

**Classic Poetry Series**

# **Henry David Thoreau**

**- poems -**

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## **Henry David Thoreau (1817 - 1862)**

Thoreau was born in Massachusetts and after an education at Harvard became a school teacher with his brother in their home town of Concord, following the teachings of Bronson Alcott.

From 1841-3 Thoreau lived in Emerson's house, employed as a general handyman, and became a disciple of his. Indeed he has been described as the answer to Emerson's plea for an American Scholar. During this period he got to know members of the Transcendental Club and published a few poems in *The Dial* and other magazines. Returning to Concord, Thoreau built himself a hut at nearby Walden pond with the intention of following the ideals of Transcendentalism. Rather than becoming part of a co-operative community as some of his contemporaries had, he sought solitude to enable himself to return to the natural simplicity of life. He lived alone on Walden pond from 4 July 1845 to 6 September 1847, significantly choosing to leave society on Independence Day. Making a pun of his name he called himself a thorough man and occupied each day carefully observing and recording experiences and thoughts in his journals. At this time he wrote his most famous work, *Walden*. His one day away from the pond was due to imprisonment for refusing to pay his poll tax in protest against the government's involvement in the Mexican War. His essay *Civil Disobedience* put forward ideas of passive resistance later adopted by Gandhi.

After two years, two months and two days, Thoreau returned to "civilisation". He died of tuberculosis whilst making a last attempt to edit his journals for publication.

## Conscience

Conscience is instinct bred in the house,  
Feeling and Thinking propagate the sin  
By an unnatural breeding in and in.  
I say, Turn it out doors,  
Into the moors.  
I love a life whose plot is simple,  
And does not thicken with every pimple,  
A soul so sound no sickly conscience binds it,  
That makes the universe no worse than 't finds it.  
I love an earnest soul,  
Whose mighty joy and sorrow  
Are not drowned in a bowl,  
And brought to life to-morrow;  
That lives one tragedy,  
And not seventy;  
A conscience worth keeping;  
Laughing not weeping;  
A conscience wise and steady,  
And forever ready;  
Not changing with events,  
Dealing in compliments;  
A conscience exercised about  
Large things, where one may doubt.  
I love a soul not all of wood,  
Predestinated to be good,  
But true to the backbone  
Unto itself alone,  
And false to none;  
Born to its own affairs,  
Its own joys and own cares;  
By whom the work which God begun  
Is finished, and not undone;  
Taken up where he left off,  
Whether to worship or to scoff;  
If not good, why then evil,  
If not good god, good devil.  
Goodness! you hypocrite, come out of that,  
Live your life, do your work, then take your hat.  
I have no patience towards  
Such conscientious cowards.  
Give me simple laboring folk,  
Who love their work,  
Whose virtue is song  
To cheer God along.

Henry David Thoreau

## **Epitaph On The World**

Here lies the body of this world,  
Whose soul alas to hell is hurled.  
This golden youth long since was past,  
Its silver manhood went as fast,  
An iron age drew on at last;  
'Tis vain its character to tell,  
The several fates which it befell,  
What year it died, when 'twill arise,  
We only know that here it lies.

Henry David Thoreau

## Friendship

I think awhile of Love, and while I think,  
Love is to me a world,  
Sole meat and sweetest drink,  
And close connecting link  
Tween heaven and earth.

I only know it is, not how or why,  
My greatest happiness;  
However hard I try,  
Not if I were to die,  
Can I explain.

I fain would ask my friend how it can be,  
But when the time arrives,  
Then Love is more lovely  
Than anything to me,  
And so I'm dumb.

For if the truth were known, Love cannot speak,  
But only thinks and does;  
Though surely out 'twill leak  
Without the help of Greek,  
Or any tongue.

A man may love the truth and practise it,  
Beauty he may admire,  
And goodness not omit,  
As much as may befit  
To reverence.

But only when these three together meet,  
As they always incline,  
And make one soul the seat,  
And favorite retreat,  
Of loveliness;

When under kindred shape, like loves and hates  
And a kindred nature,  
Proclaim us to be mates,  
Exposed to equal fates  
Eternally;

And each may other help, and service do,  
Drawing Love's bands more tight,  
Service he ne'er shall rue  
While one and one make two,  
And two are one;

In such case only doth man fully prove  
Fully as man can do,  
What power there is in Love  
His inmost soul to move

Resistlessly.

---

Two sturdy oaks I mean, which side by side,  
Withstand the winter's storm,  
And spite of wind and tide,  
Grow up the meadow's pride,  
For both are strong

Above they barely touch, but undermined  
Down to their deepest source,  
Admiring you shall find  
Their roots are intertwined  
Insep'rably.

