Jonathan Wolfe

This is a nicely turned summary of Thoreau's position—you've included some of his more quotable lines too. It's good so far as it goes, but because the essay tries to cover Walden in five pages it cannot help but be general and sketchy. This epitome of Walden might be useful to someone unfamiliar with the book, but what's here for someone who has? This is such a queer book, with so much that calls for explanation, it seems rather a pity not to discuss how and why Thoreau writes the way he does, or to take on concepts like nature, simplicity, and perspective in a way that might get into what HDT actually says about them—which can be pretty interesting as opposed to a bald summary. (Did you notice how he carefully avoids this kind of presentation himself? His essays are filled with paradoxes and particularities to grab our attention and provoke our thought.)

I would suggest taking on just a little bit of what you cover and making more of it. Take the notion of "simplicity" for instance: how does make this idea complex? He plainly regards his own life as quite complex as opposed to the numbing repetition of the lives of we non-philosophers. What then is the "simplicity" he calls for? Or, take perspective. Thoreau does all manner of stunning things with perspective, leaping from one point of view to another—from the material to the spiritual register, from the macroscopic to the microscopic, from the historical to the mythological. You could give some examples that would illustrate how "perspective" works in Walden as a literary device calculated to make us think. Very seldom does he "gain perspective" in the common sense of being "grounded"—instead he uses it to make his thoughts "fly." Better, then, to avoid flattening it all by summary. Dig in; read; interpret; play with it. Grade: B+

Ben Welch

This works well because you are using the dialogue pretty effectively. The obnoxious interviewer gets off some pointed questions that allow HDT to rise to the occasion. Apart from this, HDT, while he might have been a saint, was certainly an annoying person and this comes across well in the dialogue. You pick up on his selfless egotism (to use an oxymoron) very nicely. In fact all of your points are good, so good that they would be worth *really* polishing to get the sense and expression down as precisely as HDT does himself. You have read this book with understanding, and it shows in the conversation. It needs a better conclusion though. It makes sense that Thoreau would exit like this—lightly—but wouldn't he want to close with a zinger? He generally does. How then to let saunter off while it the same time making some sort of remark that would reverberate once he's gone? I dunno, but I think that's what is required to nail the dialogue. Maybe he ends with a punning question of the Zen variety. As you see, I like this essay enough to fret about it. Thoreau's character is not the easiest thing to capture, but by means of dialogue you bring him out pretty well. Grade: A

Andrew Wimbish

This is a good appreciation of Thoreau that touches upon several key themes and gets into enough detail to keep things lively. It is good to select three essays rather than trying to swallow the whole book, though even three can be a bit much considering how "busy" this book is. To get this up to the next level you would make the essay less of a gush and more of an argument. Select some particular thing to link the three essays together in likeness and difference, showing how HDT handles that particular thing in different contexts. Perhaps it would be useful to concentrate on what "transcendentalism" is, since it is not an easy concept. You could show how this common thing plays out with respect to the various topics of discussion in your three essays. To add still another level of argument, you could place the three essays in some kind of sequence, moving towards a climax or conclusion. "Here's how the natural-supernatural dynamic plays out with respect to reading, economics, and biology," etc.

Your writing, while it still suffers from the old problems, seems better this time. I'd work at paring away all superfluous verbiage in the process of revision. Once the sentences are reduced to naked form, you could easily catch the problems with verb agreement and so forth. Then, go back and add a modifier here or a phrase there to restore a bit of emphasis and rhetorical color. Get picky and selective while revising; every word should count. I expect the prose will still flow nicely if you really have an argument to make—just don't let the words, as opposed to ideas, run away with you. Grade: B+

Angela Romaine

Hey, you are up and running here! You manage to pack into a small essay much thought and detail. A little too much perhaps—it might gain from dropping one paragraph and using the space to develop some of the others, perhaps mixing in some quotation since HDT's writing is so clever. But, really, you do pretty well as it is: consider that in your five pages you cover most of what it took me two lectures to work through, and often you are more cogent than I was. Were there time, you could go back through nipping, tucking, adding a little cyclical patterning to your essay and a little yo-yo dialectic in imitation of HDT.

