

# EXTRA-VAGANT ENOUGH!: TEACHING *WALDEN* AS RHETORICAL EXEMPLUM

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“They were wholly deaf to my arguments, or failed to perceive their force, and fell into a strain of invective that was irresistible.”  
— *Walden*, “Spring”

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For some years, literature teachers have lamented students' responses to *Walden*. “It’s a classic, but *they* hate it,” teachers moan—and they are probably right on both counts. As a recent study by Richard Dillman shows, *Walden*’s “aggressively anti-commercial tone” does alienate sizeable numbers of undergraduates. Even our best students may object to Thoreau’s “hypocrisy” in not moving further from his mother’s kitchen, or may resent his not “using” his Harvard degree, allegedly proving that he was “a spoiled rich kid.” Punning as he tossed *Walden* over one shoulder, one student recommended that we “*Thoreau* the nerd out.”

But rather than throwing *Walden* out, we can put it to good use in advanced and/or literature-based composition classes. If we regard it as a rhetorical text whose strategies sometimes succeed—but whose shortcomings often limit its appeals to student readers—then we can put *Walden* to work for us.

As a rhetorical exemplum, *Walden* provides an especially provocative text for analysis. Students can become engaged critically in discovering what it is about Thoreau’s brushback pitch that attracts or repels them. By reading *Walden* as a rhetorical text, and

by articulating such a critique of its rhetoric, students can improve their own critical and persuasive abilities.

Several critics have considered *Walden* as a rhetorical discourse, but few have examined the consequences of its strategies. Joseph J. Moldenhauer's dissertation, "The Rhetoric of *Walden*," thoroughly explores the book's stylistic characteristics, but avoids analysis of Thoreau's sometimes dubious moves. Richard H. Dillman's recent reader-response study charts different student reactions, but stops short of asking how Thoreau might have reached more readers, past or present. However, Dillman does imply a question central to teaching *Walden*: which limitations are the reader's, and which are Thoreau's?

Dillman's study analyzes those of student readers; this one will explore Thoreau's. This discussion will examine *Walden*'s purposes, genres, and intended audiences, its audience accommodation, styles, and tones, its *personae* plus its ethical, logical, emotional, and imaginative appeals. Most importantly, this discussion will emphasize the range of rhetorical issues that *Walden* raises so effectively.

In order to realize the full potency of *Walden*, compositionists should pose the following question: "If Thoreau were to come back today, what would we tell to him to keep about his pitch, and what would we tell him to change?" Students do enjoy talking back to Thoreau, giving him some of his own sass.

## PURPOSES AND DIRECTIONS

Before exploring the effectiveness of Thoreau's rhetorical strategies, it is important to establish his basic intentions in *Walden*. In the book's memorable epigraph, Thoreau indicated that he intended "to brag as lustily as chanticleer, . . . if only to wake my neighbors up." Exploring what Thoreau seeks to awaken his readers to, Jeffrey Steele contends that Thoreau seeks "to enlarge the 'horizon' of our existence," to dramatize a range of experience that "revises any sense of the world constructed on commercial premises" (48). As so many critics have shown, *Walden* argues for independence, individualism, simple living in nature, and a critical stance toward conventional wisdom—especially that of the marketplace.

The questionable success of *Walden* as persuasive discourse raises the question of conflicting purposes. Kenneth Burke and

others look for writers' agendas: to settle scores, to debunk fallacies, to exorcise self-doubts, to convey the wonders of nature, to dramatize personal ideals, to bear witness to an inner world—plus others that apply well to Thoreau in *Walden*. A myriad of good questions arise: these are essentially personal purposes. Can any author hope to realize all these purposes in one short book? To what degree is it possible to intermix personal, expressivist purposes with public, persuasive ones? Is such a writer working at cross purposes?

The book's organization also involves pluses and minuses. *Walden* moves from negation in Chapter 1 toward affirmation in the second half of the book. This movement, judging by both Dillman's study and my own experiences, tends to evoke positive reactions in student readers. For all its originality, *Walden* follows the very traditional discourse pattern of posing a problem and then solving it. First-time readers, then, might expect to find some signs of this progression, but Thoreau does not sign his paths. Despite its general direction, his text is recursive.

