

# RIPPLES FROM WALDEN POND: AN EVENING WITH HENRY DAVID THOREAU

By  
*Richard Platt*  
STUDY GUIDE

*Ripples From Walden Pond* is the story of a young man trying to find his place in the world, yet often finding himself out of step with his neighbors, walking to the beat of a different drummer, and always reevaluating his sense of priority and proportion.



With a performance time of fifty-five minutes, the one-act version of *Ripples From Walden Pond: An Evening with Henry David Thoreau* asks timeless questions:

- What does it mean to be a responsible citizen?
- What is a citizen to do when he finds himself in the right and his government in the wrong?
- How is a man to live?
- What does a sane and healthy hierarchy of values look like?
- Why are these questions relevant today?

*Ripples From Walden Pond* is a journey of discovery; of the questions Thoreau pondered and the answers he lived.

*Here, in this courageous New Englander's refusal to pay his taxes and his choice of jail rather than support a war that would spread slavery's territory into Mexico, I made my first contact with the theory of nonviolent resistance... I became convinced that noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. No other person has been more eloquent and passionate in getting this idea across than Henry David Thoreau...*

~ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

For questions about *Ripples From Walden Pond*, please contact Veronica Murphy, Artistic Director, Write Out Loud, at (619) 944-8953, or by email, [writeoutloudsd@gmail.com](mailto:writeoutloudsd@gmail.com).

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## **OVERVIEW: WHAT SHALL IT PROFIT A MAN?**

### **A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO HENRY DAVID THOREAU**

By 1854, thirty-seven-year-old Harvard-educated Henry David Thoreau had written what would become one of the most reprinted and influential political essays in history, and no one knew it. He had published his masterpiece, *Walden*, one of the few books of nineteenth-century American literature that can claim indisputable status as a classic, and no one read it. He could read Latin, Greek, and French as easily as English, yet he had earned much of his meager living from manual labor. He had made genuine contributions to the Boston Society of Natural History in his discovery of previously unclassified plant and animal species, and his unraveling of the mysteries of the dispersion of seeds in forests. A few close friends called him a seer and a poet. Nathaniel Hawthorne called him a wholesome and healthy man to know. Ralph Waldo Emerson, the most respected man of letters in America, called him his best friend. Everyone else called him a failure.

Thoreau is the quintessential American archetype: self-reliant, blunt, hostile to rank and privilege, unwilling to accept any philosophy as true without the test of implementation, and above all, fiercely and passionately steadfast in his insistence that government exists for the benefit of the governed, that its power is derived from the consent of the governed, and that each man is the equal of every other man and superior to any government.

Henry Thoreau died in 1862. He was forty-four years old. At the time of his death, he knew that *Walden* was to be printed in a second edition. There has been a new edition, on average, every year since.

*Ripples From Walden Pond* is a gesture of both gratitude and homage. Thoreau is one of the great men in the history of American letters.

## QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION OR SOCRATIC SEMINARS

For information on constructing a Socratic Seminar Discussion see:

[https://hubpages.com/education/Socratic-Seminar-A-Practical-Guide#mod\\_18876547](https://hubpages.com/education/Socratic-Seminar-A-Practical-Guide#mod_18876547)

- 1) **Topic for Debate, Position A:** Henry David Thoreau said that when the law requires you to be the instrument of injustice to another man, you should break the law. His family harbored slaves for the underground railroad, in defiance of federal law, and he himself hid at least one fugitive slave at Walden Woods. **Position B:** Abraham Lincoln, who said that if slavery was not wrong, nothing was wrong, swore an oath to “preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution.” That included protecting slavery and enforcing the Fugitive Slave Law, which required the return of runaway slaves to their masters, even if the slave had escaped to a free state. Lincoln believed that the law should be changed, not broken, knowing that millions would remain in bondage all their lives.
- 2) German citizens were required by law to hand over their Jewish friends, neighbors, and colleagues to the Gestapo for execution in death camps. Many “broke the law” and risked their lives to hide the Jews. Compare this circumstance to Part 1. If, as Thoreau said, it is possible for a citizen to be right and a government to be wrong, who is the final arbiter? Who decides? If each citizen is to follow his own conscience, does this result in meaningful change, or anarchy? How are we to know that any change is change for the better? Does all civil disobedience begin in anarchy? **Debate Position A:** The State is the best and final arbiter of right and wrong. **Debate Position B:** The individual is the best and final arbiter of right and wrong.
- 3) John Brown believed he was inspired by God to free the slaves, as he attempted to do. Thoreau would not dispute this inspiration; thus, he seemed to tacitly admit that it was possible. Brown’s attempt, though a failure, sent a wave of fear throughout the southern United States, where slaves vastly outnumbered their owners. Many slave owners began to sleep with their guns next to their beds. Vigilante groups formed to put down nascent slave uprisings. Assuming that Brown was sincere, how does he differ from a modern-day jihadist or terrorist? **Debate Position A:** John Brown was a terrorist. **Debate Position B:** John Brown was crusader in a just cause, his actions justified.
- 4) “Civil Disobedience” has often been associated with pacifism, yet Thoreau, who supported John Brown’s raid and his seizure of the federal arsenal at Harper’s Ferry, must have known, as did Brown, that seizing a federal arsenal with intent to arm runaway slaves would almost certainly result in violence. Is civil disobedience compatible with violence? **Debate Position A:** Yes. **Debate Position B:** No.