To really ace this, go for the "mirror": how is reading a Thoreau essay like hoeing a row of beans? Discuss the back and forth, the waiting for something to happen, the sense that you the reader are sharing the labor with him the writer in a farmer-and-bean-sort-of-way. Reading HDT is hard work, but a playful experience too. And so on. The metaphors for reading and thinking are already "planted" in this essay. Water them with your thoughts, and they will grow and flower. Grade: A-

Brayden Burleigh

That's the thing: play with it. Both of your ideas prove fruitful and neither of them are particularly obvious, which gives your reader the pleasure of discovery. It works.

It might work better if you were to go with one or the other, or to add a third just to show how clever you are (and he is). As it stands, the second (and to me more interesting) idea seems a bit like an afterthought. I don't know whether it would be better to add one or to drop one, but the present arrangement is a wee bit awkward.

The advantage to dropping one would be that there would be more space for quotation, which would add much to the essay. Not long sentences, but just a sprinkle of words and phrases to keep us close to the text and to add sparkle and color. If you are going with the neighbor theme, I think it might be legit to introduce a brief anecdote or two of your own in an informal, neighborly sort of way. The reading theme might be more of a challenge to illustrate: can you find an example of HDT's "bit of cheese" in the essay and describe the chase-after-sense through one of his torturous paragraphs? Give a particular example of something he is as tenacious about as a warrior ant? If skillfully but playfully done, this could be mighty impressive.

I enjoyed this thoroughly. Grade: A

Samantha Freeburn

This is a very satisfying essay. There's something about your plain-spoken prose that is calming and which harmonizes nicely with the sentiments. La, you illustrate your points and make HDT sound positively rational! Maybe the harmony has to do with the contrast between his leaping about and your holding fast to the thread. Whatever. It works.

The thing I would tamper with is the last paragraph. One doesn't need a summary for so short an essay—there hasn't been time enough to forget. But you might gain something by going back over the ground again in a summary sort of way if there is a new twist to it. Maybe this could be done by working with a particular passage or image that "sums it all up" so that by unpacking the passage in a decorative, seemingly superfluous way, you could return to key points in your essay and make them memorable by an elegant little repetition-with-variation.

I enjoyed this much: good reading and good writing, a fine way to polish off the term. Grade: A.

Have you taken any philosophy classes? It occurs to me that philosophy might be the direction in which your twig is bent. They do interesting things with language….

Reece Prothero

Do you have any notion how hard it is to slap a grade on something like this? As if I were a literary critic or something.

Well, here goes. While it goes on too long, the dialogue has potential. Gilia's big speech is fine, but whack away at the rest of what she has to say lest she begin to seem like a bore. Douglas is excellent. He talks like a regular sleeper. The trick is to get a little sleeper-ness into the other characters. I wish I knew how trees talk—Tolkien did—but you could give them tree-like thoughts by keeping wooden images and metaphors before the reader. The Southern setting is a good idea: use it. Let's hear a little evangelical, wash-me-in-the waters discourse. It could be hilarious to do Yankee Thoreau in Alabama dialect. If the setting is 1840s, you could do a *runaway*-sleeper theme, which might lead you to some narrative closure. I like the way you keep it physical ("half-buried")—this adds color and flavor. Invent a sleeper-heaven, green, cool, that half-forgotten, stream-watered hillside. Kari might find that bo-o-o-ring and frivolous compared to their current importance in advancing the cause of civilization by upholding the transportation system. Yah, I can see it. You've got the idea, from here it is just a matter of execution. Grade: B+

Kendall Pace

Ta-tah! You've got it. It doesn't always work so well to simply follow the course of the essay, but it makes sense here, and you work in enough detail that it doesn't seem at all sketchy. You might give the essay a bit more of an argument by grabbing the bull by the horns and just saying "Thoreau's essay about sounds is really about time," which would grab our attention and give you more of a focus. You realize this, but don't make much of it. But since you've made this discovery, and it's not so obvious, why not push the idea forward an make an essay of it?