Some of *Walden*'s most sublime revelations of full awakening come early in the second half of the book, not toward its end. For instance, the splendid description of the Pond shedding its morning mists comes during Thoreau's first week at Walden. The book seldom reaches such sublimity again. Thus the flow of *Walden* meanders; Thoreau's desire to organize associatively, to speak in harmony with nature, and to render the saunterings of his consciousness contributes to his book's "natural" or "psychological" organization. Students can and do raise questions about organization; we can ask them what Thoreau gains or loses as a result of his recursiveness or apparent lack of plan. *Walden* is a difficult text: as Henry Golembra observes, "Thoreau had developed the idea that the highest rhetoric created meaning which provided gaps in its own significance" (393). Thus *Walden* leads students to consider the role of their own assumptions and expectations as readers.

## AUDIENCES AND ACCOMMODATIONS

But this leaves open the issue of intended audience: was Thoreau intending to jar his "neighbors" or "poor students," did he hope to reach the "mass of men," or would he settle for reinforcing the views of a tiny minority that essentially agreed with him? Moreover, what kind of book is this? A collection of essays?

A polemic? Natural history? Autobiography? As Golembra notes, "When readers encounter *Walden's* opening pages, they are immediately struck by a clash of rhetorical modes" (385). Literary critics often laud a work for "exploding genre"; but from rhetorical viewpoint, is such ambiguity advantageous or not? If such issues are raised early, students can read more actively, marshalling evidence to articulate oral responses or written arguments.

Thoreau addressed *Walden* to several different audiences: to his Concord "neighbors," to pessimistic New Englanders, to "poor students," to the unawakened poor, to the commercial middle class, to the "seemingly wealthy but most terribly impoverished," and to the sleeping "mass of men." Within the first few paragraphs, however, Thoreau either directly insulted most of these groups or indirectly affronted their values. Students can consider the effects of historical change: ridiculing the hard-work ethic did not win converts in 19th century New England; would it appeal to more readers today?

Some Thoreau scholars contend that Thoreau's subtle strategy involved creating a disreputable "straw audience," one that he mocked in order to drive readers over to his side. This tactic anticipates a ricochet effect, as Joseph Moldenhauer explains:

In works like *A Modest Proposal*, the 'indirect rhetoric' might thus become a 'counter-rhetoric,' exercising potent appeals upon the reader's own sympathies. . . . the reader may respond to the indirect address by adjusting his attitude at once to those of the *persona*, and so placing himself in opposition to the audience ("The Rhetoric of *Walden*" 9-10).

Three problems can arise from abuse of this strategy, however. Will the reader who feels the author's disdain come over just because the author disdains someone else more? By striking sweepingly at both the clods of Concord and the somnolent masses, making few exceptions, did Thoreau risk seeming unfair or vindictive? In short, *Walden* calls for students to consider the risks of using the "straw-audience"/ricochet strategy: what makes it work, and what makes it flop?

When Thoreau apparently did attempt to accommodate his readers, how sincere does he seem? Is he convincing as the frugal New Englander keeping ledgers and counting down to the quarter cent? Perhaps. Malini Schueller suggests, however, that as soon as Thoreau adopts the voice of an industrious farmer, finally offering

some accommodation to otherwise antagonistic readers, “the authorial voice subverts the language of the farmer.” That is, it prods readers to “not lay so much stress on grain” but to place more concern on “a new generation of men” (40-41). In short, would the rural reader finally find a familiar voice, or would he or she emerge feeling a bit “fished in?” (To make a pun that Thoreau could not have resisted).

Perhaps Thoreau felt that he *was* comprising when, after launching a barbed critique of stocks and capitalism, he pulled on the mask of the small businessman and echoed Ben Franklin. Many student readers, though, do wonder why Thoreau adopted the language of the very commerce that he condemns, while others sense a put-on. *Walden*, then, occasions intriguing rhetorical questions: when, or for whom, is tongue-in-cheek writing persuasive, and when, or for whom, is it counter-persuasive? Does his use of this tactic imply that Thoreau’s basic intent was to reach a few like-minded readers whom he hoped to reinforce?

The radical hoping to reach more conventional readers obviously faces compromise. Is there evidence that Thoreau, seeking audience identification, really did compromise? Did he possibly miss opportunities to advance his themes of localism and heroism by referring to the Concord heroes of the Revolution? What would Thoreau have sacrificed if he brought himself to use the “editorial we” before the last pages of the book?

