

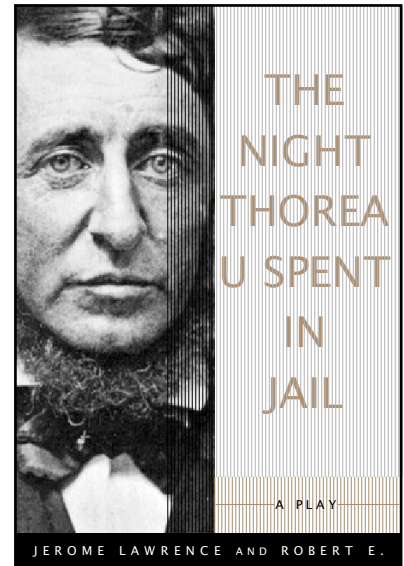


The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail

by Jerome Lawrence and
Robert E. Lee

“A superior play, a literary work as well as a theatrical experience. Scene after scene moves you to laughter or close to tears.”

—George Oppenheimer, *Newsday*



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TO THE TEACHER

The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail is an exciting, poignant, accessible, and intellectually engrossing play in two acts, with several shifting and interpolated scenes from the real and imagined life of Henry David Thoreau (1817-62), the great nineteenth-century American author and poet-philosopher. The play is a dramatic representation of a vital moment in our history, in which the 29-year-old Thoreau's ardent refusal to pay taxes—in protest to the United States government's involvement in the Mexican War—landed him in prison in his home of Concord, Massachusetts.

This famous act of civil disobedience—daring and unprecedented though it was—is merely the point of departure for Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee's widely celebrated drama. As the play progresses, we in the audience witness many if not most of the formative experiences in young Thoreau's life. We come to understand what motivates this brilliant, independent, and ever-unorthodox writer and thinker, what matters most and least to him in life and why. Perhaps most importantly, we are made privy to the inspiration and development of Thoreau's personal, natural, and influential philosophy.

That philosophy, known as transcendentalism, was an American creation of the middle 1800s that viewed all aspects of life, including human life, as small and inter-related parts of God, or the Universal Mind. Transcendentalism—originally, at least—was as much a literary movement as it was a philosophy, and it stressed individual choice and instinct above all other human impulses. Since this play candidly profiles the special bond shared by Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, it likewise profiles the friendship that, more than any other, fostered the development and dissemination of transcendentalist thought and literature. (Thoreau and Emerson are generally seen as the co-creators of transcendentalism.)

Written and first produced in the early 1970s, *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail* can—and should—be read as a work of protest. As alluded to in the playwrights’ introductory remarks, the many telling similarities between the Mexican War and the Vietnamese conflict are not coincidental. Indeed, Lawrence and Lee view their protagonist as one who can speak with clarity and conviction to all generations of Americans, be they veterans of the Revolution or members of today’s military. But the play, like the man it celebrates, is a work of enlightenment as well as protest. Henry does the majority of speaking here, and whenever he speaks, and whatever he says, he is often addressing the audience. The task your students face in reading this play is to discern Henry’s message as well as his method—what Henry David Thoreau is trying to say to us and why, and how, he is saying it. By turns wise, funny, perplexing, and sad, *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail*, as the playwrights assert in their “Production Notes,” is indeed “more than the ruminating of one man in one place in one night.” (p. 103-4) Within Henry’s dramatized musings and far-reaching ruminations, your students will recognize their choices as human beings, their dilemmas as members of society, their heritage as U.S. citizens. This play explores the crossroads of responsibility, conscience, and democracy: the self.

