**Summary**

Thoreau recalls the several places where he nearly settled before selecting Walden Pond, all of them estates on a rather large scale. He quotes the Roman philosopher Cato’s warning that it is best to consider buying a farm very carefully before signing the papers. He had been interested in the nearby Hollowell farm, despite the many improvements that needed to be made there, but, before a deed could be drawn, the owner’s wife unexpectedly decided she wanted to keep the farm. Consequently, Thoreau gave up his claim on the property. Even though he had been prepared to farm a large tract, Thoreau realizes that this outcome may have been for the best. Forced to simplify his life, he concludes that it is best “as long as possible” to “live free and uncommitted.” Thoreau takes to the woods, dreaming of an existence free of obligations and full of leisure. He proudly announces that he resides far from the post office and all the constraining social relationships the mail system represents. Ironically, this renunciation of legal deeds provides him with true ownership, paraphrasing a poet to the effect that “I am monarch of all I survey.”

Thoreau’s delight in his new building project at Walden is more than merely the pride of a first-time homeowner; it is a grandly philosophic achievement in his mind, a symbol of his conquest of being. When Thoreau first moves into his dwelling on Independence Day, it gives him a proud sense of being a god on Olympus, even though the house still lacks a chimney and plastering. He claims that a paradise fit for gods is available everywhere, if one can perceive it: “Olympus is but the outside of the earth every where.” Taking an optimistic view, he declares that his poorly insulated walls give his interior the benefit of fresh air on summer nights. He justifies its lack of carved ornament by declaring that it is better to carve “the very atmosphere” one thinks and feels in, in an artistry of the soul. It is for him an almost immaterial, heavenly house, “as far off as many a region viewed nightly by astronomers.” He prefers to reside here, sitting on his own humble wooden chair, than in some distant corner of the universe, “behind the constellation of Cassiopeia’s Chair.” He is free from time as well as from matter, announcing grandiosely that time is a river in which he goes fishing. He does not view himself as the slave of time; rather he makes it seem as though he is choosing to participate in the flow of time whenever and however he chooses, like a god living in eternity. He concludes on a sermonizing note, urging all of us to sludge through our existence until we hit rock bottom and can gauge truth on what he terms our “Realometer,” our means of measuring the reality of things

**Analysis**

The title of this chapter combines a practical topic of residence (“Where I Lived”) with what is probably the deepest philosophical topic of all, the meaning of life (“What I Lived For”). Thoreau thus reminds us again that he is neither practical do-it-yourself aficionado nor erudite philosopher, but a mixture of both at once, attending to matters of everyday existence and to questions of final meaning and purpose. This chapter pulls away from the bookkeeping lists and details about expenditures on nails and door hinges, and opens up onto the more transcendent vista of how it all matters, containing less how-to advice and much more philosophical meditation and grandiose universalizing assertion. It is here that we see the full influence of Ralph Waldo Emerson on Thoreau’s project. Emersonian self-reliance is not just a matter of supporting oneself financially (as many people believe) but a much loftier doctrine about the active role that every soul plays in its experience of reality. Reality for Emerson was not a set of objective facts in which we are plunked down, but rather an emanation of our minds and souls that create the world around ourselves every day.

Thoreau’s building of a house on Walden Pond is, for him, a miniature re-enactment of God’s creation of the world. He describes its placement in the cosmos, in a region viewed by the astronomers, just as God created a world within the void of space. He says outright that he resides in his home as if on Mount Olympus, home of the gods. He claims a divine freedom from the flow of time, describing himself as fishing in its river. Thoreau’s point in all this divine talk is not to inflate his own personality to godlike heights but rather to insist on everyone’s divine ability to create a world. Our capacity to choose reality is evident in his metaphor of the “Realometer,” a spin-off of the Nilometer, a device used to measure the depth of the river Nile. Thoreau urges us to wade through the muck that constitutes our everyday lives until we come to a firm place “which we can call Reality, and say, This is.” The stamp of existence we give to our vision of reality—“This is”—evokes God’s simple language in the creation story of Genesis: “Let there be. . . .” And the mere fact that Thoreau imagines that one can choose to call one thing reality and another thing not provides the spiritual freedom that was central to Emerson’s Transcendentalist thought. When we create and claim this reality, all the other “news” of the world shrinks immediately to insignificance, as Thoreau illustrates in his mocking parody of newspapers reporting a cow run over by the Western Railway. He opines that the last important bit of news to come out of England was about the revolution of 1649, almost two centuries earlier. The only current events that matter to the transcendent mind are itself and its place in the cosmos.

