Essay topics about Walden

1. In a speech from the early 1940s, the poet Ezra Pound dismissed Thoreau's project in less than twenty-five words: "First intellectual reaction to mere approach of industrialization: Thoreau tried to see how little he need bother about other humanity." Would you agree with Pound that the experiment Thoreau takes up at Walden Pond demonstrates his indifference to other humans? Why or why not?

2. Does Thoreau show socialist tendencies, though he is writing before socialism is a recognized idea?

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. How is *Walden* an expression of the transcendentalist vision?

5. Is the claim that the narrator of *Walden* is an anti-social recluse a valid one?

6. Describe how the narrator's financial "economy" is expanded to a philosophy of life.

7. What makes *Walden* a unified work of art rather than a "collection of eighteen essays"?

8. Discuss the seasonal metaphor that thematically unifies *Walden*.

9. Consider the significance of Walden Pond as a symbol.

10. Discuss the narrator's attitude toward the state.

11. Describe the narrator's reaction to the railroad.

12. As described in *Walden*, what is wrong with American culture?

13. Discuss the significance of the narrator's bean-field.

14. Discuss the significance of Thoreau's use of the "I" voice in *Walden*.

15. 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*?

16. 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. Is Thoreau a leader? Why or why not?

17. 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?

18. 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. He compares his weeding to the epic battles at Troy. What is the effect of all these mythological references? Do they change the overall message of the work in any important way?

19. 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?

20. 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?