

Henry David Thoreau—*Walden* Excerpt #1

Activity One: Reading for Meaning

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 defence against the rain, without plastering or chimney, the walls being of rough, weather-stained boards, with wide chinks, which made it cool at night.

5 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. To my imagination it retained throughout the day more or less of this auroral¹ character, reminding me of a certain house on a mountain which I had visited a year before. This was an airy and unplastered cabin, fit to entertain a travelling god, and
 10 where a goddess might trail her garments. The winds which passed over my dwelling were such as sweep over the ridges of mountains, bearing the broken strains, or celestial parts only, of terrestrial music. The morning wind forever blows, the poem of creation is uninterrupted; but few are the ears that hear it. Olympus² is but the outside of the earth everywhere...

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life,
 15 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 practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like³ 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
 20 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.”

25 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,
 30 and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb-nail. 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, and he must be a great calculator indeed who succeeds. Simplify, simplify.

1 Resembling the dawn.

2 In Greek mythology, the home of the gods.

3 An ancient Greek state, whose citizens were known to be highly disciplined.

Activity Two: Understanding and Evaluating Argument

The exercises below ask that you evaluate Thoreau’s writing and determine his arguments, and create your own original argumentation.

Paragraph #1

Directions: For each of the phrases below explain how Thoreau’s language helps to develop the description of his new home.

Quotation #1—“my house was not finished for winter, but was merely a defence against the rain, without plastering or chimney”

Quotation #2—“upright white hewn studs and freshly planed door and window casings gave it a clean and airy look”

Quotation #3—“This was an airy and unplastered cabin, fit to entertain a travelling god, and where a goddess might trail her garments.”

Quotation #4—“winds which passed over my dwelling were such as sweep over the ridges of mountains”

Paragraph #2

Directions: Identify two different arguments Thoreau makes over the course of the second paragraph. Paraphrase each argument. Then, identify specific evidence from your reading, knowledge, observation, or experience that supports Thoreau’s point of view. Follow each piece of evidence with three sentences of thoughtful commentary.

Argument #1—*Paraphrase one of Thoreau’s arguments.*

Evidence—*Support Thoreau’s argument with evidence from your own knowledge.*

Commentary—*Provide three sentences of meaningful commentary about your evidence.*

Sentence #1—Explain the evidence.

Sentence #2—Discuss the importance of the evidence to Thoreau’s argument.

Sentence #3—Describe how the evidence shows the importance of Thoreau’s argument in society today.

Argument #2—*Paraphrase one of Thoreau’s arguments.*

Evidence—*Support Thoreau’s argument with evidence from your own knowledge.*

Commentary—*Provide three sentences of meaningful commentary about your evidence.*

Sentence #1—*Explain the evidence.*

Sentence #2—*Discuss the importance of the evidence to Thoreau’s argument.*

Sentence #3—*Describe how the evidence shows the importance of Thoreau’s argument in society today.*

Paragraph #3

Directions: Reread the last paragraph of the excerpt. Then, in a well-developed topic sentence and body paragraph, analyze how Thoreau develops his argument about human nature.

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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 thumb-nail. In the midst of this chopping sea of civilized life, such as 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, and he must be a great calculator indeed who succeeds. Simplify, simplify.

Topic Sentence—*How does Thoreau develop an argument about human nature?*

Evidence—*What evidence from the passage proves your topic sentence? Be specific.*

Commentary—*How does the evidence prove your topic sentence?*

Evidence—*What evidence from the passage proves your topic sentence? Be specific.*

Commentary—*How does the evidence prove your topic sentence?*

Concluding Sentence—*What is the importance of Thoreau’s argument today?*