

Henry David Thoreau. Walden – From Chapter 1, “Economy”

When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only. I lived there two years and two months. At present I am a sojourner in civilized life again. (1)

I should not obtrude my affairs so much on the notice of my readers if very particular inquiries had not been made by my townsmen concerning my mode of life, which some would call impertinent, though they do not appear to me at all impertinent, but, considering the circumstances, very natural and pertinent. ... I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience. Moreover, I, on my side, require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life, and not merely what he has heard of other men's lives; some such account as he would send to his kindred from a distant land; for if he has lived sincerely, it must have been in a distant land to me. Perhaps these pages are more particularly addressed to poor students. As for the rest of my readers, they will accept such portions as apply to them. I trust that none will stretch the seams in putting on the coat, for it may do good service to him whom it fits.... (2)

Most men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them. Their fingers, from excessive toil, are too clumsy and tremble too much for that. Actually, the laboring man has not leisure for a true integrity day by day; he cannot afford to sustain the manliest relations to men; his labor would be depreciated in the market. He has no time to be anything but a machine. How can he remember well his ignorance—which his growth requires—who has so often to use his knowledge? We should feed and clothe him gratuitously sometimes, and recruit him with our cordials, before we judge of him. The finest qualities of our nature, like the bloom on fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate handling. Yet we do not treat ourselves nor one another thus tenderly. ... The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats. A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind. There is no play in them, for this comes after work. But it is a characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things. (3)

Define Each Word

sojourner: _____

obtrude: _____

impertinent: _____

factitious: _____

gratuitously: _____

Write the Correct Word from the Vocabulary

1. Orson feels no compunction when he _____ on the private conversations of others.
2. Western colonizers created _____ borders for many African nations, ignoring natural geographic or tribal boundaries.
3. Alexander Dumenici wrote about his experiences as a _____ in several countries of East Africa.
4. Rude patrons sometimes criticize the actors _____ after a performance.
5. The _____ child hurled insults at his babysitter, as if the sitter had no feelings.

Comprehension and Discussion: Answer Each Question in Complete Sentences

1. According to Thoreau, what prevents most men from “plucking” the “finer fruits” of life? Is he correct? Why (not)?

2. What does Thoreau mean when he writes, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation”? Do you think Thoreau is correct?