### **Discussion topics:**

- 1) America has always regarded itself as a peaceful nation, yet has averaged one war for every generation since its founding. Discuss.
- 2) Civil Disobedience is a tactic used in many causes: The liberation of India from British Colonial Rule; the Civil Rights Movement in America in the 1960's; the end of white majority rule and apartheid in South Africa under the leadership of Nelson Mandela; the Tiananmen Square pro-democracy protests in Beijing, China, in 1989; the Occupy Wall Street movement after the great recession of 2008. It has proven a spectacularly effective tactic as well as a spectacular failure. Why? Would it have been effective in saving the Jews of Europe from Nazi extermination? If so, why? If not, why not? What conditions need to be present for civil disobedience to be effective? How could it have been made to work where it has failed?

### **Suggested Activities:**

- 1) Create a rap, song, or poem inspired by Thoreau's ideas.
- 2) Henry Thoreau's cabin measured ten by fifteen feet. He lived there for two years, two months, and two days. Pace out the size of the cabin on the floor. When Henry Thoreau went to live at Walden Pond, he took a bed, a table, a small writing desk, and three chairs. He also had a small mirror, a pair of tongs and irons to tend the fire, a kettle, a skillet, and a frying pan, a dipper, a wash-bowl, two knives and forks, three plates, one cup, one spoon, a jug for oil, a jug for molasses, and an oil lamp. If you went to the woods to "live deliberately," like Henry Thoreau, what would you take with you? What could you do without? Remember, there will be no electricity, so you can't take a computer, a television, or a phone. Explain your choices. Make a diorama, model, or picture of your cabin.
- 3) Henry Thoreau had visitors at Walden Pond, but said fewer people came to visit him on trivial business. If you were living in a cabin at Walden Pond, who would you want to come to visit you? Why?
- 4) Henry Thoreau spent much of his time at Walden Pond writing. He kept a journal, recording his thoughts and observations on the workings of his own mind, the books he was reading, the change of seasons and the growth, life and death of every living thing around him. Imagine your first day at Walden Pond. You're moved in. You have a fire going in the fireplace to keep you warm. You are entirely alone. The silence is absolute. Write a journal entry of your first day's thoughts and what you hope to achieve at Walden Pond, knowing you don't have to go anywhere, do anything, or please anyone else.

- 5) Civil disobedience may be expressed in a variety of ways: Rosa Parks refusing to sit in the back of a bus, Vietnam anti-war protesters marching in the street, the Occupy Wall Street movement, the boycott of grapes to support Cesar Chavez and the formation of the United Farm Workers' Union, the 2017 Women's marches, professional athletes kneeling on one knee during the National Anthem. Express your views on Civil Disobedience, past or present. Create a protest poster. Write a poem or rap.
- 6) Choose a quotation at random from the following section, *The Quotable Henry David Thoreau*, and design a meme around it.

## THE QUOTABLE HENRY DAVID THOREAU

1. *A man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can afford to let alone.*
2. *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.*
3. *If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.*
4. *If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.*
5. *As a single footstep will not make a path on the earth, so a single thought will not make a pathway in the mind. To make a deep physical path, we walk again and again. To make a deep mental path, we must think over and over the kind of thoughts we wish to dominate our lives.*
6. *You cannot kill time without injuring eternity.*
7. *The fate of the country ... does not depend on what kind of paper you drop into the ballot box...but on what kind of man you drop from your chamber into the street.*
8. *Our eyes do not rest so long as on the few who especially love their own lives – who dwell apart at more generous intervals, and cherish a single purpose behind formalities of society with such a steadiness that of all men only their two eyes seem to meet in one focus.*
9. *It is not all books that are as dull as their readers.*
10. *It is the height of art that, on the first perusal, plain common sense should appear – on the second, severe truth – on a third, beauty – and having these warrants for its depth and reality, we may then enjoy the beauty forever more.*
11. *I have great faith in a seed... Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders.*
12. *It is not enough to be industrious; so are the ants. What are you industrious about?*
13. *It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right.*