For over a century and a half, some readers have read *Walden* as a Transcendentalist tract, while others have seen it as a less doctrinaire religious text. When Thoreau preached, however, he drew from his own “scriptures,” alluding to the Classical sages, East and West, and especially to Nature’s Good Book. Which of these allusions seem most or least apt to persuade readers of mainstream persuasion? Does Thoreau occasionally echo the tones of earlier Puritan divines? If so, does this increase his appeal to Christians today? Is Thoreau preaching mostly to the converted? How can a writer take moral stands without seeming to preach?

## STYLES

As even casual readers observe, *Walden* presents an inventive array of styles. Sentences range from very long to very short, from rambling Victorian periods to lengthy cumulative sentences to pithy epigrams. Diction runs from highly abstract to deliciously

concrete. As Reginald Cook indicates, *Walden's* style "ranges from the lyrical and aspirative to impassioned incisiveness; from description and narration to dramatic action; from poetically evocative writing to cool, meditative monologues" (226). Thus *Walden* raises real issues facing writers: to what point do shifts in style serve to reach different readers, to suggest the narrator's complexity, or to dispel boredom? And at what point do such shifts confuse readers, make the narrator seem contradictory, or make the author seem confused?

Do Thoreau's terse or witty sentences help or hinder his rhetorical purposes? No doubt some readers enjoy coming away from a text with a memorable quote or two. However, other readers who do not hold Thoreau's viewpoints may remain unmoved—or even be repelled—by what they see as his glibness. Others may be attracted by *Walden's* affinities to the proverbs associated with scripture or sermons. Thoreau espoused a radically subjective perspective; he needed, in non-fiction prose, to move readers toward the spiritual view. For this purpose, do Thoreau's proverbs carry enough of Scriptural connotations to appeal to a Christian reader? How does such a student react when he or she realizes that Thoreau is challenging Christian doctrines? One student of mine charged Thoreau with "hypocrisy" for using the language of orthodoxy to advance unorthodox ideas. Was he?—she raised a valid issue.

Or, for most students, do the lyrical nature descriptions for which *Walden* is famous work better? My experience suggests that they do. Most students do react well to Thoreau's nature imagery, such as his symbolic "going fishing for the Pond," and to his vivid, multi-sensory detail: "we need the tonic of wildness,—to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and the meadow—hen lurk, and hear the booming of the snipe; to smell the whispering sedge where only some wilder and more solitary fowl builds her nest, and the mink crawls with its belly close to the ground" ("Spring" par. 22). When its paens to nature reach their crescendos, *Walden* does entice readers to consider its way of life, if not its social and economic "philosophy." Puffing on his cigarette, one student told me that "this book makes even a great indoorsmen like me yearn to get outside." Such students should be asked to consider why this is so—when they find Thoreau spellbinding, what accounts for the spell?

Stylistically, Thoreau is often deliberately outrageous, radical in the root sense of the word:

I fear chiefly lest my expression may not be *extra-vagant* enough, may not wander far enough beyond the narrow limits of my daily experience, so as to be adequate to the truth of which I have been convinced. *Extra-vagance!* it depends on how you have been yarded.

This is pure Thoreau; he splits his key term to emphasize its root meanings: *extra* meant “outside,” *vagari* meant to “wander.” He puns on “yarded,” later alluding to the cow that “leaps the cow-yard fence” (“Conclusion” par. 6). While some students are impressed with such verbal razzle-dazzle, even those who are impressed are not, typically, moved any further toward buying Thoreau’s message. Inadvertently, then, Thoreau raises questions about the rhetorical uses of wordplay and experimentation.

Despite the fact that his frequent puns repelled even so sympathetic a reader as Emerson, Thoreau used them not just for their humor, but for their potential to change conventional meanings—and thus to promote unconventional thoughts. In addition to challenging the usual meanings of words by alluding to their etymologies, Thoreau’s tendency is to place the word into a strange context, one requiring that the reader infer new meanings. Classroom analysis, then, needs to question the effect of such strategies: do readers enjoy the challenge to evolve new meanings, will they take well to wordplay, or are they more likely to begin to doubt the narrator’s reliability?

*Walden’s* poetic qualities also raise rhetorical issues. Thoreau’s poetic images are often memorably fresh, thereby contributing to the book’s theme of freshness. But when Thoreau’s images become more conventional, wouldn’t they become more acceptable to conventional readers? That is, when Thoreau writes “If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them” (“Conc.” par. 5), does he grab more readers than he does with his more subtle or creative images? Thus *Walden* again raises an important issue: just how much linguistic creativity improves persuasiveness, and how much diminishes it? Are politicians trite because their speech writers are cliché mongers, or have they just paid attention to what goes over with the populace? In a larger sense, do the very stylistic

qualities that earn praise for *literary quality* differ from—or even conflict with—those offering *rhetorical effectiveness*?