Henry David Thoreau

## **I am a Parcel of Vain Strivings Tied**

I am a parcel of vain strivings tied  
By a chance bond together,  
Dangling this way and that, their links  
Were made so loose and wide,  
Methinks,  
For milder weather.

A bunch of violets without their roots,  
And sorrel intermixed,  
Encircled by a wisp of straw  
Once coiled about their shoots,  
The law  
By which I'm fixed.

A nosegay which Time clutched from out  
Those fair Elysian fields,  
With weeds and broken stems, in haste,  
Doth make the rabble rout  
That waste  
The day he yields.

And here I bloom for a short hour unseen,  
Drinking my juices up,  
With no root in the land  
To keep my branches green,  
But stand  
In a bare cup.

Some tender buds were left upon my stem  
In mimicry of life,  
But ah! the children will not know,  
Till time has withered them,  
The woe  
With which they're rife.

But now I see I was not plucked for naught,  
And after in life's vase  
Of glass set while I might survive,  
But by a kind hand brought  
Alive  
To a strange place.

That stock thus thinned will soon redeem its hours,  
And by another year,  
Such as God knows, with freer air,  
More fruits and fairer flowers  
Will bear,  
While I droop here.

Henry David Thoreau

## **I am the Autumnal Sun**

Sometimes a mortal feels in himself Nature  
-- not his Father but his Mother stirs  
within him, and he becomes immortal with her  
immortality. From time to time she claims  
kindredship with us, and some globule  
from her veins steals up into our own.

I am the autumnal sun,  
With autumn gales my race is run;  
When will the hazel put forth its flowers,  
Or the grape ripen under my bowers?  
When will the harvest or the hunter's moon  
Turn my midnight into mid-noon?  
I am all sere and yellow,  
And to my core mellow.  
The mast is dropping within my woods,  
The winter is lurking within my moods,  
And the rustling of the withered leaf  
Is the constant music of my grief...

Henry David Thoreau



## **I Knew A Man By Sight**

I knew a man by sight,  
A blameless wight,  
Who, for a year or more,  
Had daily passed my door,  
Yet converse none had had with him.

I met him in a lane,  
Him and his cane,  
About three miles from home,  
Where I had chanced to roam,  
And volumes stared at him, and he at me.

In a more distant place  
I glimpsed his face,  
And bowed instinctively;  
Starting he bowed to me,  
Bowed simultaneously, and passed along.

Next, in a foreign land  
I grasped his hand,  
And had a social chat,  
About this thing and that,  
As I had known him well a thousand years.

Late in a wilderness  
I shared his mess,  
For he had hardships seen,  
And I a wanderer been;  
He was my bosom friend, and I was his.

And as, methinks, shall all,  
Both great and small,  
That ever lived on earth,  
Early or late their birth,  
Stranger and foe, one day each other know.

Henry David Thoreau

## **Indeed, Indeed I Cannot Tell**

Indeed indeed, I cannot tell,  
Though I ponder on it well,  
Which were easier to state,  
All my love or all my hate.  
Surely, surely, thou wilt trust me  
When I say thou dost disgust me.  
O, I hate thee with a hate  
That would fain annihilate;  
Yet sometimes against my will,  
My dear friend, I love thee still.  
It were treason to our love,  
And a sin to God above,  
One iota to abate  
Of a pure impartial hate.

Henry David Thoreau

## Inspiration

Whate'er we leave to God, God does,  
And blesses us;  
The work we choose should be our own,  
God leaves alone.

If with light head erect I sing,  
Though all the Muses lend their force,  
From my poor love of anything,  
The verse is weak and shallow as its source.

But if with bended neck I grope  
Listening behind me for my wit,  
With faith superior to hope,  
More anxious to keep back than forward it;

Making my soul accomplice there  
Unto the flame my heart hath lit,  
Then will the verse forever wear--  
Time cannot bend the line which God hath writ.

Always the general show of things  
Floats in review before my mind,  
And such true love and reverence brings,  
That sometimes I forget that I am blind.

But now there comes unsought, unseen,  
Some clear divine electuary,  
And I, who had but sensual been,  
Grow sensible, and as God is, am wary.

I hearing get, who had but ears,  
And sight, who had but eyes before,  
I moments live, who lived but years,  
And truth discern, who knew but learning's lore.

I hear beyond the range of sound,  
I see beyond the range of sight,  
New earths and skies and seas around,  
And in my day the sun doth pale his light.

A clear and ancient harmony  
Pierces my soul through all its din,  
As through its utmost melody--  
Farther behind than they, farther within.

