

Banha University - Faculty of Arts
English Department
Third Year Students

American Literature (19 Century)

Lecture 5

Dr Iman A. Hanafy

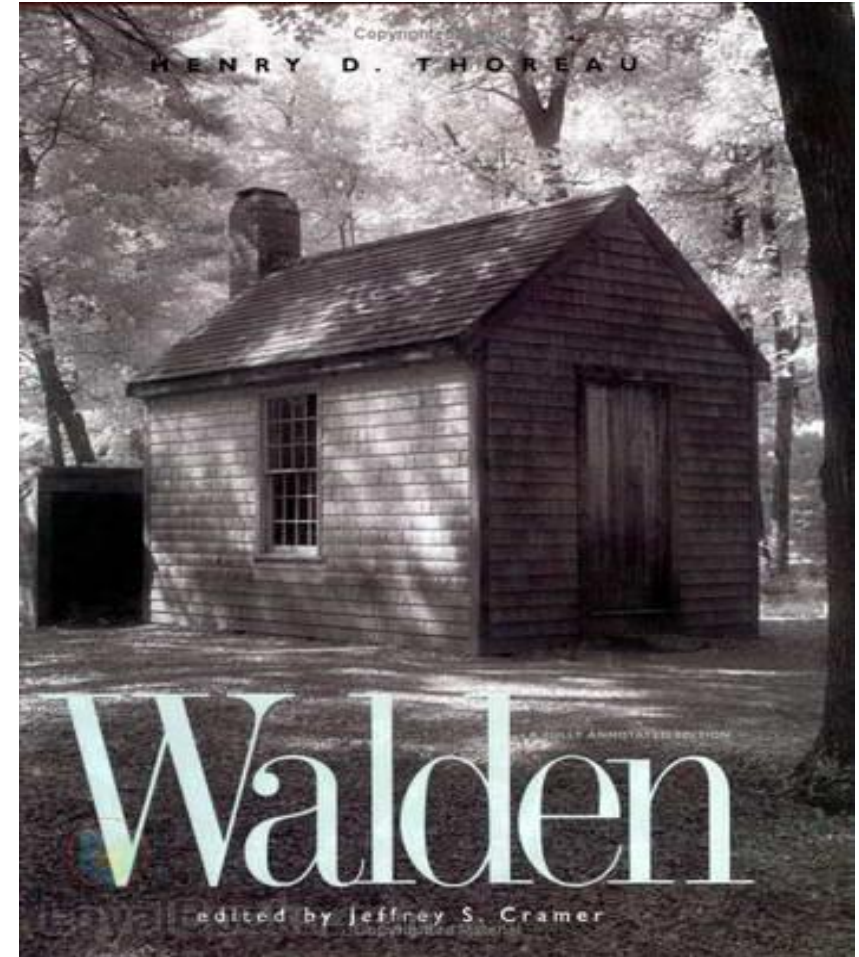
Professor of English Literature

Faculty of Arts- Banha University

Walden Economy

By

Henry David Thoreau



Symbols

- Economy
- Walden Pond
- Savage

Economy

- "Economy" is the longest and most important chapter in *Walden*, occupying about one-third of the book. The first impression may be that "Economy" is an odd title for part of a philosophical work. However, the chapter discusses money, wealth, power, business, trade, work, working conditions, and the plight of the poor. Because of the emphasis that Thoreau places on these issues, "Economy" should be seen as an alternative to the "Communist Manifesto".
- "Economy" can also be seen as an ironic or even sarcastic title, because the last thing that Thoreau is interested in is money. In fact, throughout *Walden* but especially in "Economy," Thoreau draws a parallel between others' preoccupation with money and his own enjoyment of non-monetary wealth, thus Thoreau's mathematical-sounding and apparently paradoxical statement, "A man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can afford to leave alone."

Economy

- Once we understand Thoreau, we recognize that "rich" refers to having the opportunity for spiritual and intellectual gains and "afford" refers to self-actualization rather than to cash in the bank. Repeatedly in "Economy," Thoreau uses materialistic terms to refer to non-materialist values, making fun of the capitalists in the process. Thus he presents his moving to Walden as purely a capitalist and economic venture because Walden is a good port.

Economy

- Finally, "Economy" can also be seen as simply a truthful title, as Thoreau uses this opportunity to discuss the issue of how we spend our time and energies. It's quite obvious that his townspeople are not economical as they "sew a thousand stitches today to save nine tomorrow," spending many hours of hard work to accomplish very little, thus showing a false sense of economy. In this first part, Thoreau provides a brief introduction to Walden and then begins to discuss the labors of his neighbors and the preoccupations of his society.

Walden Pond

- Walden Pond is not just the setting, but also an important symbol in the book. Everything about Walden clarity, its reflective surface, its depth, the specific qualities of its water and its ice – provides Thoreau with yet another occasion to contemplate some aspect of human life.
- Walden Pond is the "earth's eye," he writes, "looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature"

Walden Pond

- The meanings of Walden Pond are various, and by the end of the work this small body of water comes to symbolize almost everything Thoreau holds dear spiritually, philosophically, and personally. Certainly it symbolizes the alternative to, and withdrawal from, social conventions and obligations. But it also symbolizes the vitality and tranquility of nature. A clue to the symbolic meaning of the pond lies in two of its aspects that fascinate Thoreau: its depth, rumored to be infinite, and its pure and reflective quality.

Walden Pond

- Thoreau is so intrigued by the question of how deep Walden Pond is ? Wondering why people rumor that the pond is bottomless, Thoreau offers a spiritual explanation: humans need to believe in infinity. He suggests that the pond is not just a natural phenomenon, but also a metaphor for spiritual belief. When he later describes the pond reflecting heaven and making the swimmer's body pure white, we feel that Thoreau too is turning the water (as in the Christian sacrament of baptism by holy water) into a symbol of heavenly purity available to humankind on earth.

Savage

- In *Walden*, Thoreau frequently compares American society to what were then considered "primitive" or "savage" societies, such as that of the Native Americans. Thoreau also compares our society with ancient societies such as the Greek or Chinese. In both of these comparisons, American society often loses. Instead of becoming a more just society, Thoreau sees everywhere around him a barbaric attachment to wealth and political power. We are still savages, according to Thoreau, and worse, we haven't even maintained the best customs of so-called savage societies. Thoreau argues that the project of civilization remains incomplete as long as materialism, injustice, and intolerance prevail.