Many alert students also raise questions about Thoreau's allusiveness: they wonder if he is not eroding his theme of freshness by citing "stale" texts, sometimes quoting them in "dead languages." Can a book that challenges traditions rely on appeals to tradition, religious or otherwise? On the other hand, some students are impressed by Thoreau's ability to quote from both Western and Eastern texts, suggesting that if Thoreau was seeking to establish his authoritativeness, he may have succeeded with some readers. Again, *Walden* serves to provoke debate about the rhetorical tradeoffs involved with using specialized terminologies and learned allusions.

### PERSONAE AND ETHOS

As many scholars have noted, *Walden* presents a gallery of different narrators. Personae shift even within a chapter, as James McIntosh observes:

What moves and excites the reader is the extraordinary mixture of attitudes and tones in the chapter—the humorous contortions, the hectic variety. Behind all this seems to be an important intention of Thoreau's in *Walden*, his wish to exhibit the shifting play of his sensibility. As he stands over his beans he shows us one style and persona after another: he is by turns humorous, reminiscent, sentimental, satirical, and solemn (255).

This "shifting play of sensibility" embodies Thoreau's theme of a mind as free as his feet are loose. By turns Thoreau presented himself as a small businessman, scolding preacher, farmer, trickster, woodsman, eccentric, and mystic. But what are the effects of this variety of presentations? Do all these personae offer greater opportunities for identification—or do they make Thoreau seem, as one student put it, "fickle?"

The literary reader may savor this complexity, but it raises troubling doubts in the minds of many students. Can an author who can play a whole cast of characters be trusted? When is he sincere? His radical individualism and his stylistic versatility posed rhetorical challenges for Thoreau: he needed to affirm selfhood, yet not to seem entirely self-centered or solipsistic; he needed to



establish a solid sense of himself as an individual, but also to allow for identification, establishing common ground among readers very different from himself.

This variety of personae also raises questions as to whether Thoreau most sought to *express* his various sides or to *persuade* his readers. As a Transcendentalist heavily influenced by Coleridge, Carlisle, and others in the Romantic tradition, Thoreau obviously sought self-expression. However, as a New Englander influenced by the meliorist and Puritan traditions, he surely also sought to change minds—and even to save souls. Once again *Walden* raises practical issues: Can a writer have it both ways? Are Thoreau's personae consistently appealing enough to persuade? To what point do shifts in tone heighten interest and dispel monotony, and at what point do they possibly confuse or erode credibility?

On this issue Leo Marx contends that Thoreau's "incomparably forthright tone" carries: "What distinguishes his work from the rest, what leads people to take it as a guide of life, is in no small part his extraordinary skill in suspending disbelief in the authenticity of his fictive self" (100). One would expect the author of *The Machine in the Garden* to suspend disbelief in a patron saint. But do student readers find the narrator's fictive self "authentic," or merely self-indulgent or egotistical? How can a writer urge individualism yet not seem egocentric, or even eccentric? In this era of privatism, do today's readers accept a greater degree of apparent egotism than readers once did?

Egotism aside, however, many readers have indeed objected to the narrator's self-righteousness. In his attempt to dramatize his better way, the narrator often does present himself as a superior soul. Reacting to what he reads as Thoreau's adoption of a "unique moral status," George Hochfield contends that this tendency to believe in his own innocence is "a basic cause of Thoreau's failure as a writer" (436-8).

As an extension of his individualism, Thoreau sought the heroic possibilities of the present. When Thoreau invoked heroism, apparently reflecting Carlyle's influence, he comes close to presenting himself as the hero. Sitting by his door at the Pond on this third night there, Thoreau wrote in his *Journal* that "I too am at least a remote descendent of that heroic race of men of whom there is a tradition. I too sit here on the shore of my Ithaca, a fellow wanderer and survivor of Ulysses" (39). By counting himself among a "generation of heroes," Thoreau sought to inspire his

readers, reinforcing his theme that we, too, can be heroic, that “there is more day to dawn.”

But are such calls to heroism persuasive today? At what point do they limit presentation of the Burkean “signs” of good character and therefore impede audience “consubstantiality,” or identification? If real heroism is possible today, how would we define it?