I'm so glad you did "Sounds": the digression on the trains is one of my favorite bits in *Walden*, well worth an essay of its own. Wow! And you are right: he is less offended by the trains per se than by their uses and consequences. Historians argue that railroads had a revolutionary effect on perceptions of time. They plainly fascinate HDT, and with his queer objectivity he treats them as belonging to the Walden landscape like everything else. And did I say that you are writing well? You are indeed. It all comes together here, a good way to round off the term. Grade: A

Christa Hoeffler

I enjoyed reading this—your prose is admirable and you mix in plenty of detail and pace yourself very nicely. I like, too, the way you pick up on the published versus printed distinction, which I had not noticed, and run with it. This makes for an elegant essay.

The nature versus design distinction seems less happy, as if not yet thought through or thoroughly tested against the text. I suspect that HDT is more subtle than what passes for common sense among us, and that he would not accept such a duality. He is, after all, a creationist for whom nature *is* design and governed by laws. He is fond of pointing out the natural basis of human behavior. There is of course *something* to what you say about nature versus design, but I suspect that these are not the best words to capture the distinction. Perhaps it would be better to run with just publish and print, a novel distinction calculated to keep us on our toes.

As I think about this, it seems to me that this "sound" essay is deliberately paired with the preceding essay on "reading": they are both more concerned with time than with their ostensible subjects. Did you notice how "Sounds" follows the course of a twenty-four hour natural day? That the sounds are usually linked to time (like the concluding riff on the cockerel)? The wonderful digression on trains is all about perceptions of time. I suspect that time is more significant here than the nature-design distinction. Yet there's that concluding image of the house permeated by nature—is that there to set up the next essay? We're not to the bottom of "Sounds" quite yet.

What might time have to do with the publish-print distinction, or as HDT also puts it, the "reading" versus "seeing" distinction? That's the question I'm left with after reading your fine essay. Grade: A-

Beth Cameron

Sleepers awake! Wow, but I can empathize with this since my own daughter, having made a mess of things up at UVa, is currently washing dishes for a living as she dreams new dreams. Parents can be a burden, even when they are not particularly "pressing." But I take the different-drummer argument to heart, and I am as confident of your ultimate success as I am of hers. College is a great place to have such a breakdown. I did it myself when bombing out of a supposed career in architecture. My best literature students have generally been ex-engineers.

College, when done right, is a kind of Walden experience. One has to cope with the practical business of bills and laundry and living on one's own, but at the same time we're only a couple of metaphorical miles from the village, camping out in a pup-tent in the back yard. But if we manage to keep on the alert, eyes and ears open, all attention—well, college life becomes the universe, just like little Walden pond. A wonderful place to think and reflect if one puts one's mind to it. The college cycles (which drove my daughter ballistic with anxiety) are to me the stuff of life: one is always beginning again, the sun rising like the morning star.

For what it's worth, I suggest that you make some forays into digital humanities while you are here. In many ways it's engineering without the math: lots of logic of course, but no equations. You get to make stuff, stuff where content matters and literary skills are prized. Talk to me about this if you are curious.

You are writing well, and of course engaging with HDT. Grade: A-

Jaqueline Bailey

This is a good essay written in smooth, easy-going prose with enough detail to keep it interesting. You *get* Thoreau just fine. The way to boost it up the next degree would be to add some more argument to the summary. The thing that suggests itself is the comment on HDT's obnoxiousness and condescension. I'm glad you put this in, and wonder if you couldn't get an essay out of this, using it as the entry-point to your discussion of solitude. Hermits and prophets are obnoxious people of course, always after us to mend our ways. It goes with the territory. But I wonder whether, musing on what he has to say about solitude, you couldn't make something more of this, thinking about the role he assigns to the reader of his essays. The other thing that comes to mind is the business about the old settler and the elderly dame. There's a great mystery about them (so it seems to me) and he occasionally alludes to them elsewhere. Who are they? My guess is that they are History and Nature, but I'm not at all sure who these companions in solitude might be.

