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Classics and Myths in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*

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In mid-nineteenth-century America, mechanization and industrialization began to rise and spread rapidly, and people's lives in material terms also improved. However, in fact, these improvements degraded people and enslaved them to their labor. Henry David Thoreau criticizes those who have become slaves to their labor, and urges them to awaken. In this thesis, I examine how Thoreau motivates people's spirits to awaken in his masterpiece *Walden*.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I provide an overview of the history of the establishment of American national literature, and discuss the activities of Thoreau and his mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, at that time. American industry has improved dramatically since its independence; on the other hand, American arts and literature remained inferior to the countries of Europe. To establish a national literature would require Americans to seek out a national character representing the country's unique characteristics. However, America at that time had not yet defined a national character, and American writers found it difficult to establish a national literature. In their works and lectures, Emerson and Thoreau focus on the American Revolutionary War and the settlements of the Puritans, which could provide the foundations for an American national character. In particular, in his lecture and essay "A Plea for Captain John Brown," Thoreau describes John Brown as the second coming of the Puritans, and argues that he has inherited the spirit of the volunteer militia who fought in the American Revolutionary War. This suggests that Thoreau considers these events as the foundations for American national literature.

In the second chapter, I set out to examine the significance of Thoreau's life in the woods by focusing on the chapters, "The Bean-Field" and "Brute Neighbors." In mid-nineteenth-century America, the spirit of the Puritans and the American Revolutionary War was shared among writers, but as for the general public, this was not the case. The people of Concord, who should have sensed inheriting the spirit and land from their ancestors, instead turned themselves into slaves of their labor. Thoreau criticizes such citizens, but recognizes himself as one of those who work like a machine. On July 4th, 1845, Thoreau sets out to awaken himself and enters the woods to live. Farming,

which forms a part of his life in the woods, is an integral element in his spiritual awakening. For Thoreau, farming is a sacred act that holds a direct relationship with the land, a symbol of the earth goddess. He attempts to awaken his spirit through his experience of cultivation of the land. Moreover, in the chapter "Brute Neighbors," he derives human spirit from animals that inhabit the woods. In this way, Thoreau gives rise to a new sense of nature's value.

In the third chapter, I focus on the chapter "Reading," which has been neglected in previous studies, and discuss what makes Thoreau a classic American writer. In mid-nineteenth-century America, studies of the classics were viewed as unimportant due to the rapid advancements in the practical fields of economy and science. In "Reading," Thoreau criticizes the public who refuse to read the classics and argues about the inherent value of the classics. For him, the language written in the classics is as sacred as the words of the Bible, and in the process of reading the classics, people's intellect would develop. Moreover, he hopes to attain the status of a classic writer, one who can move beyond space and time and speak to the intellect of those who can understand his words. Through references to the fact that the ancient philosophers' lives were simple and they wrote their masterpieces on bark, he places his life with them. In this way, Thoreau gives a classical image to his life. By publishing his life as *Walden*, he attempts to awaken people's spirit.

Above all, I demonstrate that *Walden*, one of the most representative works of Henry David Thoreau, makes him an American classic writer who criticizes mid-nineteenth century commercialism and urges an awakening of people's spirit during an age when nature and reading were used as slaves to commercial pursuits.