PRAISE FOR THE PLAY

“Lawrence and Lee have produced their finest work.”—*London Financial Times*

“Absolutely fascinating. The ingenuity of fitting the years together for a single night, the research skill which uncovered all these striking parallels and uses them so naturally, strikes me as imaginatively commanding.”—*The Washington Post*

“Thoreau’s night in jail seems destined for an important place in the American theater. It combines the drama of Lawrence and Lee’s most important previous work, *Inherit the Wind*, with the charm of their other best known play, *Auntie Mame*. The script is filled with humor, poignancy, and powerful drama.”—*St. Paul Dispatch*

“The play must rank among the most brilliant intellectual stimulants of the 1970s, perhaps even of the twentieth century.”—*Columbus Dispatch*

PREPARING
TO READ

This Teacher's Guide is primarily divided into two sections, which both appear immediately below. The first, "Following and Understanding the Play," is meant to help students with reading comprehension, dramatic appreciation, plot adherence, character interpretation, and related matters. "Exercises for the Class," the second section, aims to enable students to think more freely or comparatively about this play—thereby creatively expanding on their ideas concerning the life and thought of Henry David Thoreau—in a classroom setting or as part of an independent project. A supplementary section, "Other Readings and Resources," is offered by way of conclusion.

FOLLOWING AND
UNDERSTANDING THE PLAY

1. Why do playwrights Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee refer to the hero of this play as "The Now Thoreau?" (p. v) Having read the play, which aspects of Thoreau seem especially contemporary or "now" to you? Provide specific dialogue, actions, or scenes to illustrate your point of view.
2. The playwrights conclude their introduction by calling Henry David Thoreau "a fascinating paradox." (p. vi) Where in the course of this drama did the character of Henry strike you as paradoxical—and why did he strike you this way?
3. *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail* is a dramatic representation of a crucial event in American history. But where exactly is the play set, and when? Explain what is meant by this stage direction, from p. 3: "Time and space are awash here."
4. "He keeps casting conformity behind him." Such is the complaint Mrs. Thoreau makes about her son, Henry, at the outset of the play. (p. 6) What does she mean by this? Why is Henry so taken by the notion and practice of non-conformity?
5. As Henry and his brother John discuss Henry's recent graduation from Harvard, one name in particular comes up. Henry says, "John, I got more from one man—not even a professor—than I learned in four years of academic droning and snorting." (p. 7) Who is this man? Explain why Henry was (and is) so impressed by him.
6. What has Henry done to end up in prison? What has Bailey, his cellmate, done? If Henry's self-incarceration is an act of protest, what is he protesting against? Does his protest prove successful, in the end? Explain. And how does Bailey regard it?
7. Throughout the drama, it is clear that Henry is rarely at a loss for words. Indeed, he skillfully arranges his words into not only sound and meaningful sentences but

witty maxims and quotable declarations. Why do you think this is the case? Assuming playwrights Lawrence and Lee have in many instances deliberately enhanced Henry's speech, how and why would they do this?

8. What is "huckleberrying," and how does it relate to Henry's admittedly unorthodox method of teaching? And why is Deacon Ball so upset by this method?

9. During the classroom scene on pp. 17-23, the idea of transcendentalism first enters the drama. Define this idea. Also during this scene, Henry's speech and behavior as a teacher are occasionally mirrored by Waldo's speech and behavior as a preacher. Comment on the reasons for—and results of—this symmetry. What does Henry mean by telling young Potter that "an Intelligence" is behind all of Creation? Explain the term "Universal Mind."

10. While teaching a group of children in Heywood's Meadow, Henry meets Ellen, the older sister of one of his pupils. Look again at their initial meeting on pp. 27-9. First Henry tells Ellen not to take notes on his lecture, then he says she should take notes. What is Henry trying to say to Ellen? Does she understand him? Also, what broader problem in Henry's philosophical outlook, if any, is alluded to by his confused or arbitrary guidance in this matter? Also, comment on the lack of practicality that now and again plagues Henry's philosophical dictums. Did this impracticality bother you, as a reader? Explain why or why not. And does it bother any of the characters in this drama? Who, if so, and how?

11. In a subsequent scene, Henry takes Ellen for a boat ride. He tries to explain transcendentalism to her, falls in love with her, and is unsuccessful in both respects. But Henry also has much to say on the subject of nature—and humanity's responsibility to nature. Explain the dramatic irony of the following claim, made by Henry on p. 34: "Thank God men haven't learned to fly: they'd lay waste the sky as well as the earth." Also, explain how and why Henry's chat with Ellen closely links what we now call environmentalism to the key ideas of transcendentalism.