More swift its bolt than lightning is,  
Its voice than thunder is more loud,  
It doth expand my privacies  
To all, and leave me single in the crowd.

It speaks with such authority,  
With so serene and lofty tone,

That idle Time runs gadding by,  
And leaves me with Eternity alone.

Now chiefly is my natal hour,  
And only now my prime of life;  
Of manhood's strength it is the flower,  
'Tis peace's end and war's beginning strife.

It comes in summer's broadest noon,  
By a grey wall or some chance place,  
Unseasoning Time, insulting June,  
And vexing day with its presuming face.

Such fragrance round my couch it makes,  
More rich than are Arabian drugs,  
That my soul scents its life and wakes  
The body up beneath its perfumed rugs.

Such is the Muse, the heavenly maid,  
The star that guides our mortal course,  
Which shows where life's true kernel's laid,  
Its wheat's fine flour, and its undying force.

She with one breath attunes the spheres,  
And also my poor human heart,  
With one impulse propels the years  
Around, and gives my throbbing pulse its start.

I will not doubt for evermore,  
Nor falter from a steadfast faith,  
For thought the system be turned o'er,  
God takes not back the word which once He saith.

I will not doubt the love untold  
Which not my worth nor want has bought,  
Which wooed me young, and woos me old,  
And to this evening hath me brought.

My memory I'll educate  
To know the one historic truth,  
Remembering to the latest date  
The only true and sole immortal youth.

Be but thy inspiration given,  
No matter through what danger sought,  
I'll fathom hell or climb to heaven,  
And yet esteem that cheap which love has bought.

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Fame cannot tempt the bard  
Who's famous with his God,  
Nor laurel him reward

Who has his Maker's nod.

Henry David Thoreau

## Let such pure hate still underprop

Let such pure hate still underprop  
Our love, that we may be  
Each other's conscience,  
And have our sympathy  
Mainly from thence.  
We'll one another treat like gods,  
And all the faith we have  
In virtue and in truth, bestow  
On either, and suspicion leave  
To gods below.

Two solitary stars--  
Unmeasured systems far  
Between us roll;  
But by our conscious light we are  
Determined to one pole.

What need confound the sphere?--  
Love can afford to wait;  
For it no hour's too late  
That witnesseth one duty's end,  
Or to another doth beginning lend.

It will subserve no use,  
More than the tints of flowers;  
Only the independent guest  
Frequents its bowers,  
Inherits its bequest.

No speech, though kind, has it;  
But kinder silence doles  
Unto its mates;  
By night consoles,  
By day congratulates.

What saith the tongue to tongue?  
What hearest ear of ear?  
By the decrees of fate  
From year to year,  
Does it communicate.

Pathless the gulf of feeling yawns;  
No trivial bridge of words,  
Or arch of boldest span,  
Can leap the moat that girds  
The sincere man.

No show of bolts and bars  
Can keep the foeman out,  
Or 'scape his secret mine,  
Who entered with the doubt  
That drew the line.

No warder at the gate  
Can let the friendly in;  
But, like the sun, o'er all  
He will the castle win,  
And shine along the wall.

There's nothing in the world I know  
That can escape from love,  
For every depth it goes below,  
And every height above.  
It waits, as waits the sky,  
Until the clouds go by,  
Yet shines serenely on  
With an eternal day,  
Alike when they are gone,  
And when they stay.

Implacable is Love--  
Foes may be bought or teased  
From their hostile intent,  
But he goes unappeased  
Who is on kindness bent.

Henry David Thoreau

## **Low-Anchored Cloud**

Low-anchored cloud,  
Newfoundland air,  
Fountain-head and source of rivers,  
Dew-cloth, dream-drapery,  
And napkin spread by fays;  
Drifting meadow of the air,  
Where bloom the daisied banks and violets,  
And in whose fenny labyrinth  
The bittern booms and heron wades;  
Spirit of lakes and seas and rivers,  
Bear only perfumes and the scent  
Of healing herbs to just men's fields!

Henry David Thoreau



## **Mist**

Low-anchored cloud,  
Newfoundland air,  
Fountain head and source of rivers,  
Dew-cloth, dream drapery,  
And napkin spread by fays;  
Drifting meadow of the air,  
Where bloom the dasied banks and violets,  
And in whose fenny labyrinth  
The bittern booms and heron wades;  
Spirit of the lake and seas and rivers,  
Bear only perfumes and the scent  
Of healing herbs to just men's fields!

