

Essay



Where I Lived and What I Lived For

from *Walden*
by Henry David Thoreau

1 When first I took up my abode in the woods, that is, began to spend my nights as well as days there, which by accident, was on Independence Day, or the Fourth of July, 1845, my house was not finished for winter, but was merely a defense against the rain, without plastering or chimney, the walls being of rough, weather-stained boards, with wide chinks, which made it cool at night. The upright white hewn studs and freshly planed door and window casings gave it a clean and airy look, especially in the morning, when its timbers were **saturated** with dew, so that I fancied that by noon some sweet gum would **exude** from them.

saturated: soaked
exude: ooze

2 I was seated by the shore of a small pond, about a mile and a half south of the village of Concord and somewhat higher than it, in the midst of an extensive wood between that town and Lincoln,¹ and about two miles south of our only field known to fame, Concord Battle Ground;² but I was so low in the woods that the opposite shore, half a mile off, like the rest, covered with wood, was my most distant horizon.

3 Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself. I have been as sincere a worshiper of Aurora³ as the Greeks. I got up early and bathed in the pond; that was a religious exercise, and one of the best things which I did. They say that characters were engraven on the bathing tub of King Tching-thang to this effect: "Renew thyself completely each day; do it again, and again, and forever again." I can understand that. Morning brings back the heroic ages. I was as much affected by the faint hum of a mosquito making its invisible and unimaginable tour through my apartment at earliest dawn, when I was sitting with door and windows open, as I could be by any trumpet that ever sang of fame. It was Homer's **requiem**; itself an *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in the air, singing its own wrath and wanderings.⁴ There was something cosmical about it; a standing advertisement, till forbidden, of the everlasting vigor and fertility of the world. The morning, which is the most memorable season of the day, is the awakening hour. Then there is least **somnolence** in us; and for an hour, at least, some part of us awakes which slumbers all the rest of the day and night. After a partial cessation of his sensuous life, the soul of man, or its organs rather, are reinvigorated each day, and his Genius tries again what noble life it can make. All memorable events, I should say, transpire in morning time and in a morning atmosphere. The Vedas⁵ say, "All intelligences awake with the morning." Poetry and art, and the fairest and most memorable of the actions of men, date from such an hour. All poets and heroes, like Memnon,⁶ are the children of Aurora, and emit their music at sunrise. To him whose elastic and vigorous thought keeps pace with the sun, the day is a perpetual morning. It

requiem: a mass or a solemn ceremony for a deceased person

somnolence: sleepiness

¹ **Lincoln:** small town in Massachusetts between Concord and Sudbury

² **Concord Battle Ground:** reference to Emerson's poem "Concord Hymn"

³ **Aurora:** Greek goddess of dawn

⁴ **wrath and wanderings:** Homer's *Iliad* concerns the "wrath" of Achilles and the *Odyssey* tells of the "wanderings" of Odysseus

⁵ **Vedas:** collection of sacred Hindu literature

⁶ **Memnon:** In Greek mythology, the King of the Ethiopians whom Zeus made immortal. Memnon's statue at Thebes was supposed to emit musical notes at dawn.

matters not what the clocks say or the attitudes and labors of men. Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me. Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep. Why is it that men give so poor an account of their day if they have not been slumbering? They are not such poor calculators. If they had not been overcome with drowsiness, they would have performed something. 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. How could I have looked him in the face?

4 We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep. I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor. It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts. Every man is tasked to make his life, even in its details, worthy of the contemplation of his most elevated and critical hour. If we refused, or rather used up, such paltry information as we get, the oracles would distinctly inform us how this might be done.

5 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. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartanlike⁷ as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were **sublime**, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God, and have somewhat hastily concluded that it is the chief end of man here to “glorify God and enjoy him forever.”⁸

6 Still we live meanly, like ants; though the fable tells us that we were long ago changed into men; like pygmies we fight with cranes; it is error upon error, and clout upon clout, and our best virtue has for its occasion a superfluous and evitable wretchedness. Our life is frittered away by detail. An honest man has hardly need to count more than his ten fingers or in extreme cases he may add his ten toes, and lump the rest. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumbnail. In the midst of this chopping sea of civilized life such are the clouds and storms and quicksands and thousand-and-one items to be allowed for, that a man has to live, if he would not founder and go to the bottom and not make his port at all, by dead reckoning,⁹ and he must be a great calculator indeed who succeeds. Simplify, simplify. Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one; instead of a hundred dishes, five; and reduce other things in proportion. Our life is like a German Confederacy,¹⁰ made up of petty states, with its boundary forever fluctuating, so that even a German cannot tell you how it is bounded at any moment. The nation itself, with all its so-called

⁷ **Spartanlike**: The inhabitants of the ancient Greek city-state of Sparta were famed for their courage, discipline, and frugality.

⁸ “glorify ... forever”: from the Presbyterian book of beliefs: *Westminster Shorter Catechism*

⁹ **dead reckoning** (*n.*): nautical term for a method of positioning a ship without using the more reliable method of astronomical observation

¹⁰ **German Confederacy**: in 1815, the first ineffective alliance of German territories

GRAMMAR & USAGE

Hyperbole

Exaggerating an idea to emphasize a point is something people often do in everyday conversations—consider “It hit me like a ton of bricks.” When writers use this strategy in an essay to create an emotional response in their audience, it is called **hyperbole**. In Thoreau’s essay, notice the exaggeration he uses when he says that he does not want to discover that “... when I [come] to die, ... that I [have] not lived.” Thoreau does not mean he does not literally live his life, and readers understand he is exaggerating to make his point about living a “deliberate life.”

