for example when in "House-Warming" he tells us a precise history of the freezing of Walden Pond over the past several years. Similarly detailed passages refer to his farming endeavors, his home construction, and other topics. Why does Thoreau repeatedly display these irrelevant details? How do they fit in to his overall plan for Walden?
8. Thoreau has inspired twentieth-century leaders such as Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi, but it is not certain that he had any leadership potential himself, though he often posed as a kind of prophet for his fellowman. Is Thoreau a leader? Why or why not?
9. Thoreau doesn't really give us an explanation for why he leaves Walden Pond. Do you have any educated guesses? Also, do you think he made the right choice?