### ETHICAL APPEALS

For many readers, of course, Thoreau’s living the life he preached does provide a strong ethical appeal in *Walden*. Even readers unsympathetic to non-conformity may respect a writer who not only called for non-conformity, but refused to conform to a society that he deemed misguided or unjust. Moreover, when Thoreau made the laughs come at his own expense—as he occasionally did—he made himself ethically more appealing to many readers. Apparently he was shrewd enough to omit some details—such as the fact that his cabin was located only a mile and a half from his family home—that later detractors have marshalled against his credibility. But now that many students know about some of Thoreau’s inconsistencies—such as the meals he sometimes received at the Pond—they face very topical issues: How important is appeal of character? How heavily do we weigh “ad hominem” arguments? When are they valid, when not?

Though Thoreau apparently did attend to his *ethos*, he did not offer consistent ethical appeals. After asserting the virtue of not hunting or fishing, he included shocking details—such as his strong impulse to kill a muskrat and eat it alive—that would seem to undermine his ethical credibility. After railing against slavery and racism, he turned around to create “straw” characters—or caricatures—to mock. For instance, at several points Thoreau adopted a prejudicial tone toward Irish immigrants. And he virtually omitted women from *Walden*. How much do these contradictions reduce his ethical appeal or limit reader identification? If we regard *Walden* as a rhetorical text, how do we explain Thoreau’s apparently counter-productive self-revelations? Does the sort of ambivalence that Thoreau expresses toward the railroad make his vision seem more complex, or just contradictory? In short, is consistency “the hobgoblin of little minds,” or is it crucial to credibility?

Since tone reflects the personality of the speaker, tone becomes an issue. In *Walden*, the tone shifts from biting to genial,

from tough-minded to homespun to sensitive. Does the changing tone enhance personal appeals, suggesting that the speaker is “large, and contains multitudes,” or does it possibly confuse, implying either that he does not know who he is or that he is changing masks?

The tone of Thoreau’s satire also seems problematic. Though it can be gentle and good natured, *Walden*’s satire can also seem mean-spirited. Thoreau’s attack on all conformity to fashion provides one instance: “The head monkey at Paris puts on a traveler’s cap, and all the monkeys in America do the same” (“Economy” par. 68). No doubt some certain readers do enjoy such stabs at conformity. In adopting satirical tactics, however, Thoreau often comes off as malicious—as in his use of the “monkey see” image—and puts his ethical credibility at risk. *Walden* makes one wonder: Does all satiric ridicule (to some degree) risk undercutting ethical appeals? Is it the tone that determines the rhetorical usefulness of satire?

### **RATIONAL, IMAGINATIVE AND EMOTIONAL APPEALS**

It is clearly illogical to ask that a book in the romantic/Transcendental/mystical mode conform strictly to the conventions of logic. But does consideration of rational appeals beg the question in a text like this? Yet because most student readers ask that a text “make sense” if they are to accept its ideas, such a discussion works well in a class using *Walden* as a springboard into rhetorical questions.

Frequent philosophical contradictions do challenge the rational appeal of *Walden*. Perhaps the most serious among these weakens its important chapter “Higher Laws.” Here a central and apparently unresolved conflict emerges. On the one side, Thoreau celebrated sensory delights—the call of the loon, a bowl of fresh huckleberries, pure water, “lakes of light,” and “the body in one sense.” On the other, though, he turned ascetic: “It is neither the quality nor the quantity, but the devotion to sensual savors; when that which is eaten is not a viand to sustain our animal; or [to] inspire our spiritual life, but food for the worms that possess us” (par. 12). Thus *Walden* invites us to ponder: just how much latitude from conventions of logical consistency will readers of moral/religious discourse allow?

A parallel contradiction, and nearly as central, appears in

“Where I Lived, What I Lived For.” As Richard Bridgeman contends, “The early portion is all mountain freshness, dawn, and bathing; yet there is a serpent in this rhetorical Eden . . . .” “Should one fail to believe this, Thoreau says, then that man ‘has despaired of life, and is pursuing a descending and darkening way’ ” (83). Thundering like a Puritan preacher, Thoreau again adopts the strategy of setting up mutually-exclusive opposites—apparently in hopes of driving the reader over to his side because the opposite one seems so depraved. This is a common rhetorical strategy, but what are its risks? How many readers either react negatively to moral condemnation, or resent attempts to reduce their options to only these two? And how many do accept one of the choices?