14. *Slavery exists wherever a man allows himself to be made a mere thing or a tool, and surrenders his inalienable rights of reason and conscience.*
15. *Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also in prison.*
16. *Go toward the sun and your shadow will fall behind you.*
17. *What is the use of a house if you haven't got a tolerable planet to put it on?*
18. *Life is a battle in which you are to show your pluck, and woe be to the coward.*
19. *In the long run men hit only what they aim at. Therefore, though they should fail immediately, they had better aim at something high.*
20. *The value of any experience is measured not by the amount of money, but the amount of development we get out of it.*
21. *Do we call this the land of the free? What is it to be free and continue the slaves of prejudice?*
22. *What is the value of any political freedom, but as a means to moral freedom?*
23. *A man cannot be said to succeed in this life who does not satisfy one friend.*
24. *He is the true artist whose life is his material.*
25. *How insufficient is all wisdom without love.*
26. *The beauty of the earth answers exactly to your demand and appreciation.*
27. *We are dazzled by the colors of the rainbow. From the right point of view, every storm and every drop in it is a rainbow.*
28. *Nature would not appear so rich, the profusion so rich, if we knew a use for everything.*
29. *The question is not what you look at, but what you see. We see so much only as we possess.*



30. *Cultivate the tree which you have found to bear fruit in your soil. Regard not your past failures nor successes. All the past is equally a failure and a success; it is success in as much as it offers you the present opportunity.*
31. *Whether he sleeps or wakes — whether he runs or walks — whether he uses a microscope or a telescope, or his naked eye — a man never discovers anything, never overtakes anything, or leaves anything behind, but himself.*
32. *What a man thinks of himself, that it is which determines his fate.*
33. *If a plant cannot live according to its nature, it dies; and so a man.*
34. *It is well to find your employment and amusement in simple and homely things. These wear best and yield most.*
35. *What sort of space is that which separates a man from his fellows and makes him solitary? I have found that no exertion of legs can bring two minds much nearer to one another.*
36. *Take time by the forelock. Now or never! You must live in the present, launch yourself on every wave, find your eternity in each moment.*
37. *Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth.*
38. *It takes two to speak the truth, — one to speak, and another to hear.*
39. *Say what you have to say, not what you ought. Any truth is better than make-believe.*
40. *Money is not required to buy one necessary of the soul.*
41. *How vain it is to sit down to write when you have not stood up to live!*
42. *If a man constantly aspires, is he not elevated?*
43. *Every man says his dog will not touch you. Look out nevertheless.*
44. *The more slowly trees grow the sounder they are at the core, and I think the same is true of human beings.*
45. *Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes, and not rather a new wearer of clothes.*

*46. I am as desirous of being a good neighbor as I am of being a bad subject.*

*47. Books are the treasured wealth of the world.*

*48. No man loses ever on a lower level by magnanimity on a higher level.*

*49. There will never be a really free and enlightened State, until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly.*

**HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT:  
RELEVANT PEOPLE AND EVENTS IN HENRY THOREAU'S LIFETIME  
1817 - 1861**

**PEOPLE**

**Alcott, Louisa May** (1832 – 1888): The daughter of Bronson Alcott, a close friend of Henry Thoreau's, Louisa May Alcott attended the Concord Academy when Henry Thoreau and his brother John taught there, and was a lifelong admirer of Henry Thoreau. She is most remembered for her novel *Little Women*.

**Brown, John** (1800 – 1859): John Brown was a radical slavery abolitionist who believed that armed insurrection was the only way to eradicate slavery in the United States. In 1859, leading a small group of followers, Brown seized control of the United States Federal Arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, intending to arm runaway slaves that he thought would come to him. He and his men were attacked and seized by United States Marines, led by Captain Robert E. Lee, who was later to command the Confederate Army in the Civil War. Brown was tried for treason and executed. His actions contributed greatly to the heightening of emotions, north and south, which led to the Civil War.

**Emerson, Ralph Waldo** (1803 – 1882): A profound influence on Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson was an essayist, lecturer, poet, sometime Unitarian minister, and the most famous man in Concord, Massachusetts in Henry Thoreau's lifetime. Emerson was a leading proponent of Transcendentalism, the belief that there is a kind of innate or intuitive knowledge that can be gained by reflection, and which is to be found outside of logic, reason, or ordinary sense experience. (see: *Thoreau Through the Eyes of His Peers*)

**Hawthorne, Nathaniel** (1804 – 1864): Author, most notably, of the novels *The House of the Seven Gables* and *The Scarlett Letter*, and the short story collection, *Twice-Told Tales*, Nathaniel Hawthorne lived near Concord for a time and befriended Henry Thoreau (see: *Thoreau Through the Eyes of His Peers*). His sister-in-law, Elizabeth Peabody, first published Thoreau's essay, "Resistance to Civil Government," later known as "Civil Disobedience."

