

Thoreau, “The Ponds” (*Walden*, 1854)

“The scenery of Walden is on a humble scale, and, though very beautiful, does not approach to grandeur, nor can it much concern one who has not long frequented it or lived by its shore; yet this pond is so remarkable for its depth and purity as to merit a particular description. It is a clear and deep green well, a half a mile long and a mile and three quarters` in circumference, and contains about sixty one and a half acres, a perennial spring in the midst of pine and oak woods, without any visible inlet or outlet except by the clouds and evaporation.”

In “IX The Ponds” chapter from *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau contemplated Walden Pond's wonderful features. (Walden Pond is a small spring-fed lake surrounded by woods.) He portrays Walden Pond as a pristine, crystal-clear body of water, describing it as a “gem” and an “eye” of the earth. He extols the water's physical properties; its remarkable transparency, deep green hues, and its reflection of the sky, highlighting the pond's spiritual and natural purity. He describes Walden Pond as remarkably clear, deep, and pure, noting that its water changes color between blue and green depending on the light. He also describes its unique animal life (aquatic, bird, and mammal); its rock formations and bed; and especially, its mirror-like surface properties. He famously compares Walden Pond to the sacred Ganges River, viewing the physical clarity of the water as a mirror for human consciousness and spiritual truth. Thus, he believes that observing the depths of the pond allows a person to look inward and better understand themselves. In these descriptions of Walden Pond, Thoreau elevates the landscape from mere

scenery to a temple of wisdom, reinforcing his philosophy of living deliberately and simply. The chapter blends precise natural science with poetic reflection, detailing the shoreline geography, local wildlife, and the transparency of the water.

As he ponders the source of the pristine water body in the woods, he observes that it had no visible inlet or outlet, and considers the possibility of an unidentified spring at the bottom. Noting the kettle landform's ramparts and resilient shore, he concludes that a unique, natural geologic event formed the site, while recognizing local myths:

“Some have been puzzled to tell how the shore became so regularly paved. My townsmen have all heard the tradition -- the oldest people tell me that they heard it in their youth -- that anciently the Indians were holding a pow-wow upon a hill here, which rose as high into the heavens as the pond now sinks deep into the earth, and they used much profanity, as the story goes, though this vice is one of which the Indians were never guilty, and while they were thus engaged the hill shook and suddenly sank, and only one old squaw, named Walden, escaped, and from her the pond was named. It has been conjectured that when the hill shook these stones rolled down its side and became the present shore. It is very certain, at any rate, that once there was no pond here, and now there is one; and this Indian fable does not in any respect conflict with the account of that ancient settler whom I have mentioned, who remembers so well when he first came here with his divining-rod, saw a thin vapor rising from the sward, and the hazel pointed steadily downward, and he concluded to dig a well here. As for the stones, many still think that they are hardly to

be accounted for by the action of the waves on these hills; but I observe that the surrounding hills are remarkably full of the same kind of stones, so that they have been obliged to pile them up in walls on both sides of the railroad cut nearest the pond; and, moreover, there are most stones where the shore is most abrupt; so that, unfortunately, it is no longer a mystery to me. I detect the paver. If the name was not derived from that of some English locality -- Saffron Walden, for instance -- one might suppose that it was called originally Walled-in Pond."

Thoreau's Romanticism in "The Ponds"

In "The Ponds," Thoreau also describes incorporeal experiences around the water, both experiences related to him by others and his own. Thoreau, who was well read and a transcendentalist, and therefore intimately familiar with Romanticism, relates the stories in a way that could be argued to interpret or reveal the pond as the locale of the Grail Legend in the Americas. In the following passage, Walden Pond's vanishing treasure chest echoes the protagonist's fleeting encounter with the Grail in Wolfram von Eschenbach's German romance *Parzival*, and the pond's canoe is reminiscent of the boat in Goethe's *A Fairy Tale*. Thoreau wrote:

"An old man who used to frequent this pond nearly sixty years ago, when it was dark with surrounding forests, tells me that in those days he sometimes saw it all alive with ducks and other water-fowl, and that there were many eagles about it. He came here a-fishing, and used an old log canoe which he found on the shore. It was made of two white pine logs dug out and pinned

together, and was cut off square at the ends. It was very clumsy, but lasted a great many years before it became water-logged and perhaps sank to the bottom. He did not know whose it was; it belonged to the pond. He used to make a cable for his anchor of strips of hickory bark tied together. An old man, a potter, who lived by the pond before the Revolution, told him once that there was an iron chest at the bottom, and that he had seen it. Sometimes it would come floating up to the shore; but when you went toward it, it would go back into the deep water and disappear ... When I first paddled a boat on Walden, it was completely surrounded by thick and lofty pine and oak woods, and in some of its coves grapevines had run over the trees next the water and formed bowers under which a boat could pass. The hills which form its shores are so steep, and the woods on them were then so high, that, as you looked down from the west end, it had the appearance of an amphitheater for some kind of sylvan spectacle. I have spent many an hour, when I was younger, floating over its surface as the zephyr willed, having paddled my boat to the middle, and lying on my back across the seats, in a summer forenoon, dreaming awake, until I was aroused by the boat touching the sand, and I arose to see what shore my fates had impelled me to; days when idleness was the most attractive and productive industry."

Long before it became one of America's most celebrated literary landscapes, Walden Woods was shaped by ice. Roughly 12,000 years ago, as glaciers retreated from New England, this area lay beneath the waters of glacial Lake Sudbury. Deep deposits of sand and gravel were left behind,

and as large blocks of ice melted, they formed the kettle-hole ponds that still define the landscape today—including Walden Pond itself. Its geological history helped create an ecosystem unlike much of the surrounding region, one that captured Henry David Thoreau's attention and inspired observations that continue to influence readers, scientists, and conservationists alike. Today, Walden Woods remains a place where geology, ecology, history, and literature intersect, each layer adding to our understanding of this remarkable landscape.