Lecture Notes to Thoreau's "Economy," from *Walden*

- **Title:** as Thoreau explains later in the chapter, the title means something like "philosophy of living," economy meaning "the thrifty management of resources"—hence one of the major themes: materialism versus economy.
- **The first chapter of *Walden* is an introduction to Thoreau's philosophy that led him to live at Walden Pond for two years and two months. It gives the reader a background argument for this dramatic step, diagnosing what he perceives to be the major drawbacks of the Industrial Revolution and the American quest for materialist definitions of success (a Franklinian concept).

**Para.1**
- Thoreau explains he wrote *Walden* while living on Walden Pond. His philosophy is already evidenced in the first paragraph in his radically simplified lifestyle: he lived in "a house which I had built myself and "earned my living by the labor of my hands only."
- **Irony:** At the present Thoreau considers himself a "sojourner in civilized life again." The word *sojourner* means a temporary resident, someone passing through—a word that accrues meaning when coupled with his ironic use of the word *civilized.* As we see, he spends the rest of the chapter deconstructing our notion of "civilization" and "civilized" life.

**Para.2**
- Thoreau exhibits a self-consciousness in using the first-person "I," for fear of "egotism" and going against the literary conventions of the time. Still, while Thoreau appears to humbly undertake "the narrowness of my experience" as his main subject, he does feel inclined to address those readers to "accept such portions [of his writing] as apply to them ... for it may do good service to him whom it fits."
- In this sense Thoreau, like Franklin, writes in full self-consciousness that he is offering himself to others as a representative "type," a contrast to Franklinian ideas of success; this contrast is meaningfully (and intentionally, I think) invoked in the structure of his opening paragraph, which clearly patterns itself after Franklin's introduction to *The Autobiography,* but with satiric intent. As Brian Barbour has said, "he aims to destroy the false economy that results in a mere accumulation of goods, and substitute for it a true economy, focusing life toward a spiritual end, a reality not eroded by time" ("Franklin, Lawrence, and Tradition," 2).

**Para.3**
- Allusions to the religious self-torture of high-caste Hindus in India and to Hercules and the 12 labors, each apparently impossible: this is an all-out satirical attack on his neighbors' endless labor
- These allusions establish Thoreau as a well-rounded intellectual man, not just some mindless loafer

**Para.4**
- Inheritance is a burden, adding to one's burden of keeping up with more stuff.
- **Hyperbolic words**—"serfs of the soil," "condemned," "digging their graves as soon as they are born," "crushed and smothered under its load"—reflect Thoreau's opinion regarding society and "civilization" in the wake of the Industrial Revolution.

**Para.5**
- **Biblical allusion** from Matthew 6:19: it is a "fool's life" to lay up treasures that are corruptible—an indictment of materialism
- **Satiric tone:** Thoreau criticizes people who live a life of hard work without questioning what they are working for—compelled by the "necessity" of material things, theirs is "a blind obedience to a blundering oracle" (i.e.—Franklin? The dream of monetary success and happiness?)

**Para.6**
- **Symbolic imagery:** laboring man as "a machine"
Para.7
- Sardonic wit: people "trying to get out of debt" (yet who continue the cycle of more things, more debt, more work) are "still living, and dying"

Para.8
- Too much work can lead to a kind of self-imposed slavery worse, in his view, that "Negro slavery," and leading to a life of "quiet desperation" (f 9). These men are trapped and enslaved by their own employment or possessions.
- Rhetorical persuasion through image of slave: The image of the slave was particularly powerful in Thoreau's time, when the debate about slavery in the South escalated and during which the abolitionist movement was powerful in Massachusetts. His consideration of how a man enslaves himself is primarily a rhetorical move, meant to emphasize the spiritual enslavement all people face and not to de-emphasize the horrors of slavery.

Para.9
- Thoreau's prognosis: "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" and "resignation"

Para.10
- Thoreau seeks to discover what "is the chief end of man, and what are the true necessities and means of life."
- Thoreau is skeptical of traditions that are blindly adhered to out of a fear of change; in other words, just because we have "always done it this way," does that make it right? Or beneficial? Yet most people are unwilling to accept the possibility of change, or consider taking the risk toward change, and this, he believes, is wrong.
- He disputes the "wisdom" of old people, mostly of whom have not truly "tried life"

Para.11
- The farmer, "with vegetable-made bones," lumbering along with plow and oxen, is morbidly comic image of an individual who is set in his ways and refuses to accept the possibility of change.

Para.12
- Thoreau laments that there is nothing that hasn't been done to the earth, but "man's capacities have never been measured"—reflects the Transcendental belief that true virtue and happiness depend upon self-realization and intuitive inner reflection that coincides with man's relationship to nature/the world—basic optimism in the immeasurable resources/knowledge of mankind.

Para.13
- Thoreau invites us to think outside the box: "Who shall say what prospect life offers to another?"

Para.14
- Reverses the categories, or logic, of good and bad to continue to force us to think outside the box and question social mores and customs of the time: "The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad, and if I repent of anything, it is very likely to be my good behavior." Thoreau questions the validity of ethics when based on social, not moral conventions. Slavery is a good example for this point: many in society justified this practice, but just because society accepts it doesn't make it sound morally or ethically!

Para.15
- Thoreau refers to our "incessant anxiety and strain" as an "incurable form of disease. We are made to exaggerate the importance of what work we do; and yet how much is not done by us!"—Thoreau questions our progress: how much are we really accomplishing here?

Para. 16-18
• Living "primitive or frontier life" will allow him to shed off life's un-necessities and discover what he calls "necessaries of life" for humans: food, shelter, clothing, and fuel, the latter three which he argues are not fundamental necessities because the sun can provide warmth enough in some climates.

Para. 18
• Thoreau parodically refers to the "luxuriously rich" as "cooked"; they seek not to be "comfortably warm" but "unnaturally hot"—this morbid image is a satiric assault on those who have been made slaves to materialism which dries up their spiritual essence.

Para. 19
• "Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevations of mankind": suggests that riches and possessions are responsible for the degeneration of the human spirit.
• Appeal to ethos: People who live by "conformity, practically as their fathers did,...are in no sense the progenitors of a noble race of men."—contrast to the philosopher who maintains "his vital heat by better methods than other men."

Para. 20
• Metaphor / Parable of soil, seed, and "nobler plants"—here Thoreau appeals to a higher way of living—one where man's spiritual faculty may be developed and he may "may rise in the same proportion [as a plant shooting out from the soil] into the heavens above," "far from the ground."

Para. 21
• Thoreau, finally, addresses his words about their destructive power specifically to the discontented "mass of men" (f 9) who complain about their lots in life yet have "forged their own golden or silver fetters."