

WALDEN BY HENRY DAVID THOREAU

NEXT MEETING: TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 14 AT 6:30 P.M.

PLOT SUMMARY AND RESOURCES ATTACHED

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. 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*?
2. 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? At times Thoreau seems like a diarist narrating the flow of everyday events, as humdrum as they may be. At other times he is almost a mystic writer, as when he compares the topography of ponds to the shape of the human soul. And at still other times he is a social critic and moral prophet. Does the hodgepodge of genres in *Walden* contribute something positive to its overall meaning for us?
4. Thoreau is a practical man and a close observer of nature, but he is also a fantasist who makes a lot of references to mythology. In “Economy” he mentions the Greek myth of Deucalion and Pyrrha who created men by throwing stones over their shoulders; in “The Pond in Winter” he compares a pile of ice to Valhalla, palace of the Scandinavian gods. In “Sounds” he describes the Fitchburg Railway train as a great mythical beast invading the calm of Walden. What is the effect of all these mythological references? Do they change the overall message of the work in any important way?
5. Thoreau repeatedly praises the simplicity and industriousness of the working poor, and comes very close to joining their ranks when he lives at subsistence level in the woods for two years. Yet in his chapter on reading he disdains popular tastes in books, implying that everyone should be able to read the Greek tragedian Aeschylus in the original, as he does. 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?
6. 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?