Henry David Thoreau

## **On Fields O'er Which the Reaper's Hand Has Pass'd**

On fields o'er which the reaper's hand has pass'd  
Lit by the harvest moon and autumn sun,  
My thoughts like stubble floating in the wind  
And of such fineness as October airs,  
There after harvest could I glean my life  
A richer harvest reaping without toil,  
And weaving gorgeous fancies at my will  
In subtler webs than finest summer haze.

Henry David Thoreau

## **Pray to What Earth Does This Sweet Cold Belong**

Pray to what earth does this sweet cold belong,  
Which asks no duties and no conscience?  
The moon goes up by leaps, her cheerful path  
In some far summer stratum of the sky,  
While stars with their cold shine bedot her way.  
The fields gleam mildly back upon the sky,  
And far and near upon the leafless shrubs  
The snow dust still emits a silver light.  
Under the hedge, where drift banks are their screen,  
The titmice now pursue their downy dreams,  
As often in the sweltering summer nights  
The bee doth drop asleep in the flower cup,  
When evening overtakes him with his load.  
By the brooksides, in the still, genial night,  
The more adventurous wanderer may hear  
The crystals shoot and form, and winter slow  
Increase his rule by gentlest summer means.

Henry David Thoreau

## Prayer

Great God, I ask for no meaner self  
Than that I may not disappoint myself,  
That in my action I may soar as high  
As I can now discern with this clear eye.  
And next in value, which thy kindness lends,  
That I may greatly disappoint my friends,  
Howe'er they think or hope that it may be,  
They may not dream how thou'st distinguished me.

That my weak hand may equal my firm faith  
And my life practice what my tongue saith  
That my low conduct may not show  
Nor my relenting lines  
That I thy purpose did not know  
Or overrated thy designs.

Henry David Thoreau

## **Rumors from an Aeolian Harp**

There is a vale which none hath seen,  
Where foot of man has never been,  
Such as here lives with toil and strife,  
An anxious and a sinful life.  
There every virtue has its birth,  
Ere it descends upon the earth,  
And thither every deed returns,  
Which in the generous bosom burns.

There love is warm, and youth is young,  
And poetry is yet unsung.  
For Virtue still adventures there,  
And freely breathes her native air.

And ever, if you hearken well,  
You still may hear its vesper bell,  
And tread of high-souled men go by,  
Their thoughts conversing with the sky.

Henry David Thoreau

## Sic Vita

I am a parcel of vain strivings tied  
By a chance bond together,  
Dangling this way and that, their links  
Were made so loose and wide,  
Methinks,  
For milder weather.

A bunch of violets without their roots,  
And sorrel intermixed,  
Encircled by a wisp of straw  
Once coiled about their shoots,  
The law  
By which I'm fixed.

A nosegay which Time clutched from out  
Those fair Elysian fields,  
With weeds and broken stems, in haste,  
Doth make the rabble rout  
That waste  
The day he yields.

And here I bloom for a short hour unseen,  
Drinking my juices up,  
With no root in the land  
To keep my branches green,  
But stand  
In a bare cup.

Some tender buds were left upon my stem  
In mimicry of life,  
But ah! the children will not know,  
Till time has withered them,  
The woe  
With which they're rife.

But now I see I was not plucked for naught,  
And after in life's vase  
Of glass set while I might survive,  
But by a kind hand brought  
Alive  
To a strange place.

That stock thus thinned will soon redeem its hours,  
And by another year,  
Such as God knows, with freer air,  
More fruits and fairer flowers  
Will bear,  
While I droop here.

Henry David Thoreau

## Smoke

Light-winged Smoke, Icarian bird,  
Melting thy pinions in thy upward flight,  
Lark without song, and messenger of dawn  
Circling above the hamlets as they nest;  
Or else, departing dream, and shadowy form  
Of midnight vision, gathering up thy skirts;  
By night star-veiling, and by day  
Darkening the light and blotting out the sun;  
Go thou my incense upward from this hearth,  
And ask the gods to pardon this clear flame.

Henry David Thoreau

## **The Inward Morning**

Packed in my mind lie all the clothes  
Which outward nature wears,  
And in its fashion's hourly change  
It all things else repairs.  
In vain I look for change abroad,  
And can no difference find,  
Till some new ray of peace uncalled  
Illumes my inmost mind.

What is it gilds the trees and clouds,  
And paints the heavens so gay,  
But yonder fast-abiding light  
With its unchanging ray?

Lo, when the sun streams through the wood,  
Upon a winter's morn,  
Where'er his silent beams intrude,  
The murky night is gone.

How could the patient pine have known  
The morning breeze would come,  
Or humble flowers anticipate  
The insect's noonday hum--

Till the new light with morning cheer  
From far streamed through the aisles,  
And nimbly told the forest trees  
For many stretching miles?

