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American Studies English 11

Transcendentalism

Henry David Thoreau

“Walden”

Background Notes on Thoreau:

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| Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) advocated simple, mindful living and rejected a lifestyle dedicated to the pursuit of  wealth. Thoreau spent much of his life writing and observing nature, devoting only a minimum of time to earning a wage.  Thoreau’s life was full of examples of his nonconformity to society’s norms. As a Harvard student, he was required to wear a  a black coat but sported a green one instead. In his first year teaching, he refused to punish his students physically. In 1845,  he conducted his famous experiment, living simply and frugally in a small cabin on the shores of Walden Pond. In 1846,  he was arrested and spent a night in jail for refusing to pay a poll tax, an act of protest against the U.S government’s war with  Mexico and its support of slavery. Thoreau’s exercise of “conscience over law” later became known as civil disobedience.  Thoreau died at age 44 from tuberculosis. |

Reading Questions

1. At what time of year does Thoreau begin living in the cabin?
2. How does Thoreau describe the cabin?
3. What natural features surround the cabin?
4. Summarize Thoreau’s reasons for moving to the woods.
5. What do Thoreau’s ideas about the news and letters reveal about his nonconformity?
6. Why do you think Thoreau capitalizes Nature?
7. What tenets of Transcendentalism are evident in this passage? For each tenet of Transcendentalism you identify,

offer an explanation and support with a DQ.