**Melville, Herman** (1819 – 1891): American novelist, short story writer, and poet, Herman Melville is best known for his novel *Moby-Dick or The Whale*, published in 1851 and dedicated to Nathaniel Hawthorne. It is regarded by many as the finest novel ever produced by an American. It sold fewer than fifty copies in Melville's lifetime.

**Poe, Edgar Allan** (1809 – 1849): Edgar Allan Poe was an editor, essayist, short story writer and poet. His poem, "The Raven", published while Henry Thoreau lived at Walden Pond, is one of the most anthologized poems in the English language.

**Twain, Mark** (1835 – 1910): Mark Twain, the pen name of Samuel Langhorne Clemens was a humorist, publisher, and lecturer. Among his best-known novels are *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), which is often referred to as "The Great American Novel."

**Whitman, Walt** ( 1819 – 1892): Walt Whitman is the author of the poetry collection *Leaves of Grass* and is perhaps America's greatest poet. His work, which he had to have privately printed as no publisher would accept it, was greatly admired by Thoreau, who actually went to meet Whitman and received a signed copy of Whitman's book.

### **OTHER RELEVANT HISTORICAL FIGURES**

**Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand** (1869 – 1948): Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was the leader of the Indian independence movement against British colonial rule. Employing the nonviolent civil disobedience advocated by Henry Thoreau, Gandhi led India to independence and inspired movements for civil rights and freedom across the world. He is referred to as "Mahatma," meaning "the wise or venerated one," and is often called the Father of Modern India.

**King, Dr. Martin Luther, Jr.** (1929 – 1968): Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was an American Baptist minister and the most prominent leader in the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's. He is best known for using the tactics of nonviolence and civil disobedience based on his Christian beliefs and inspired by Henry Thoreau and the nonviolent activism of Mahatma Gandhi. (see: *Thoreau Through the Eyes of His Peers*)

### **HISTORICAL EVENTS**

**Baseball:** The first recorded baseball game was played in 1846 in New York, where the Knickerbocker Baseball Club defeated by The New York Nine, 23 to 1.

**Fugitive Slave Acts:** Passed in 1793 and again in 1850, they required the return of runaway slaves to their owners, even when those slaves had escaped to states where slavery was illegal.

**Macbeth:** Opera composed by Giuseppe Verdi (1813 –1901), one of the two greatest composers of Italian opera. First performed in 1847, *Macbeth*, Verdi's tenth opera, the story of a great man who is tragically brought down by his own ambition, is based on the play by William Shakespeare.

**Mexican-American War:** Long referred to in America as simply "The Mexican War," The Mexican-American War (1846 – 1848) followed the annexation of Texas as the 29th state, after Texas had declared its independence from Mexico. The 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the war and established the Rio Grande as the southern border of the United States.

**Telegraph:** In May 1845, the Magnetic Telegraph Company was formed by Samuel F. B. Morse, inventor of The Morse Code, and in 1847 a patent issued was issued to him as the inventor of the telegraph.

**Underground Railroad:** Organized in the late 1830's, the Underground Railroad was an irregular network of volunteers working in defiance of federal law to assist runaway slaves in their flight to freedom, and ultimately to Canada, where the fugitive slave laws had no jurisdiction.

## TIMELINE: A THOREAU CHRONOLOGY

- Year    Events (Henry Thoreau's Life in **Boldface**)
- 1817    **Born July 12th, Concord Massachusetts**  
Jane Austen dies, age 41  
James Monroe is President of the United States
- 1818    Congress adopts a new U. S. flag, with 13 stripes and a star for each state  
*Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley published
- 1822    **Visits Walden Pond for the first time, age 5**
- 1823    Monroe Doctrine enunciated by James Monroe  
James Fenimore Cooper publishes first of *The Leatherstocking Tales*
- 1825    New York Stock Exchange opens  
John Quincy Adams elected President
- 1826    Thomas Jefferson and John Adams die on July 4th
- 1827    Noah Webster publishes his *American Dictionary of the English Language*
- 1828    Andrew Jackson elected President
- 1831    Nat Turner's slave rebellion
- 1832    New England Anti-Slavery Society formed  
South Carolina adopts Ordinance of Nullification  
Samuel Francis Smith writes lyrics to "America"
- 1833    **Enrolls at Harvard College**  
American Anti-Slavery Society founded in Philadelphia
- 1835    Ralph Waldo Emerson moves to Concord  
*Fairy Tales* by Hans Christian Anderson published
- 1836    Texas declares independence from Mexico  
The Alamo fort at San Antonio falls  
Martin Van Buren elected President  
Congress passes resolution saying it has no right over state slavery laws  
Samuel Colt patents a six-shot revolver
- 1837    **Graduates from Harvard, 19th in class of about 50**  
Congress enacts a gag rule to suppress debate on slavery  
Elijah Paris Lovejoy, abolitionist publisher, shot and killed  
Economic depression, 618 banks fail  
Three out of four Americans work in agriculture  
*The French Revolution* by Thomas Carlyle published
- 1838    **Delivers first Concord Lyceum Lecture**  
Underground Railroad organized
- 1839    **Takes over the Concord Academy,**  
          **stresses reasoning over memorization**

