

Henry David Thoreau's Life and Works

Dr. Raju T. Malagimani*

Lecturer, S.D.M. (Shri Dharmasthala Manjunatheshwara) P.U. College, Honnavar, Karnataka

Abstract – Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) was a great American author. Thoreau was a younger member of the transcendentalist group that flourished in mid 19th-century New England and was probably its best literary artist. His fame rests primarily on his unique master piece *Walden* and his famous essays like “Civil Disobedience” that influenced anti-establishmentarians like Mahatma Gandhi.

-----X-----

EARLY LIFE:

Thoreau was born in Concord, Mass in 1817, and Concord remained the center of his world, although he spent several years of his early childhood in neighbouring towns and later lived briefly elsewhere. His college career (1833-1837) at nearby Harvard brought him two gifts – the discovery of the world of books and friendship with Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Having read Emerson's essay *Nature* (1836) an expression of the main principles of transcendentalism, the young Thoreau was prepared for the full impact of Emerson's address, *The American Scholar*, delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Harvard in 1837. That was the Declaration of Independence for American Literature, Oliver Wendell Holmes approved this. So did another audience J.R. Lowell. In that address Emerson called for leadership of American society by native scholars, who have become self-reliant and independent of the “popular cry” through following the precepts “Know thyself” and “Study nature.” Wherein Emerson spoke of two democratic principles – individuality and self-reliance which later paved way for capitalism and the rise of middle class.

Thoreau went to live as a member of Emerson's household from 1841 to 1843 and again in 1847–1848. Through this connection he came to know Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, and other members of the Transcendental Club. He helped Emerson edit the transcendental periodical *The Dial* and contributed a number of poems and essays to it. This was his first incentive to authorship and his first outlet, just as the transcendental “fellowship” furnished most of his literary friendships, at least in his early years. But he was a detached participant at best and was never Emerson's disciple. As a creative writer, Thoreau is most interesting when farthest removed from Emerson. It was too unfortunate for the critic J.R. Lowell to call him ‘the windfall’ in Emerson's garden. The hearty readers cannot forgive Lowell for this.

Like Emerson, Thoreau taught school with his brother John, “tried tutoring for a few months, and from time to time was engaged in his father's business of manufacturing pencils, but his goal was one that could not be fitted to an everyday profession. He was a dedicated poet, and the audience for this kind of writing was especially limited.

MIDDLE AND LATER YEARS:

Thoreau carried out his well-known experiment in living—the residence at Walden Pond, near Concord, from July 4, 1845, to Sept. 6, 1847—partly to determine whether he could support himself in a minimal way by light manual labor and thus have most of his time free for writing. The Walden Pond belonged to Emerson which he allowed for Thoreau's experiment. This Walden experiment was a model for Mahatma Gandhi later. Gandhi was inspired by Thoreau's ideology for his own Satyagrah. When he left the pond, Thoreau had completed the manuscript of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and an early draft of *Walden*. Thereafter he lived at his family's home in Concord and made a bare living as a handy man. Thoreau did surveying, lecturing, teaching, collecting natural organisms in the forest. He was a naturalist.

By most of the citizens of Concord, Thoreau was considered an eccentric. His rare nature-lore, unusual manual skills, and keen common sense won admiration, but when he expressed his deep-convictions through dramatic action, he provoked mixed feelings of respect and dismay. His withdrawal to Walden Pond was one such occasion. Another was his refusal in 1845 to pay his taxes, in protest against the Mexican War and the extension of slavery; he thus forced the Concord jailer to lock him up. This event found expression in his best-known essay *Civil Disobedience*. Near the end of his life Thoreau once again defied society by being almost the first to come to the defenses of John

Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry (1859). He rang the bell himself at the Concord town hall; to call a meeting, and in his *Plea for Captain John Brown*, he exceeded the most fanatical abolitionists. He died in Concord on May 6, 1862. This was to say that Thoreau lived as he exactly preached. He was bolder than Emerson.

WORKS:

Thoreau never earned a living by his pen. His first book was a spectacular failure: printed locally at his own expense in 1849, *A Week* sold only 219 of the original 1,000 copies. *Walden* finally appeared in 1854 under the imprint of a leading Boston publisher. Although it received some good reviews, five years were required to dispose of an edition of 2,000 copies. The body of his works intended for publication includes these two books, some poems and numerous essays, and the posthumously published *Excursions* (1863), *The Maine Woods* (1864), *Cape Cod* (1865), and *A Yankee in Canada* (1866).

A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers (1849): This book usually has been considered Thoreau's most transcendental work because it is concerned with the quality of experience. The journey follows the natural course of the rivers and a literal span of seven days, but this apparent simplicity masks the work's complex structure. For one thing, the journey extends back into history, since travelers on these streams move geographically from civilization to primitive country. There is also outward-bound voyage—against the current, upstream to the source; then the return, rapidly downstream, with the flow of time. Less obvious but more interesting are the symbols suggesting the week of Creation as described in Genesis.

WALDEN (1854):

As a discovery of nature, *A Week* forms an introduction to *Walden*—Thoreau's exploration, through nature, of the life of the spirit. For nearly a century after *Walden's* publication this masterpiece was interpreted as a collection of nature essays, as social criticism, or as literal autobiography. All these approaches throw light on facets of the book, but they leave the central vision untouched. More recently *Walden* has been approached as a created work of art, even as a poem in prose. Intricate circular imagery centers on the pond as a symbol of heaven, the ideal of perfection striven for. Such a reading assumes that the work's meaning resides in its language, its structure of images, its symbolism and is inseparable from them. It is a lay Bible.

JOURNALS:

Thoreau's contemporary reputation was based on *A Week* and *Walden*, plus a few fine essays such as *Walking*, *Wild Apples*, and *Life without Principle*. The

great bulk of his writing consists of his private *Journal*, covering his life from 1837 to 1862, which was not published until nearly 50 years after his death. It is not diary but an artist's workbook that records his observations, material for his works, and experiments in a new literary genre of miniatures. With the publication of the *Journal* (14 vols., 1906) Thoreau came into his own as a major writer.

REFERENCES

1. Crevecoeur, Hector. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. New York: WWNorton, 2000. Print.
2. VanSpanckeren, Kathryn. *American Literature*. New York: US Dept. of State, 1994. Print.

Corresponding Author

Dr. Raju T. Malagimani*

Lecturer, S.D.M. (Shri Dharmasthala Manjunatheshwara) P.U. College, Honnavar, Karnataka

rajumm.m12@gmail.com