Abby McDuff

*Walden* Essay

*Walden* is a book that challenges; it inspires readers to live with our eyes wide open. It shows how necessary it is to embrace curiosity and simplicity. It reminds us to know what we live for and to be familiar with where we live. It shows us that by improving how we live on the outside, it will better us on the inside. By being in touch with spirit, we will become better people. Although *Walden* was written over one hundred and fifty years ago, it seems more relevant than ever. We live in a booming world overrun by our bustling, workday lives; however, we are all still making the grand journey through life. We are all going to die someday, and, when we do, we will have wanted to live. *Walden* is a book about experience, self-help, spirituality, and simplicity. The twenty-first century is the century that Thoreau was writing for. Re-evaluating our lives and souls, getting out of our rut, and learning more about the world and ourselves is just what the world needs. There is a difference between existing and living.

One thing that *Walden* focuses on is maintaining a balance between soul, spirit, and the way we live our lives. It urges us not to elevate material possessions because, in the end, that is not what will be important. This was written between 1845 and 1854 when the world population was at a mere one billion. Nowadays, we’re pushing eight billion, and it is hard to find peace and quiet. We live in the most materialistic century to exist thus far, surrounded by technology, media, propaganda, and people. There is a constant race to upgrade and change, and it’s incredibly easy to get caught up in that. That is why Thoreau’s ideas expressed in *Walden* are more applicable than ever. Amidst the chaos, growth, new ideas, and creations, there is still you. As people, we tend to forget about ourselves; we all need to take time to relax, breathe, and become familiar with who we are. To do that, we don’t need anyone or anything else. Thoreau makes the point that society and what comes with it is not necessary, and that our minds and the nature that we are blessed with is enough to carry us:

The indescribable innocence and beneficence of Nature,—of sun and wind and rain, of summer and winter,—such health, such cheer, they afford forever! and such sympathy have they ever with our race, that all Nature would be affected, and the sun’s brightness fade, and the winds would sigh humanely, and the clouds rain tears, and the woods shed their leaves and put on a mourning in midsummer, if any man should ever for a just grieve. Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself? (183)

We are all part of something greater—the earth. Since the beginning, the earth has nourished us, allowed us to grow, and has provided what is necessary to live. We would not be where we are without its gifts. If we stripped away all of our material possessions and luxuries, we would still be able to get by and be more in touch with ourselves. Nature provides subtle company: be it the sun, birds, wind, or rain. As Thoreau says, “I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude” (180). There is so much that we can be taught just by familiarizing ourselves with the grass, with the sky, with the water, with the wind, and with the world that came long before revolutions and people. There are music and voices for those who listen, and we could come to realize this if we got away from the bustle, commotion, and routine of our everyday lives.

Another aspect of *Walden* is the idea that we need to slow down, take our time, and enjoy life and ourselves. It is natural to have the desire to strive, succeed, and move quickly to achieve our aspirations; however, it is also alright to slow down. Going about something in a different way or at a different pace should not result in judgment. Thoreau states, “Let every one mind his own business, and endeavor to be what he was made” (374). No two people are exactly alike; therefore, it only makes sense that we all lead different lives. With these diverse traits, skills, and ideas, we make the world a more interesting place. Not only that, but we can learn countless other things and absorb other cultures and be inspired. It is common to look down on people that resist conformity; this is especially true now due to the pressures that come from school, family, and the media. There is an inevitable pressure to succeed; however, most everyone has a different definition of what success is. For some, it may be money, luxury, fame, and fortune: picture a penthouse apartment, no debt, and a well-paying job. On the other hand, someone else might picture success as happiness, joy, and a sense of contentment. What is the point of harshly judging either person? What will benefit us all in the end is relaxing and focusing on ourselves rather than our neighbors. Instead of conforming to society, we need to do what is best for us. If we lie to ourselves, that will only lead to misfortune. We can find happiness in the simplest areas, and that is what is most important. In the end, life comes down to simply being. Thoreau reminds us of this by saying, “Our life is frittered away by detail” (135). People feel that there is so much to do and little time to get things done, when, really, we have done so much already and could afford time to relax. In the chapter “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For” Thoreau comments on how men are constantly rushing, determined, and almost spastic when it comes to working and advancing:

Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life? We are determined to be starved before we are hungry. Men say that a stitch in time saves nine, and so they take a thousand stitches to-day to save nine to-morrow. As for *work*, we haven’t any of any consequence. We have the Saint Vitus’ dance, and cannot possibly keep our heads still. (137)

*Walden* is even more applicable today than before, simply because of how exaggerated things have become since Thoreau’s time. Working is a huge part of life. Adults typically wake up early, commute, work for eight or nine hours, come home, have minimal time for themselves, and then rest so they can get up and repeat the process. If you think about it, we work in school to prepare ourselves for a higher education which prepares us for the workforce. It’s a huge process that consumes a significant chunk of our living.

Another idea expressed in *Walden* that is still relevant today is that change is always possible and is usually healthy. We develop paths and patterns that we follow daily and dig ourselves into a rut that seems inescapable. We accept the same lifestyles and routines. While we make great proposals about things that we desire to do, they are usually never accomplished. Thoreau makes an excellent point in “Conclusion” about how we accept repetitiveness and tradition while there is so much more to experience in the world:

There is an incessant influx of novelty into the world, and yet we tolerate incredible dullness. I need only suggest what kind of sermons are still listened to in the most enlightened countries. There are such words as joy and sorrow, but they are only the burden of a psalm, sung with a nasal twang, while we believe in the ordinary and mean. We think that we can change our clothes only. (381)

The changes that Thoreau encourages may be simple like a change in location, occupation, or something of that nature; however, what he really wants is for us to remold and remake our souls. It is incredibly important to resist conformity and tradition, try new things, and become more aware of the world around you. We can benefit from reaching out of our comfort zones and submerging ourselves in new cultures, lifestyles, and experiences. Change can be hard to accept, but it happens all of the time. We grow and learn, caterpillars evolve into butterflies, and seasons come and go. It’s all part of the grand scheme of things. Life is shorter than we seem to realize. When the time comes to move on to whatever comes next, we will have wanted to have lived life to the fullest instead of playing it safe. Our brains are so fixated on what we know that we avoid going on other paths that could introduce even more aspirations and accomplishments. It took Thoreau two years of living the life he thought he wanted before he realized that he needed to branch off and try new things. As Thoreau says, “Thank Heaven, here is not all the world” (368). There are countless things to be discovered, and that will never happen on a daily commute. There are expeditions waiting to happen, countries waiting to be explored, back roads waiting to be traveled on, and adventures waiting to happen. The world expands farther than our backyards, and that is something that people have a difficult time realizing. If people adopted an engaged, open-minded lifestyle, and a desire to explore and change, the world would be a better place.

*Walden* is an inspiring read, a self-help guide, and has many timeless lessons that should be applied to all generations. It causes us to reevaluate our lives, our minds, and our souls. It reminds us that life does not consist of one path, but millions. It shows us the importance of spirit, respect, and simplicity. This book helps us see beauty, justice, and potential where it isn’t obvious. *Walden* was written over one hundred and fifty years ago, but is still as relevant and powerful today; it celebrates the fact that the whole world lies before us. Thoreau reminds us that we shouldn’t waste away the hours that we are blessed with: “As if you could kill time without injuring eternity!” (372). We all have our lives ahead of us, and it is important that we put them to good use.