I've heard within my inmost soul  
Such cheerful morning news,  
In the horizon of my mind  
Have seen such orient hues,

As in the twilight of the dawn,  
When the first birds awake,  
Are heard within some silent wood,  
Where they the small twigs break,

Or in the eastern skies are seen,  
Before the sun appears,  
The harbingers of summer heats  
Which from afar he bears.

Henry David Thoreau



## **The Moon**

Time wears her not; she doth his chariot guide;  
Mortality below her orb is placed.  
--Raleigh

The full-orbed moon with unchanged ray  
Mounts up the eastern sky,  
Not doomed to these short nights for aye,  
But shining steadily.

She does not wane, but my fortune,  
Which her rays do not bless,  
My wayward path declineth soon,  
But she shines not the less.

And if she faintly glimmers here,  
And paled is her light,  
Yet alway in her proper sphere  
She's mistress of the night.

Henry David Thoreau

## The Summer Rain

My books I'd fain cast off, I cannot read,  
'Twixt every page my thoughts go stray at large  
Down in the meadow, where is richer feed,  
And will not mind to hit their proper targe.

Plutarch was good, and so was Homer too,  
Our Shakespeare's life were rich to live again,  
What Plutarch read, that was not good nor true,  
Nor Shakespeare's books, unless his books were men.

Here while I lie beneath this walnut bough,  
What care I for the Greeks or for Troy town,  
If juster battles are enacted now  
Between the ants upon this hummock's crown?

Bid Homer wait till I the issue learn,  
If red or black the gods will favor most,  
Or yonder Ajax will the phalanx turn,  
Struggling to heave some rock against the host.

Tell Shakespeare to attend some leisure hour,  
For now I've business with this drop of dew,  
And see you not, the clouds prepare a shower--  
I'll meet him shortly when the sky is blue.

This bed of herd's grass and wild oats was spread  
Last year with nicer skill than monarchs use.  
A clover tuft is pillow for my head,  
And violets quite overtop my shoes.

And now the cordial clouds have shut all in,  
And gently swells the wind to say all's well;  
The scattered drops are falling fast and thin,  
Some in the pool, some in the flower-bell.

I am well drenched upon my bed of oats;  
But see that globe come rolling down its stem,  
Now like a lonely planet there it floats,  
And now it sinks into my garment's hem.

Drip drip the trees for all the country round,  
And richness rare distills from every bough;  
The wind alone it is makes every sound,  
Shaking down crystals on the leaves below.

For shame the sun will never show himself,  
Who could not with his beams e'er melt me so;  
My dripping locks--they would become an elf,  
Who in a beaded coat does gayly go.

Henry David Thoreau

## **They Who Prepare My Evening Meal Below**

They who prepare my evening meal below  
Carelessly hit the kettle as they go  
With tongs or shovel,  
And ringing round and round,  
Out of this hovel  
It makes an eastern temple by the sound.

At first I thought a cow bell right at hand  
Mid birches sounded o'er the open land,  
Where I plucked flowers  
Many years ago,  
Spending midsummer hours  
With such secure delight they hardly seemed to flow.

Henry David Thoreau

## **What's the Railroad to Me?**

What's the railroad to me?  
I never go to see  
Where it ends.  
It fills a few hollows,  
And makes banks for the swallows,  
It sets the sand a-blowing,  
And the blackberries a-growing.

Henry David Thoreau

## Winter Memories

Within the circuit of this plodding life  
There enter moments of an azure hue,  
Untarnished fair as is the violet  
Or anemone, when the spring stew them  
By some meandering rivulet, which make  
The best philosophy untrue that aims  
But to console man for his grievences.  
I have remembered when the winter came,  
High in my chamber in the frosty nights,  
When in the still light of the cheerful moon,  
On the every twig and rail and jutting spout,  
The icy spears were adding to their length  
Against the arrows of the coming sun,  
How in the shimmering noon of winter past  
Some unrecorded beam slanted across  
The upland pastures where the Johnwort grew;  
Or heard, amid the verdure of my mind,  
The bee's long smothered hum, on the blue flag  
Loitering amidst the mead; or busy rill,  
Which now through all its course stands still and dumb  
Its own memorial, - purling at its play  
Along the slopes, and through the meadows next,  
Until its youthful sound was hushed at last  
In the staid current of the lowland stream;  
Or seen the furrows shine but late upturned,  
And where the fieldfare followed in the rear,  
When all the fields around lay bound and hoar  
Beneath a thick integument of snow.  
So by God's cheap economy made rich  
To go upon my winter's task again.

Henry David Thoreau