Isn't the concluding bit about patent-medicines clever? Selling us bottled air in place of snake-oil? Air seems to be what the prophet has on offer, to what profit remains to be seen. I enjoyed your essay. Grade: B+

Conner Fowler

I'm sorry you've had to read HDT for so many classes—yikes! But I suppose there are worse things, and I quite agree that it is different each time. For sure, the essays need to be read more than once before they yield up their secrets.

I like your topic, but wonder whether "balance" and "mix" are the right ways to think about philosophy and practice here. To be sure they are intermingled. I think you could develop this topic by taking on some examples to show the range of ways practice and theory are handled: sometimes merged, sometimes opposed, sometimes alternated…. Is there a pattern or a program to it? He hammers away at practical people for their dullness, but then insists of the practicality of living "philosophically." Perhaps you could make more of a game of this by presenting your subject as a problem requiring a solution, a riddle to be puzzled through.

I like the passage you select about the newly-built cabin. Maybe you join it with a couple of others that combine the practical with the philosophical in different or contrary ways. That would get the pattern-logic working and lead you into more of an argument. The genius of Thoreau lies in the details and in the expression of an idea, so you could pause and analyze a little: images, metaphors, similes, maxims, stories: how does HDT develop the dialectic between practicality and philosophy, work and play?

I enjoyed this. Grade: B+

Jay Laiche

This is your best yet—you have good things to say about Thoreau and are very alert to the dialectical dance he does while embracing seeming opposites. You also do that bold thing, comparing two essays: that's the spirit! I think you could make more of this, first underscoring their difference, then showing how, ultimately, they make a similar point.

Rather than discussing first one and then the other, it might be a little slicker to cut back and forth between the two, using juxtapositions to set things up. My sense is that the titles are a little misleading: "Sounds" is really about time, and "Solitude" is really about space—or that's how I would go at it. But choose something to underscore the difference, toggling back between one and the other. Then make your move: while the two essays treat different subjects they make much the same point about the need to break down distinctions between seeming opposites and to set them in new relationships. Give some examples of this, showing how seemingly different things in Thoreau work in parallel ways.

It makes sense to treat two essays since your topic has to do with "doubles." Roll with it—you are certainly onto something here. Well done. Grade: A-

Amanda Speirs

There's not much to disagree with here, but not much to applaud either. By working at such a high level of generality, trying to cover the whole work in six pages, you are reduced to writing what amounts to an encyclopedia article, repeating what everybody knows about *Walden*. Better to select a thread and run with it. Perhaps you could seize on the idea of an "experiment," presenting in shortened form your account of the first chapter, and then dwelling on what HDT has to say about experiments, his own or those of others. What did he understand by the term? What makes for a good experiment or a failed experiment? (Do Thoreauvian experiments ever fail? How?) You could discuss Thoreau's "experimental prose," the way in which he tries things out, the way he compels his readers to duplicate his "thought experiment" in the reading of the essay. What does he have to offer by way of evidence, of conclusion? This is offered as a suggestion; obviously there would be other ways to go. But select a thread to develop, something to lead into discussion and analysis, and the essay would be the better for it. Your remark about ice, for instance…. There's a whole essay to be had from that, I'm sure. Don't skim the surface, dig in. Grade: B

Joon Seo

I'm glad that you chose this lovely essay. It's not one I've worked up yet, but I mean to someday. You haven't quite worked it up yet, either. You give a description and a synopsis, but haven't yet found an argument. What is it about? Thoreau's titles are sometimes deceptive. It seems to me that most of discussions of animals are really discussions of people, reflections on how animals are like people and vice versa. That seems to be the case here, and might become the basis of an argument about the habits and moral behavior of beasts, both when in the company of people and on their own. The story about the hounds "hunting on their own" is obviously the centerpiece of the essay. You might start the thought process there. I'm also struck by the remark at the end about "you've hardly seen a wild creature … only a natural one." That might be another gateway into the essay: HDT throws these things out to get us thinking. The descriptions in this essay are also moody and attractive; you pick up on that nicely—link it to some kind of point that might get us "out of the box," and you're there. Grade: B

