Walden is an account of the two years during which Henry David Thoreau built his own cabin, raised his own food, and lived a life of simplicity in the woods near Concord, Massachusetts. Thoreau's idea was that one's true self could be lost amid the distractions of ordinary life. His experiment consisted of stripping away those distractions, living deliberately instead of automatically, and following the inclinations that arose within him in the solitude, silence, and leisure of his simplified life. He retreated from nonessentials to explore what remained as the core of human identity, assuming that human identity is not based on one's profession or possessions or social connections.

Thoreau was a faithful, lifelong journal-keeper, and Walden is an artful reworking of journal entries from his time in the woods. It is a masterpiece of one of the master writers of Transcendentalism. One reason that Walden is exemplary as a work of Transcendentalism is that the book makes the idealistic assumption that there is a true self to discover. Walden is also a Transcendentalist work in other ways. It is the record of an eclectic intelligence considering life from many perspectives. Thoreau observed and appreciated nature keenly; Walden details a naturalist's perceptions of the animals, plants, and seasons of the Concord woods. Thoreau was also a witty and merciless social critic. Walden is laden with his acid condemnations of the hypocrisy, mindless conformity, and waste of the human spirit that drove him away from the culture around him. Thoreau was well-read in Eastern religion and philosophy; Walden is one of the early attempts to put before a Western audience the Eastern values of mindfulness, detachment, simplicity, and living in the present moment.

In chapter 9, Thoreau talks about some of his activities at Walden Pond. He would go for a walk to Fair Haven Hill and pick huckleberries, which he would have for dinner. Sometimes he would fish, often by himself and occasionally with a friend; he particularly enjoyed fishing at night when he could hear the sounds of owls, foxes, and other wildlife. At other times he would simply sit in his boat, watching the fish and birds or playing his flute.

Thoreau also describes in detail the ponds around his cabin. Walden is, of course, the one to which he gives the most attention. He describes it as a humble pond, clean and in places quite deep, with sand on its bottom and white stones on its shore. It is approximately half a mile long and two miles around. It is set down amidst steep hills, which give enough shade to make the pond take on a lovely blue-green color most of the time. Thoreau praises the pond for its purity, and uses its water for drinking and bathing. He claims he can see the bottom even at depths of thirty feet or more. He even spends some time discussing the history of the pond in terms of its constitution and details the wildlife living in and around its borders.

Walden is only one of several ponds in the area. There is White Pond, which Thoreau thinks is the most beautiful of all, for it is very pristine -- unspoiled by man's presence. Sandy Pond (also called Flint's Pond) is located near Lincoln; with an area of 197 acres, it is the largest in the area. Also, there are Goose and Fair Haven Ponds. The last of this chapter is kind of an ode to ponds in general, wherein Thoreau describes them as the precious crystals of the earth. In fact, he goes as far as to say that if they were

jewels that could be contained, they would be carried off as offerings to the emperors around the world. He regrets that more people do not appreciate the beauty of the ponds.

Thoreau's extensive, closely observed descriptions of the pond show his deep reverence for it and the spiritual grandeur he believes it has as a part of nature. When he goes out fishing with his companion but they stay silent, he is able to have a kind of solitude in the company of another person just as he is able to have solitude in nature.

There are tracks around the pond that, Thoreau thinks, were made by aboriginal hunters. According to an Indian fable, a group was holding a pow-wow on a hill and were using profanity, when suddenly the hill they were on sank and became a depression and swallowed up the whole group except for one person, a woman named Walden. Thoreau describes the pond as "earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature." To him, the water is "as sacred as the Ganges," yet the villagers merely pump it into town to wash their dishes.

Thoreau thinks of himself as having a kind of connection with the aboriginal hunters of the past, who respected the land and had a sense of its spiritual value. The Indian's sense of the pond as holy is made clear in the fable, in which those who curses near the pond were swallowed up. But the villagers also belittle the pond, not by cursing near it but by seeing it only as something they can use to wash their dishes, and therefore not appreciating or even noticing its sacred beauty.In contrast, Thoreau believes he can learn about himself by looking into the pond.