- Meets Ellen Sewell, July**  
**Goes with Brother John for two-week trip on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers**
- 1840 **Publishes his first poem**  
 Louisa May Alcott, future author of *Little Women*, enrolls at Concord Academy  
 William Henry Harrison elected President  
 Successful slave rebellion aboard The Armistead slave ship
- 1841 **Closes Concord Academy due to John's poor health**
- 1842 **Brother, John, dies of lockjaw, January 11**  
**Meets Nathaniel Hawthorne**  
 A Christmas Carol' by Charles Dickens published
- 1844 James K. Polk elected president
- 1845 **Builds cabin at Walden Pond, moves in July 4th**  
**Writes *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers***  
 Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society publishes the  
 Autobiography of Frederic Douglas  
 U.S. annexes Texas
- 1846 **Begins Writing *Walden***  
**Arrested for not paying the poll tax**  
**Travels to Maine**  
 Smithsonian Institution founded  
 Mexican War begins  
 First recorded baseball game  
 Goldrush begins in California
- 1847 **Leaves Walden Pond**  
**Completed first drafts of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and *Walden***
- 1848 **Delivers lecture on Resistance to Civil Government**  
 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ends Mexican war; USA annexes California  
 and all of Mexico north of the Rio Grand  
 "A Fable for Critics" by James Russell Lowell describes Thoreau as  
 "watered-down Emerson"
- 1849 **"Resistance to Civil Government" published**  
***A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* published**  
 Cornerstone of the Washington Monument is laid
- 1850 Fugitive Slave Act passed, strengthening the act of 1793  
*David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens published  
 Compromise of 1850, designed to reduce North-South conflict  
 Millard Fillmore becomes President on the death of President Zachary Taylor  
 California becomes the 31st state

- 1851 Passage of the Fugitive Slave Act  
Moby Dick by Herman Melville published  
The *New York Times* begins publication
- 1852 Franklin Pierce elected President  
Uncle Tom's Cable published in book form after 1851 serial publication
- 1853 **Receives unsold copies of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers***  
**Works as a land surveyor**  
**First trip to Cape Cod**  
**Second trip to Maine**  
First World's Fair opens in New York  
Half of Americans work in agriculture
- 1854 **Delivers speech, "Slavery in Massachusetts"**  
**Walden published August 9th**  
Republican Party, later called "The GOP," is organized  
Kansas-Nebraska Act repeals the Compromise of 1820,  
introduces "popular sovereignty"
- 1855 **Third trip to Cape Cod**  
Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* published, at his own expense
- 1856 **Meets Walt Whitman**  
Charles Sumner assaulted by Preston Brooks in the Senate  
for anti-slavery speech  
James Buchanan elected President  
"Bleeding Kansas" erupts due to Kansas-Nebraska Act  
John Brown and followers kill 5 pro-slavery advocates
- 1857 **Meets John Brown in Concord**  
**Last trip to Cape Cod**  
Dred Scott decision forbids Congress from forbidding slavery in US territories  
Economic depression, 5,000 businesses fail
- 1858 Abraham Lincoln gives "house divided" speech
- 1859 **Writes "Life Without Principle"**  
**Hears John Brown speak at Concord**  
John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry Arsenal  
**Speaks in John Brown's defense**  
John Brown captured, tried, executed  
U.S. Supreme Court upholds the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850  
*On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*  
by Charles Darwin published
- 1860 Abraham Lincoln elected President with 40% of the popular vote  
Cotton accounts for almost two-thirds of U. S. exports  
U.S. population reaches 31.4 million, double the level of 1840  
First U.S. income tax



- 1861 **Makes last visit to Walden Pond**  
Civil War begins with firing on Fort Sumter
- 1862 **Dies of Tuberculosis, May 6th**  
Battle of Gettysburg
- 1863 Emancipation Proclamation signed into law
- 1864 ***The Maine Woods* published**
- 1865 ***Cape Cod* published**  
American Civil War ends  
Assassination of Abraham Lincoln

## THOUGHTS ON THOREAU BY HIS PEERS

A truth-speaker capable of the most deep and strict conversation; a physician to the wounds of any soul; a friend, knowing not only the secret of friendship but almost worshipped by those few persons who resorted to him as their confessor and prophet, and knew the deep value of his mind and great heart. His soul was made for the noblest society; he had in a short life exhausted the capabilities of this world; wherever there is knowledge, wherever there is virtue, wherever there is beauty, he will find a home....The country knows not yet, or in the least part, how great a son it has lost.

