

Name: _____ Class: _____

Excerpt from Walden: “The Ponds”

By Henry David Thoreau
1854

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) was an American author, essayist, and philosopher. He was one of the major figures of Transcendentalism, a movement that valued the spiritual over the material. The following excerpt comes from his best-known work, Walden, in which he reflects upon his two years spent living in the wilderness near Walden Pond in Massachusetts. As you read, take notes on the words Thoreau uses to describe the scene before him.

[1] It is a soothing employment, on one of those fine days in the fall when all the warmth of the sun is fully appreciated, to sit on a stump on such a height as this, overlooking the pond, and study the dimpling circles which are incessantly¹ inscribed on its otherwise invisible surface amid the reflected skies and trees. Over this great expanse there is no disturbance but it is thus at once gently smoothed away and assuaged, as, when a vase of water is jarred, the trembling circles seek the shore and all is smooth again. Not a fish can leap or an insect fall on the pond but it is thus reported in circling dimples, in lines of beauty, as it were the constant welling up of its fountain, the gentle pulsing of its life, the heaving of its breast. The thrills of joy and thrills of pain are undistinguishable. How peaceful the phenomena of the lake! Again the works of man shine as in the spring. Ay, every leaf and twig and stone and cobweb sparkles now at mid-afternoon as when covered with dew in a spring morning. Every motion of an oar or an insect produces a flash of light; and if an oar falls, how sweet the echo!



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In such a day, in September or October, Walden is a perfect forest mirror, set round with stones as precious to my eye as if fewer or rarer. Nothing so fair, so pure, and at the same time so large, as a lake, perchance, lies on the surface of the earth. Sky water. It needs no fence. Nations come and go without defiling it. It is a mirror which no stone can crack, whose quicksilver will never wear off, whose gilding Nature continually repairs; no storms, no dust, can dim its surface ever fresh; — a mirror in which all impurity presented to it sinks, swept and dusted by the sun's hazy brush, — this the light dust-cloth, — which retains no breath that is breathed on it, but sends its own to float as clouds high above its surface, and be reflected in its bosom still.

A field of water betrays the spirit that is in the air. It is continually receiving new life and motion from above. It is intermediate in its nature between land and sky. On land only the grass and trees wave, but the water itself is rippled by the wind. I see where the breeze dashes across it by the streaks or flakes of light. It is remarkable that we can look down on its surface. We shall, perhaps, look down thus on the surface of air at length, and mark where a still subtler spirit sweeps over it.

1. **Incessant** (*adjective*): continuing without pause or interruption

Walden by Henry David Thoreau (1854) is in the public domain.

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: What is the meaning of “assuaged” as it is used in paragraph 1?
 - A. calmed
 - B. alerted
 - C. reflected
 - D. muted

2. PART B: Which phrase from paragraph 1 provides context for the meaning of “assuaged”?
 - A. “fully appreciated”
 - B. “smooth again”
 - C. “welling up”
 - D. “circling dimples”

3. PART A: What is Thoreau’s purpose in the passage from “Walden”?
 - A. to describe his reasons for visiting Walden Pond and its surroundings
 - B. to argue for the preservation and reclamation of Walden Pond in the face of human intrusion
 - C. to explain why most people are not able to appreciate the beauty of nature
 - D. to describe the permanence of a natural scene

4. PART B: Select TWO quotations that most clearly reveal Thoreau’s purpose in the passage.
 - A. “It is a soothing employment, on one of those fine days in the fall when all the warmth of the sun is fully appreciated, to sit on a stump on such a height as this, overlooking the pond” (Paragraph 1)
 - B. “Over this great expanse there is no disturbance but it is thus at once gently smoothed away and assuaged” (Paragraph 1)
 - C. “Not a fish can leap or an insect fall on the pond but it is thus reported in circling dimples, in lines of beauty” (Paragraph 1)
 - D. “In such a day, in September or October, Walden is a perfect forest mirror, set round with stones as precious to my eye as if fewer or rarer.” (Paragraph 2)
 - E. “It is a mirror which no stone can crack, whose quicksilver will never wear off, whose gilding Nature continually repairs” (Paragraph 2)
 - F. “It is intermediate in its nature between land and sky.” (Paragraph 3)