*Walden* invites further inquiry: Does absolutist, either-or thinking seem appropriate in a text that invokes absolute values, or does it mar the book’s already limited rational appeals? Does it possibly encourage the love-or-hate responses that we often encounter in students?

Thoreau the iconoclast, prophet, or mystic often deliberately subverted logic, which he associated with conventional thinking. His most persistent device is paradox, as Joseph Moldenhauer asserts:

In *Walden*, Thoreau wants to convey truth of the most unconventional sort—to bring other minds into proximity and agreement with his own attitudes and beliefs. He employs paradox not only for its galvanic effect in persuasion (i.e. as a verbal shock treatment which reorients the audience), but for the special precision of statement it affords (“Paradox in *Walden*” 353).

Thoreau’s style is indeed paradoxical. In his critique of the railroad, for instance, Thoreau opens with “We do not ride on the railroad, it rides on us,” (“Where I Lived, What I Lived For” par. 16). Such passages hold great literary appeal, for they are clever, poetic, and imaginative. But how many readers do they persuade, how many do they fail to reach, and how many do they even repel? What are the tradeoffs between direct and indirect expression of ideas?

One hardly expects books urging freshness and a break with tradition to argue by authority, yet *Walden* does. Thoreau knew his Greek and Latin and quoted the Classics, often in the original. He also quoted ancient Hindu and Chinese texts, sometimes

mistaking Confucius with Lao Tsu. Thoreau's use of authority seems unintentionally paradoxical: if his intent was to invoke the heroic, or to suggest that his readers could, like the Ancients, begin "afresh," are literary allusions the way to go? Does the fact that he often quoted the pastoral poetry of Virgil mitigate potential drawbacks? Do Thoreau's attempts to support his contentions by invoking authorities contradict his calls for the inspired individual as his or her own authority? How does a writer establish credibility by demonstrating his or her knowledge yet avoid seeming pompous or pedantic?

Logical appeals also suffer because of Thoreau's fondness for hyperbole. For Thoreau, "extra-vagance" was a means to the deepest truths. Following the mystical impulse toward correspondences, for example, he compares a mosquito's hum to "Homer's requiem, itself an *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in the air, singing its own wrath and wanderings." Though such outlandishly "heroic" analogies may work in visionary poetry, can they work in prose? Do they succeed in *Walden*? Or do they erode Thoreau's credibility?

Once again, one does wonder: how, in prose, can a writer move readers from the palpable to the impalpable? For most students, Thoreau is most persuasive when he lets his "higher laws" emerge from the mysterious blue depths of the Pond. For most, he becomes least so when he seems to slight the natural world by mining it for metaphors. Students can observe this straining for the symbolic in Thoreau's famous description of the railroad cut, with its forced conceits of vegetation and excrement. They may rightly ask, as one student of mine did, "If this passage is not persuasive, why is this so famous?" And here again the question of the rhetorical versus the literary arises.

### ADDITIONAL PRACTICALITIES

One can laud or fault Thoreau's rhetorical moves in *Walden*, but the questions it evokes continue: Can a writer satisfy both his readers and himself? Is Peter Elbow right when he contends that to accommodate is to compromise self? And how does one tell an original thinker from a kook?

In addition, *Walden* can provide models of vigorous argumentation, sentence rhythm, "down home" imagery, vivid narration, concrete nature description, or effective one-liners. Students also can assemble a list of suggestive or symbolic images—such as the

sudden bursting into life of the insect—and then explore what each implies about writer and audience. They can also assemble a commonplace book of clever paradoxes and pithy aphorisms, exploring the persuasive potential of each.

As we have seen, we can make students' negative responses to *Walden* work for us. Just when they are most charmed by or frustrated with *Walden*, students can use their journals to draft a letter to Henry David. Some will confirm the continued charm of his appeals; some will advise him on how to adapt his rhetoric so as to persuade *their* generation; others may blast him for failing in so many of his appeals. Still others enjoy parodying him the way he lampooned Ben Franklin. Or, reacting to his provocations, students can respond to Thoreau's challenges by articulating more solid and persuasive rebuttals.

Thoreau remains an effective provocateur; one can imagine him poking Emerson in the ribs, or jabbing his walking stick into anthills. Because *Walden* has hardly lost its irritant value, it offers us real possibilities for promoting critical thinking about rhetorical issues that matter. And, with an ironic twist that Henry David would have enjoyed, *Walden* might well prod readers into considering which limitations are Thoreau's—and which are their own.

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