~ Ralph Waldo Emerson

Mr. Thoreau is a singular character - a young man with much of wild original nature still remaining in him; and so far as he is sophisticated, it is in a way and method of his own, with uncouth and somewhat rustic, although courteous manners, corresponding very well with his honest and agreeable exterior, which becomes him much better than beauty. He is a keen and delicate observer of nature - a genuine observer, which, I suspect, is almost as rare a character as even an original poet; and Nature, in return for his love, seems to adopt him as her special child, and shows him secrets which few others are allowed to witness. He has more than a tincture of literature; a deep and true taste for poetry. He is a good writer: true, minute, and literal in observation, yet giving the spirit as well as the letter of what he sees....there are passages where his thoughts seem to measure and attune themselves into spontaneous verse, as they rightfully may, since there is real poetry in him. There is a basis of good sense and moral truth throughout, which is also a reflection of his character....On the whole, I find him a healthy and wholesome man to know....he is one of the few persons with whom to hold a conversation is like hearing the wind among the boughs of a forest tree, and with all his wild freedom, there is a high and classic cultivation in him too.

~ Nathaniel Hawthorne

## THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS

*It is the purpose of the arts to engage, entertain, edify, uplift, and ennoble; to enrich our minds with a vision of positive transformation in ourselves and in our world, and to place in our hearts the will to effect that change. It is this belief that informs all of my work.*

~ Richard Platt

### ***How did Ripples From Walden Pond come to be? Why did you want to bring Henry David Thoreau to the stage?***

Henry Thoreau and I have been friends for a long time. When I was a young man, I loved him for his values and his perspective. Now that I'm a not-so-young man I love him for his youthful exuberance, for the passion with which he embraces everything he cherishes and believes.

I have always been drawn to the one-man theatrical format, its simplicity and austerity, the way it takes everything I enjoy about theater and distills it down to its absolute essentials. *Ripples From Walden Pond* can be staged with only a chair, a table, a podium, and a few books, and it is that kind of paring down that brings into high relief the magic of theater. Henry Thoreau is the perfect subject to present in the one-man format because his entire life was about simplicity; about paring life down to its absolute essentials. I think the one thing that Henry and I would agree on, more than anything else, is that we write not to make a living, but to make a difference. Henry Thoreau was a man trying to make a difference, and so am I.

### ***What are the biggest challenges in adapting literature to the Stage?***

There are two mountains to climb in adapting literature to the stage.

The first is the task of compression. In his forty-four years, Henry Thoreau produced a wide body of work: travel books, poetry, essays, a fourteen-volume journal, a fat volume of correspondence, and, of course, his masterpieces "Resistance to Civil Government" and *Walden*. He enjoyed the friendship or acquaintance of some of the most remarkable people of his day, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Walt Whitman, John Brown, Louisa May Alcott and her father Bronson.

In portraying a life so varied, so fruitful, and so fully-lived in a ninety-minute presentation, inevitably some things must be left behind. I have made choices less from my own preferences than from what is most suitable and relevant to a modern audience. Nathaniel Hawthorne, an astute observer who was neither easily impressed nor prone to hyperbola, said Thoreau was a healthy and wholesome man to know. It is my hope that when an audience has seen *Ripples From Walden Pond* they will want to know Henry Thoreau better.

The second task we may sum up in Thoreau's words: *Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity*. Henry Thoreau's prose is muscular, dense, stylistically complex, littered with classical allusions.

When reading Thoreau, we have the luxury of being able to stop, ponder, chew and digest, just as he intended we should. In a theatrical presentation, the audience does not have this luxury. If an audience member has to pause to consider what has just been said, they do not hear what is *being* said, and the actor and playwright have lost them. Because Thoreau is too fine a craftsman to be reduced to sound bites, this also means the text must be painstakingly punctuated, and that punctuation strictly adhered to in performance, to allow those brief pauses wherein the audience may ponder and absorb what they have heard.

***How were you able to reconstruct Thoreau's character and personality?***

In all great books you will find a personality. That is, in fact, one of the things that stamps and defines a great book. There is a unique narrative voice that you recognize each time you return to them. Henry Thoreau's voice rings through all of his works like music. Perhaps music is the best analog, for language is very much like music. Think of Mozart. Once you've heard a Mozart string quartet, even if you know nothing about music you'll hear a musical signature, a light-hearted bounce that, once identified, you can hear in everything that Mozart wrote (with the exception of the Requiem). Great literary voices are like that. They have a musical signature, and that is the key to reconstructing and reproducing their character and personality.

***How long did it take to write Ripples From Walden Pond?***

The first draft of *Ripples From Walden Pond* was written in the summer of 2007. The final performance draft, after presentation to test audiences and audience feedback, was completed in 2012. There were about twenty drafts in all. The revisions and original source material fill two three-inch binders. The final draft is thirty-four pages.

