

# The Hawthornes on Thoreau

**Nathaniel Hawthorne, from *American Notebooks***

*September 1, 1842.* Mr. Thoreau dined with us yesterday. He is a singular character — a young man with much of wild original nature still remaining in him; and so far as he is sophisticated, it is in a way and method of his own. He is as ugly as sin, long-nosed, queer-mouthed, and with uncouth and rustic, though courteous manners, corresponding very well with such an exterior. But his ugliness is of an honest and agreeable fashion, and becomes him much better than beauty. He was educated, I believe, at Cambridge, and formerly kept school in this town; but for two or three years back, he has repudiated all regular modes of getting a living, and seems inclined to lead a sort of Indian life among civilized men — an Indian life, I mean, as respects the absence of any systematic effort for a livelihood. He has been for some time an inmate of Mr. Emerson's family; and, in requital, he labors in the garden, and performs such other offices as may suit him — being entertained by Mr. Emerson for the sake of what true manhood there is in him.

Mr. Thoreau is a keen and delicate observer of nature — a genuine observer — which, I suspect, is almost as rare a character as even an original poet; and Nature, in return for his love, seems to adopt him as her especial child, and shows him secrets which few others are allowed to witness. He is familiar with beast, fish, fowl, and reptile, and has strange stories to tell of adventures, and friendly passages with these lower brethren of mortality. Herb and flower, likewise, wherever they grow, whether in garden or wildwood, are his familiar friends. He is also on intimate terms

with the clouds, and can tell the portents of storms. It is a characteristic trait that he has a great regard for the memory of the Indian tribes, whose wild life would have suited him so well; and strange to say, he seldom walks over a ploughed field without picking up an arrow-point, a spearhead, or other relic of the red men — as if their spirits willed him to be the inheritor of their simple wealth.

With all this he has more than a tincture of literature, — a deep and true taste for poetry, especially for the elder poets, and he is a good writer, — at least he has written a good article, a rambling disquisition on Natural History, in the last *Dial*, which, he says, was chiefly made up from journals of his own observations. Methinks this article gives a very fair image of his mind and character, — so true, innate, and literal in observation, yet giving the spirit as well as letter of what he sees, even as a lake reflects its wooded banks, showing every leaf, yet giving the wild beauty of the whole scene. Then there are in the article passages of cloudy and dreamy metaphysics, and also passages where his thoughts seem to measure and attune themselves into spontaneous verse, as they rightfully may, since there is real poetry in them. There is a basis of good sense and of moral truth, too, throughout the article, which also is a reflection of his character; for he is not unwise to think and feel, and I find him a healthy and wholesome man to know.

After dinner (at which we cut the first watermelon and muskmelon that our garden has ripened) Mr. Thoreau and I walked up the bank of the river; and, at a certain point, he shouted for his boat. Forthwith, a young man paddled it across the river, and Mr. Thoreau and I voyaged farther up the stream, which soon became more beautiful than any picture, with its dark and quiet sheet of water, half shaded, half sunny, between high and wooded banks. The late rains have swollen the stream so much that many trees are standing up to their knees, as it were, in the water, and boughs,

which lately swung high in air, now dip and drink deep of the passing wave. As to the poor cardinals which glowed upon the bank a few days since, I could see only a few of their scarlet hats, peeping above the tide. Mr. Thoreau managed the boat so perfectly, either with two paddles or with one, that it seemed instinct with his own will, and to require no physical effort to guide it. He said that, when some Indians visited Concord a few years since, he found that he had acquired, without a teacher, their precise method of propelling and steering a canoe. Nevertheless he was desirous of selling the boat of which he is so fit a pilot, and which was built by his own hands; so I agreed to take it, and accordingly became possessor of the Musketaquid. I wish I could acquire the aquatic skill of the original owner.

**From** *The Memoirs of Julian Hawthorne*

Once, when I was nearly seven years old, Thoreau came to the Wayside to make a survey of our land, bringing his surveying apparatus on his shoulder. I watched the short, dark, unbeautiful man with interest and followed him about, all over the place, never losing sight of a movement and never asking a question or uttering a word. The thing must have lasted a couple of hours; when we got back, Thoreau remarked to my father: "Good boy! Sharp eyes, and no tongue!" On that basis I was admitted to his friendship; a friendship or comradeship which began in 1852 and was to last until his death in 1862.

In our walks about the country, Thoreau saw every thing, and would indicate the invisible to me with a silent nod of the head. The brook that skirted the foot of our meadow was another treasure-house which he discovered to me, though he was too shy to companion me there; when he had given me a glimpse of Nature in her privacy, he left me alone with her .... [and] on a hot August

day, I would often sit, hidden from the world, thinking boy thoughts.

I learned how to snare chub, and even pickerel, with a loop made of a long-stemmed grass; dragon-flies poised like humming-birds, and insects skated zigzag on the surface, casting odd shadows on the bottom .... Yes, Thoreau showed me things, and though it didn't aid me in the Harvard curriculum, it helped me through life.

Truly, Nature absorbed his attention, but I don't think he cared much for what is called the beauties of nature; it was her way of working, her mystery, her economy in extravagance; he delighted to trace her footsteps toward their source .... He liked to feel that the pursuit was endless, with mystery at both ends of it ....