

Economy

I wrote most of this book while I was living alone in the woods near the town of Concord, Massachusetts. I lived in a house that I built myself, on the shores of Walden Pond, a mile from any neighbor. I earned my living by the labor of my own hands for two years and two months. I have now returned to civilized society.

Ordinarily, I would not talk about myself so much, but a number of people from town have asked me questions about how I lived. Some asked what I ate, if I felt lonely, if I wasn't afraid, and so on. Others asked if I contributed

part of my income to the poor. I hope that readers who have no particular interest in my personal life will forgive me for answering some of these questions in this book.

In most books, the word “I” is not used at all. In this book I will use it quite often. After all, whether the author uses the word “I” or not, it is the author who is speaking. While you may think that I talk about myself far too much, in fact there is no one else that I know so well. I am forced to talk about myself by the narrowness of my experience. For myself, what I ask of an author is a simple, honest account of his own life, not what he has read or heard about other people’s lives. Such an account should be something like a letter that the author might send to his family from a foreign country. If such an author exists and has, in fact, lived a simple, honest life, I am sure he couldn’t have lived anywhere near me.

Perhaps this book is written mainly for poor students. As for other readers, they may try on the coat to see if it fits, but if it doesn’t, they shouldn’t stretch it out of shape. For those whom it does fit, it may serve them well.

I don’t wish to concern myself with people in distant lands like China or Hawaii, but rather people just like you,

living here in this town, in this state, and in the surrounding area of New England. I wish to say something about your condition in the world and in this town. Is it necessary that things be as bad as they are? Can't they be improved?

I have traveled a good deal in Concord. Everywhere I go—in shops, in offices, in fields—people seem to be carrying some terrible burden on their shoulders. I have heard of holy men in India who engage in strange and wonderful things as a religious discipline, such as staring directly into the face of the sun, or hanging upside-down over a fire, or spending their entire lives at the foot of a tree. As incredible as this all may seem, I have seen things just as astonishing in the daily life around me.

I know young men who have inherited farms, houses, barns, cattle, and tools, and once they have them, they are stuck with them. It would have been better had they been born in a field and raised by wolves. At least then, they would have had a chance to choose their own path, the one best suited to them.

Who made them slaves to the soil? Who said they had to begin digging their own graves as soon as they were

born? Yet, here they are, forced to live their lives pulling all these things behind them. How many men have I known who were nearly crushed by the weight of it all? How many men have I seen going slowly down the road of life, pulling along a house and a barn, fields and woods? Even for those who have no inherited burdens like this, life is hard enough!

Most people's lives are based on a mistake—that it is possible though hard work to save up something of lasting value. But all material things decay and eventually turn to dust, and so this is the life of a fool, as they will soon find out when they get to the end of it, if not before.

Even in a fairly free country like ours, most people are so occupied with their work that they can't enjoy the fruit of their labors. Their hands, minds, and bodies are too exhausted for that. Ordinary working people can't afford to live an honest life. They cannot afford to live like human beings, not machines. They don't recognize where they're lacking in knowledge about life—something that is necessary for growth—because they're so busy using the knowledge they have in order to make a living. Before judging such people, perhaps we should first show some charity. The best

qualities of human nature require careful handling, just as a peach must be carefully handled. The truth is, we do not treat one another with as much delicacy as we should.

Some of you, I'm sure, are poor. Some of you find it hard to make a living. Some probably find it hard, almost, to breathe. Others have likely not paid for all the meals they have already eaten. Others are unable to buy new coats or shoes to replace the ones that are now wearing thin. You may, in fact, be reading this book on stolen time, time you should be using to pay back a debt.

I know, from experience, what low lives most of you live. I know you live at the limits of your means—always trying to drum up some business, always trying to get out of debt, always promising to pay tomorrow, not today; trying to get on people's good side to win their business, and feigning friendliness toward your neighbors so they'll let you make their shoes, their hats, their coats. You make yourself ill saving up for a rainy day, hoping to put away a little money—somehow, someday.

I sometimes wonder why we are so concerned about black slavery in the South when there are so many clever kinds of slave masters both in the North and in the South.

It is hard to have a Southern slave master standing over you; it is harder to have a Northern one. Worst of all is when you yourself are both slave master and slave. Talk about the human race being Godlike! Look at the driver of a wagon and horses, working both day and night. His greatest duty is to feed and water his horses. What value does he see in his life when he compares it with that of his employer? Isn't he always afraid of something? How Godlike is he then? He is nothing but a prisoner of his own opinion of himself, an opinion he has earned by the lowness of his existence. Public opinion is a gentle master compared with private opinion. What we think of ourselves in private is what determines our future.

The Adventure of Life

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. Men and women in general may say that they have simply accepted their lot in life, but in reality they have given up hope. From the city, filled with hopeless people, we go to the country, also filled with hopeless people. Except, at least in the country, the brave animals bring some cheer to life. Even the games people play, and the other things they do