## **AN EXCERPT FROM *RIPPLES FROM WALDEN POND***

A theatrical script is like the blueprint for a building. Just as no two builders will produce identical buildings given identical blueprints, no two theater companies will produce identical plays with the same script. Actors and directors will have differing ideas about what emotions, passages, or ideas should be emphasized.

A finished script gives the place and time that a play takes place, describes what the stage looks like, gives a list of characters or *dramatis personae*, indicates where on the stage each object is placed.

These are the opening pages of *Ripples From Walden Pond*:

### **Ripples From Walden Pond: An Evening with Henry David Thoreau**

By

Richard Platt

#### **Act One**

*The lights are lit on stage center. Birds are heard softly in the background. Stage right and stage left remain in shadow. Stage center is Henry David Thoreau's home at Walden Pond: a small, lovingly-maintained, unpainted shingled cabin, ten feet by fifteen feet, with a forty-degree pitch to the roof, also shingled. It has a single, open door on one of the shorter sides which faces the audience, toward stage right, and a single open sash window on each of the longer sides, one of which faces the audience, toward stage left. A brick chimney rises from the fourth side. Only the top of it is visible at the rear of the roof. Attached to the rear of the cabin, stage left, is a small open shed stocked with firewood. Just outside the cabin is a simple wooden chair, a footstool, a small table with an ink well and a dip pen, a sheaf of blank paper and one of manuscript, a few pine cones, and a stack of books, including Thoreau's own *Walden* and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. The bindings are diverse. Some are leather-bound; some are modern paperbacks. A dark, formal three-quarter-length coat is draped on one of the chairs. A podium stands at stage right. Two comfortable leather wingchairs stand at stage left, angled toward each other to be conducive to conversation. The background is filled with trees displaying the mature colors of autumn. The cabin remains lit as the theatre lights go down.*

*Henry David Thoreau stands at the rear of the theatre, silent and still, gradually appearing in spotlight. He is clean-shaven. His dark hair meets the top of his ears and is parted from the left, haphazardly combed over as if wet down with water and left to dry. He is a vigorous thirty-to-forty years old, thin, and just below average height. He is wearing dark pants with braces, sensible, sturdy leather shoes suitable for long walks, a vest, unbuttoned, with his reading glasses*

*in the vest pocket, and a pale long-sleeve cotton shirt open at the collar. He has dressed carelessly, a man indifferent to his appearance. His clothing is worn. There is dust on his boots and around the cuffs of his pants from a long walk in the woods, but he is otherwise clean. He walks with assurance. His posture is erect.*

*His eyes are fixed on the cabin. He appears not to notice the audience. He walks slowly, deliberately, toward the stage. He approaches the cabin, carefully examining it. He stops at the door, hands clasped behind him in contemplation. He turns slowly to the audience, only now acknowledging that they are there. His eyebrows rise in astonishment, and a bemused half-frown spreads across his face as he surveys them. He smiles slowly, chuckling to himself, shaking his head in disbelief.*

I had no idea. I used to *live* here. *This is my house* – at least it looks like my house. But it couldn't be. I'd heard that it had been rebuilt, in *exactly* same spot as the original, with the doorway looking down toward Walden Pond, and that even *I* wouldn't be able to tell the new one from the original, but I didn't believe it. I'm still not sure I believe it. The one that I built has been gone for more than *a century*, but every *board*, every *shingle*, looks just as it was then. [*He examines the surface of the wood with his hands.*] Even *the nails* are right. I knew that every year hundreds of people, just like you, came here to walk *the paths* through Walden Woods, *but this....*

I was twenty-seven years old when I built a cabin here in 1845. I only had a handful of visitors then – I preferred solitude - but *now, seeing* all of you here, seeing *this*, lifts my heart. Welcome. It's a great comfort for a man to see that he's left something behind that endures, even if it's just a few trails through the woods for others to follow without fear of losing their way. Your age *has* lost its way, you know. So had mine. Prosperous ages have a way of convincing us that our spiritual needs can be met by worldly means. We strive to find our place in the world, but in the end it's the world that finds its place in us. Worldly prosperity binds our spirits. It keeps us from soaring. That's why I came here: so I could soar. So I could breathe freely as the first man. So I could shake from my boots the dust and grit that Mr. Jefferson didn't foresee in his "Pursuit of Happiness."

My parents first brought me here when I was five years old. This woodland vision for a long time made the drapery of my dreams. I can't remember a time when my soul didn't feel the tug of these woods, their silence and stillness.