Find another example of hyperbole in the essay. How is it intended to create an emotional response in the reader?

sublime: elevated or lofty

My Notes

WORD CONNECTIONS

Roots and Affixes

The word *inevitable* has as its base the word *evitable*, which means “capable of being avoided.” With the addition of the prefix *in-*, meaning “not,” the word *inevitable* means “not able to be avoided, or sure to happen.”

sleepers: wooden beams to which railway tracks are riveted

GRAMMAR & USAGE

Conditional Sentences

Conditional verbs such as *can/could* and *will/would* are used to create **conditional sentences**. They can be used in past, present, or future tense. Notice how Thoreau uses conditional verb tenses to suggest what *would* happen if a change were made: "If we respected only what is inevitable ... music and poetry *would* resound ..." Here, the conditional mood is created by the juxtaposition of the verb tenses.

Annotate the first three paragraphs for further uses of conditional verbs. Compare your findings with those of a partner and discuss how each example creates a conditional mood concerning the past, present, or future.

internal improvements, which, by the way are all external and superficial, is just such an unwieldy and overgrown establishment, cluttered with furniture and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense, by want of calculation and a worthy aim, as the million households in the land; and the only cure for it, as for them, is in a rigid economy, a stern and more than Spartan simplicity of life and elevation of purpose. It lives too fast. Men think that it is essential that the Nation have commerce, and export ice, and talk through a telegraph, and ride thirty miles an hour, without a doubt, whether they do or not; but whether we should live like baboons or like men, is a little uncertain. If we do not get out **sleepers**, and forge rails and devote days and nights to the work, but go to tinkering upon our lives to improve them, who will build railroads? And if railroads are not built, how shall we get to heaven in season? But if we stay at home and mind our business, who will want railroads? We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us. Did you ever think what those sleepers are that underlie the railroad? Each one is a man, an Irishman, or a Yankee man. The rails are laid on them, and they are covered with sand, and the cars run smoothly over them.

7 For my part, I could easily do without the post office. I think that there are very few important communications made through it. To speak critically, I never received more than one or two letters in my life—I wrote this some years ago—that were worth the postage. The penny post is, commonly, an institution through which you seriously offer a man that penny for his thoughts which is so often safely offered in jest. And I am sure that I never read any memorable news in the newspaper. If we read of one man robbed, or murdered, or killed by accident, or one house burned, or one vessel wrecked, or one steamboat blown up, or one cow run over on the Western Railroad, or one mad dog killed, or one lot of grasshoppers in the winter—we never need read of another. One is enough. If you are acquainted with the principle, what do you care for myriad instances and applications? To a philosopher all news as it is called, is gossip, and they who edit and read it are old women over their tea. Yet not a few are greedy after this gossip. There was such a rush, as I hear, the other day at one of the offices to learn the foreign news by the last arrival, that several large squares of plate glass belonging to the establishment were broken by the pressure—news which I seriously think a ready wit might write a twelvemonth, or twelve years, beforehand with sufficient accuracy. ...

8 Shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truths, while reality is fabulous. If men would steadily observe realities only, and not allow themselves to be deluded, life, to compare it with such things as we know, would be like a fairy tale and the Arabian Nights' Entertainments. If we respected only what is inevitable and has a right to be, music and poetry would resound along the streets. When we are unhurried and wise, we perceive that only great and worthy things have any permanent and absolute existence, that petty fears and petty pleasures are but the shadow of the reality. This is always exhilarating and sublime. By closing the eyes and slumbering, and consenting to be deceived by shows, men establish and confirm their daily life of routine and habit everywhere, which still is built on purely illusory foundations. Children, who play life, discern its true law and relations more clearly than men, who fail to live it worthily, but who think that they are wiser by experience, that is, by failure. ...

9 Time is but the stream I go-a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars. I cannot count one. I know not the first letter of the alphabet. I have always been regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born. The intellect is a cleaver; it discerns and rifts its way into the secret of things. I do not wish to be any more busy with my hands than is necessary. My head is hands and feet. I feel all my best faculties concentrated in it. My instinct tells me that my head is an organ for burrowing, as some

creatures use their snout and forepaws, and with it I would mine and burrow my way through these hills. I think that the richest vein is somewhere hereabouts; so by the divining rod and thin rising vapors I judge; and here I will begin to mine.

Second Read

- Reread the essay to answer these text-dependent questions.
 - Write any additional questions you have about the text in your Reader/Writer Notebook.
5. **Craft and Structure:** Emerson and Thoreau each write in the genre of essay. The word *essay* comes from the Latin root *exigere*, meaning “to examine or test.” In what ways is this genre appropriate for the work of both Emerson and Thoreau?
6. **Craft and Structure:** Based on the word choice in paragraph 3, what tone or attitude toward nature does Thoreau establish and how?
7. **Craft and Structure:** In paragraph 3, what metaphor does Thoreau use to explain spiritual awareness?
8. **Key Ideas and Details:** In paragraph 7, what value does Thoreau place on common forms of communication, such as letter- and news-writing? How might he feel about the role of the Internet and social media in modern life? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.

My No

9. **Craft and Structure:** What literary device does Thoreau use in paragraph 9 to describe the role of the intellect? How does this comparison contribute to one of the central ideas of the essay?

10. **Craft and Structure:** In paragraph 9, how does Thoreau describe time? How does this metaphor relate to the central idea of the essay?

11. **Key Ideas and Details:** In what ways does Thoreau's life in the woods extend Emerson's philosophy of self-reliance?

12. **Key Ideas and Details:** Why do Emerson and Thoreau each value instinct? How does this concept contribute to the central idea of each essay?