**Summary**

One of the many delightful pursuits in which Thoreau is able to indulge, having renounced a big job and a big mortgage, is reading. He has grand claims for the benefits of reading, which he compares, following ancient Egyptian or Hindu philosophers, to “raising the veil from the statue of divinity.” Whether or not Thoreau is ironic in such monumental reflections about books is open to debate, but it is certain that reading is one of his chief pastimes in the solitude of the woods, especially after the main construction work is done. During the busy days of homebuilding, he says he kept Homer’s Iliad on his table throughout the summer, but only glanced at it now and then. But now that he has moved in not just to his handmade shack, but into the full ownership of reality described in the preceding chapter, reading has a new importance. Thoreau praises the ability to read the ancient classics in the original Greek and Latin, disdaining the translations offered by the “modern cheap” press. Indeed he goes so far as to assert that Homer has never yet been published in English—at least not in any way that does justice to Homer’s achievement. Thoreau emphasizes the work of reading, just as he stresses the work of farming and home-owning; he compares the great reader to an athlete who has subjected himself to long training and regular exercise. He gives an almost mystical importance to the printed word. The grandeur of oratory does not impress him as much as the achievements of a written book. He says it is no wonder that Alexander the Great carried a copy of the Iliad around with him on his military campaigns.

Thoreau also urges us to read widely, gently mocking those who limit their reading to the Bible, and to read great things, not the popular entertainment books found in the library. Thoreau gradually extends his criticism of cheap reading to a criticism of the dominant culture of Concord, which deprives even the local gifted minds access to great thought. Despite the much-lauded progress of modern society in technology and transportation, he says real progress—that of the mind and soul—is being forgotten. He reproaches his townsmen for believing that the ancient Hebrews were the only people in the world to have had a Holy Scripture, ignoring the sacred writings of others, like the Hindus. Thoreau complains the townspeople spend more on any body ailment than they do on mental malnourishment; he calls out, like an angry prophet, for more public spending on education. He says, “New England can hire all the wise men in the world to come and teach her, and board them round the while, and not be provincial at all.” Thoreau implicitly blames the local class system for encouraging fine breeding in noblemen but neglecting the task of ennobling the broader population. He thus calls out for an aristocratic democracy: “[i]nstead of noblemen, let us have noble villages of men.”

**Analysis**

This chapter shows us how subtly Thoreau can segue from the personal to the public, and from observation to diatribe. He begins by simply stating that now that the work on his house has been finished, he has time to read the Homeric epic that has been sitting on his table untouched all summer. Reading here seems broached as a private pastime, an entertainment for the individual mind after the day’s work is done. But little by little he moves from the particular to the general, commenting not just on his ability to read Homer in the original but on the merits of all people being able to do so. This point leads him to a meditation on modern publishing and its stultification of the American audience, which in turn leads him to a bitter reflection on the parochialism of his compatriots who do not even know that the Hindus have a sacred writing like that of the Hebrews. By the end of the chapter, he has driven himself into a thunderous rage—as the large number of rhetorically powerful question marks and exclamation marks in the last paragraph suggest—over the American prejudice against education. He begins in the individual mode, referring to his copy of the Iliad and his leisure time. But by the end the reference has shifted to “we” rather than “I,” so that the word “us” is the last word of the chapter, appearing in the gloomy and despairing image of “the gulf of ignorance that surrounds us.” Thoreau begins the chapter as a quiet meditation about an evening’s reading pleasure but somehow ends it as a raging sermon about the state of the world.

It is in this chapter that Thoreau’s social background is most fully felt, especially the advantages of a Harvard education and a familiarity with the classics and with ancient languages. Earlier in the work, his words do not betray his origins; in discussing home construction or domestic economy, he is simply a fiery thinker and a practical man. But when he discourses on the necessity of reading Aeschylus in the original Greek, disdaining the contemporary translations offered by the “modern cheap and fertile press,” we feel that he is a member of the elite speaking to us. Although he calls out at the end of the chapter for “noble villages of men” in which education is spread broadly through the population instead of thinly over the aristocrats, we feel he must realize the impracticality of expecting woodcutters to read Aeschylus in Greek. This tension introduces the dark subject of Thoreau’s snobbism, which recurs later in his exchange with John Field and his family. Thoreau may sincerely appreciate the merits of poverty and values the lifestyle of common laborers, but his lofty words about the classics recall that in fact he is a Harvard-educated man slumming in the backwoods, and that his poverty is chosen rather than forced on him by circumstances.