Maegan Stebbins

This is a good essay to write about. It has some particularly fine passages, is more intelligible than some, and yet leaves us with things to think about. I like the way that, instead of beginning at the beginning, you begin with the more obvious parts and work towards the more elusive. You are good on the details. But whither, in the end, does it all tend? Not very clear to me. But in your conclusion you bring up the notion of human "brutishness" which seems the right idea. HDT gives his animals moral characters and it seems right that the essay would lead to a moral point. This one sounds promising, but to make it work, you'd need to go back through the essay and set it up more carefully, perhaps with some reflections on "brutishness" along the way. The two main episodes, the ants and the loon, certainly set up the animal-human dialectic. Bring out the pattern in the pattern a little more clearly and this will be just perfect. Grade: A

Zander Merle-Smith

This is a pleasing essay as far as it goes. But perhaps it doesn't take us all that far? The risk in trying to cover the book in five pages is that one falls into superficiality. The essay needs a point. It's true that you have one in the "step back and reflect" notion, but this tends to commonplace and doesn't really tell us much about the book Walden. It's OK to write an essay about a commonplace notion, but to make that work the notion needs to be put across in an uncommon way to grab our attention.

The exception to this general complaint is your paragraph about animals and survival. This doesn't seem so obvious, and in fact seems like a very good starting-place for an essay on Thoreau. His animals indulge in a wide range of behaviors, as various as the human behaviors they often seem to mimic. They are not just concerned with survival: they play, they have leisure, they sometimes work very hard, and, he suggests, they even have some sort of spiritual life. I suspect that you could take your topic about survival in the wild, complicate it with observations about human and animal behavior, and come up with an essay which, while addressing the whole book in a general sort of way, could also make room for some surprising twists and a clear point. It might be amusing to think of that twelve-hour trek to the lake in these terms: do we do such things to live more brutishly or more civilly? Do animals take vacations? How does the culture-nature divide manifest itself here? Grade: B+

Nick Allen

Boom. Ker-pow. You just nail this one, and it's a two-fer too since you've given me the WW paper that nobody wrote. I like the way you are able to extract the sweet quotations without getting lost in Thoreau's meandering essay. One has to digest the essay carefully to be able to do that. You should have been lecturing on this one instead of me, 'cause I always get sucked into the shrubbery.

The remarkable thing about the comparison is how very different these two writers are: WW so still and deliberate, HDT so hyper and flashy. Yet as you argue, their programs are very similar in the joint attempt to return to earth. Their concern with authenticity makes them so very remote from our post-modern rejection of groundedness that it is a wonder that they can speak to us at all.

It's comforting to think that beans are still being grown and that somewhere writers are still concerned with truth as opposed to truthiness. I suppose Martin Heidegger was led to pre-Socratic philosophy for the same reasons as Thoreau. Maybe we should all be eating celery and learning Greek.

Well done. You've saved my bacon, er, legumes, on more than one occasion this term. Grade: A

Ryan Stebbins

This is a good essay: the prose flows easily, you mix in details, handle quotations and paraphrase very nicely, and follow the drift. Very well executed.

I wonder, though, if in reducing it to sense like this we miss a little bit of the craziness. You seem to miss the joke about the "bottled air," in which HDT offers his philosophy as an alternative to the snake-oil sold off of wagons—a comparison which (doesn't it?) rather puts the reader on his mettle, or might. Do we, dare we, buy into this philosophy, and would it be healthy for us? The Hebe/Hygeia comparison speaks to this, though I haven't quite figured that one out yet.

Another crazy bit has to do with the elder settler and the elderly dame. There is something mysterious about this pair. Is it exaggeration, or is HDT dipping in mythology here, cloaking History and Nature in such homely garb that they are easily overlooked? I'm not entirely sure. He alludes to these odd characters elsewhere. They haunt the landscape.

You do a fine job with this, though it might be just as well to acknowledge that wit and weirdness of the original. One the one hand, our business is to make sense out of the essay but, on the other, we run the risk of losing the flavor of the thing by doing so. "We murder to dissect," says Wordsworth. Well, at least we can do it with style, as you do here. Grade: A