During the two years I lived here Edgar Allen Poe published *The Raven*, Samuel Morse sent the first telegraph message, Giuseppe Verdi's *Macbeth* debuted in Florence, and the first recorded baseball game was played. I had greater matters to attend to: I was planting a bean field just beyond the cabin, over there, and watching it grow. [*He smiles broadly. He pauses to look through the doorway, shaking his head in disbelief.*]

Men and monuments don't endure though. It's *ideas* that endure.

## **ATTENDING A THEATRICAL PERFORMANCE**

A theater is a window into another person's experience, often to another time or place, and the performers are our guides. They can hear and see us, just as we can hear and see them. Talking, whispering, texting, taking photos, eating and drinking, or excessive fidgeting are considered very bad manners, like interrupting a conversation that you are listening to but are not a part of. Cell phones should be turned completely off and put away.

This does not mean an audience needs to be silent. An actor works best when he can feel your attention and interest. If you think something is funny, laugh. Sigh if you're moved. Cry if you feel sad. Releasing your emotions like this is called *catharsis*, and is one of the things theater is for. React the same way you would if you are hearing a good story from a friend. If you like what you see, applaud. Applause is appropriate and welcomed at the end of each act and, of course, at the conclusion of a performance. Theater is an art form. Embrace it and enjoy it.

## **THE FOURTH WALL**

In *Ripples From Walden Pond*, there are many times when the actor addresses the audience directly, making the audience part of the play. This is called "breaking the fourth wall." A stage is assumed to be a world unto itself, like a room with three walls and a fourth invisible wall. The audience sits behind the invisible fourth wall, so "breaking the fourth wall" means the actors have acknowledged the presence of the audience.

## ORIGINAL SOURCE MATERIAL AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

The Major Works of Henry David Thoreau:

*Walden, or, Life In The Woods*

*A Week On The Concord And Merrimack Rivers*

*The Maine woods*

*Journals*

*Cape Cod*

Essays:

*Resistance to Civil Government ("Civil Disobedience")*

*Autumnal Tints*

*Walking*

*The Succession of Forest Trees*

*Life Without Principle*

*Paradise (to be) Regained*

*A Plea For Captain John Brown and The Last Days of John Brown*

*The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau*, New York University press, 1958, edited by Walter Harding and Carl Bode, is a work of painstaking and indispensable scholarship.

Dover Publications at [www.doverpublications.com](http://www.doverpublications.com) offers the most affordable editions of Thoreau.

Websites: The Walden Woods Project at <https://www.walden.org/> is dedicated to preserving Thoreau's legacy and the natural environment at Walden Pond, and The Thoreau Society at <http://www.thoreausociety.org/> has an abundance of further educational materials.

### BOOKS ON THOREAU

*Thoreau, The Poet-Naturalist* by William Ellery Channing. Channing was Thoreau's closest friend, and his insightful and indispensable account is sympathetic without fawning, and particularly good concerning Thoreau's religious beliefs and his attempts to use nature as an analog, or a path, to come to terms with eternal truths and the existence of God.

*Henry Thoreau as Remembered by a Young Friend* by Edward Emerson. Emerson, the youngest child of Ralph Waldo and Lydia Emerson, was seventeen years old when Thoreau died. He loved Thoreau without adoration, and admired him while being fully aware of his faults. His memoir is a brief, engaging, and fair-minded primary source.

*Henry David Thoreau* by Joseph Wood Krutch. Krutch's is a short, very readable account of Thoreau's life and thought. Though somewhat superseded by modern scholarship, Krutch, a professional literary scholar and amateur naturalist who authored a number of entertaining books on natural history, brings a unique perspective to Thoreau that is perfectly in harmony with his subject.



There are three fine modern biographies of Thoreau. The first is Walter Harding's *The Days Of Henry David Thoreau*. Harding is the great Thoreau scholar of the twentieth century. Anyone who wants to know Thoreau is indebted to him. To walk in Thoreau's steps is to walk in Harding's as well. Harding is also the author of *A Thoreau Handbook*, a dated though still highly useful guide to published material on Thoreau.

A second great modern study of Thoreau, and the more readable, is *Henry David Thoreau: A Life of The Mind*, by Robert D. Richardson, Jr. Richardson is wonderfully free of the pseudo-scientific lit-speak jargon that is the hallmark of modern literary criticism. This is a model of literary biography.

The most recent, and perhaps the definitive study of Thoreau's life and work is *Henry David Thoreau: A Life*, by Laura Dassow Walls. Admirably written, Walls is particularly good at painting a picture of the social and cultural milieu of Thoreau's Concord, as well as offering fine sketches of his family, friends, and mentors.

#### **SUGGESTED FILMS FOR THEMES ASSOCIATED WITH HENRY DAVID THOREAU**

*The Great Debaters*

*Selma*

*Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom*

*42 (The story of Jackie Robinson)*

*Freedom Writers*

*Remember the Titans*

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