

Name: _____ Class: _____

Excerpt from Walden

By Henry David Thoreau
1854

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) was an American essayist, philosopher, advocate for the abolishment of slavery, and a major figure in the transcendentalist movement.¹ He was an avid nature-lover and questioned the value of integrating technology into society. As you read the text below, take notes on Thoreau's argument regarding technology and the changing society.

From "Economy"²

[1] As with our colleges, so with a hundred "modern improvements"; there is an illusion about them; there is not always a positive advance. The devil goes on exacting compound interest³ to the last for his early share and numerous succeeding investments in them. Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end, an end which it was already but too easy to arrive at; as railroads lead to Boston or New York. We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate. Either is in such a predicament as the man who was earnest to be introduced to a distinguished deaf woman, but when he was presented, and one end of her ear trumpet was put into his hand, had nothing to say. As if the main object were to talk fast and not to talk sensibly. We are eager to tunnel under the Atlantic and bring the Old World some weeks nearer to the New;⁴ but perchance the first news that will leak through into the broad, flapping American ear will be that the Princess Adelaide⁵ has the whooping cough. After all, the man whose horse trots a mile in a minute does not carry the most important messages; he is not an evangelist,⁶ nor does he come round eating locusts and wild honey. I doubt if Flying Childers⁷ ever carried a peck of corn to mill.



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1. Transcendentalism was a philosophical and literary movement that lasted from the early 19th century until about 1900. It focused on individualism and the belief that both nature and humans are inherently good.
2. **Economy (noun): careful management of available money or resources**
3. Compound interest refers to the loan interest paid on the principal (original) and accrued (gained) interest. It is essentially interest on interest.
4. Thoreau is referring to the trans-Atlantic telegraph cable, which ran under the Atlantic Ocean; its first communications occurred on August 16, 1858.
5. Princess Mary Adelaide Wilhelmina Elizabeth of Cambridge (1833-1897) was a member of the British Royal Family, the granddaughter of George III and great-grandmother of Elizabeth II.
6. **Evangelist (noun):** a person who seeks to convert others to the Christian faith, especially by public preaching; a zealous advocate of something
7. Flying Childers was a famous and undefeated Thoroughbred racehorse in the 1700s.

One says to me, "I wonder that you do not lay up money; you love to travel; you might take the cars and go to Fitchburg today and see the country." But I am wiser than that. I have learned that the swiftest traveller is he that goes afoot. I say to my friend, Suppose we try who will get there first. The distance is thirty miles; the fare ninety cents. That is almost a day's wages. I remember when wages were sixty cents a day for laborers on this very road. Well, I start now on foot, and get there before night; I have travelled at that rate by the week together. You will in the meanwhile have earned your fare, and arrive there some time tomorrow, or possibly this evening, if you are lucky enough to get a job in season. Instead of going to Fitchburg, you will be working here the greater part of the day. And so, if the railroad reached round the world, I think that I should keep ahead of you; and as for seeing the country and getting experience of that kind, I should have to cut your acquaintance altogether.

Such is the universal law, which no man can ever outwit, and with regard to the railroad even we may say it is as broad as it is long. To make a railroad round the world available to all mankind is equivalent to grading the whole surface of the planet. Men have an indistinct notion that if they keep up this activity of joint stocks and spades long enough all will at length ride somewhere, in next to no time, and for nothing; but though a crowd rushes to the depot, and the conductor shouts "All aboard!" when the smoke is blown away and the vapor condensed, it will be perceived that a few are riding, but the rest are run over—and it will be called, and will be, "A melancholy accident." No doubt they can ride at last who shall have earned their fare, that is, if they survive so long, but they will probably have lost their elasticity⁸ and desire to travel by that time. This spending of the best part of one's life earning money in order to enjoy a questionable liberty during the least valuable part of it reminds me of the Englishman who went to India to make a fortune first, in order that he might return to England and live the life of a poet. He should have gone up garret⁹ at once. "What!" exclaim a million Irishmen starting up from all the shanties in the land, "is not this railroad which we have built a good thing?" Yes, I answer, comparatively good, that is, you might have done worse; but I wish, as you are brothers of mine, that you could have spent your time better than digging in this dirt.

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8. **Elasticity** (*noun*): adaptability

9. A garret is a very small room on the top floor of a house or building, typically an attic. In this context, Thoreau means that the Englishman should have skipped traveling to India to become a poet and skip straight to living in a garret, as befits a struggling artist.

Text-Dependent Questions

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

1. PART A: Which of the following best describes a central idea of the text? [RI.2]
 - A. Thoreau believed travel to be a waste of money, although he admits that getting to know other cultures can broaden one's worldview.
 - B. Thoreau believed that technological advances do not necessarily lead to a better quality of life.
 - C. Thoreau believed that society was on the brink of financial collapse.
 - D. Thoreau believed that increased communication furthers global progress.

2. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
 - A. "As with our colleges, so with a hundred 'modern improvements'; there is an illusion about them; there is not always a positive advance." (Paragraph 1)
 - B. "The devil goes on exacting compound interest to the last for his early share and numerous succeeding investments in them." (Paragraph 1)
 - C. "And so, if the railroad reached round the world, I think that I should keep ahead of you; and as for seeing the country and getting experience of that kind, I should have to cut your acquaintance altogether." (Paragraph 2)
 - D. "To make a railroad round the world available to all mankind is equivalent to grading the whole surface of the planet." (Paragraph 3)

3. PART A: Which of the following best explains the simile Thoreau uses to critique the Maine-Texas cable? [RI.4]
 - A. Thoreau compares Maine to a foolish man attempting to talk to a deaf woman, mocking the design of new technology and revealing his own doubts about whether it will really work.
 - B. Thoreau compares Texas to a deaf woman, commenting on the fairly recent proclamation of Texas as a state; he is essentially calling the cable useless, as the new state will be unlikely to listen anyway.
 - C. Thoreau compares the cable to the ear trumpet because while he thinks the cable is useful, it does not close the distance between the two states, just as the instrument does not change the woman's natural state of hearing.
 - D. Thoreau compares the cable to a man with nothing to say to a deaf woman, supporting his idea that technology may make communication easier but not necessarily meaningful.

4. PART B: Which of the following best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
 - A. "Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things." (Paragraph 1)
 - B. "As if the main object were to talk fast and not to talk sensibly." (Paragraph 1)
 - C. "...he is not an evangelist, nor does he come round eating locusts and wild honey" (Paragraph 1)
 - D. "I doubt if Flying Childers ever carried a peck of corn to mill." (Paragraph 1)

5. Summarize Thoreau's argument on the relationship between travel, technology, [RI.6] [RI.3] and economy. Cite evidence from the text.