12. In the wake of John's death, Henry is devastated. How does Ellen placate Henry's pain and anger? What does she say? What important realization does she make, and what realization does she help Henry make?

13. What is the "experiment" that Henry imagines for himself while being hired as a handyman by Waldo and Lydian? Explain how this experiment—or the idea behind it, at least—reflects Henry's personality and philosophy.

14. Shortly before he is arrested, Henry—always the educator and agitator—addresses the townspeople gathered around him: "What law ever made men free? Men have got to make the *law* free." (p. 61) What is Henry trying to say here? Do you agree with his sentiments? Why or why not?

15. Act One ends with an exchange between Thoreau and Emerson, one that actually took place when Emerson visited his young friend after Thoreau's arrest. What do they say to each other? What are the wider contexts of their respective remarks?
16. Look again at the prayer Henry says on behalf of Bailey's upcoming trial (see p. 80). Does it seem sincere to you, or mocking in tone? Given Henry's beliefs about religion, is the prayer blasphemous or celebratory? Or both? Explain.
17. Shortly thereafter, a visitor appears in Henry's beanfield at Walden. Who is he? Where has he come from? Where is he going? Why does Henry warn him that "there's slavery in the North, too"—and what is meant by this warning? (p. 83)
18. Who is the unseen Congressman who cries out "Stop the war, Mr. President!" (p. 95-6) during Henry's nightmare? Explain why "everything on stage freezes" (as we read in the stage directions) when this individual is speaking. Why is it significant that this character appears in this particular scene? What great issues and events are foreshadowed by this character's appearance?
19. At the end of the drama, Henry says of his beloved Walden (p. 101): "It is not necessary to be there in order to *be* there." Explain what he means, especially in light of his earlier conversation with Ellen in Act One (see p. 35), and in light of your own understanding of transcendentalism.
20. In the "Production Notes" following the play, we read (p.103): "Thoreau's decision to return to the human race is the shape, the parabola, of the play." Looking back, why do you think Henry ultimately comes to this decision? Were you surprised by it, or pleased, disappointed, otherwise? Explain how you view the play's ending—happy, sad, comic, tragic—and why you view it this way.

**EXERCISES FOR
THE CLASS**

1. On at least three separate occasions (see pp. 13, 72, and 94), Henry expresses disgust for the idea of "getting along" or "going along" with everyone else. Look again at these three instances. What is Henry really disgusted with? Discuss the whole of this play—both the past and present journeys Henry makes during his night in prison—as a reaction to this everyday concept of "getting along" in life.
2. Talk about the history of this play, the events and personalities of nineteenth-century America that playwrights Lawrence and Lee aim to resurrect. What did you know of the life and thought of Thoreau—and, for that matter, of Emerson—before reading the play? What did you learn from the play in this regard?

3. Explore the close and complex relationship between Thoreau and Emerson as it is depicted here. Where and how do they inspire one another? Where and how do they disappoint one another? Which is the student and which is the master, or do these roles somehow alternate throughout the play? Explain.

4. At the end of the scene where Waldo and Lydian agree to hire Henry as a handyman, the two of them—husband and wife, conversing in an aside—are typically learned and cogent. Lydian says: “Not many people will understand that young man. He doesn’t want anything.” Waldo replies: “Perhaps he wants too much.” (p.55) Discuss the two distinct viewpoints presented in this exchange—then state which view of Henry you yourself are inclined to agree with, and why.

5. Consider the difficulties Henry has with his personal relationships throughout *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail*. His love for Ellen is rejected, his feelings for Lydian are too complicated (and only hinted at), and he seems unable to connect with his mother and his Aunt Louisa. To what extent are these troubled personal ties the by-products of Henry’s radical, highly unusual ways of thinking and behaving? Also, go back to the question Lydian asks Henry on p. 77: “If love is all around you, like huckleberries—why do you pick loneliness?” Because this scene is suddenly interrupted, Lydian’s question is never answered—but how do you think Henry would have answered it? Write a short essay explaining your view.

6. As the play makes plainly clear, Henry David Thoreau is a kind of “founding father” of the modern environmental movement. As an independent project, read several passages from Thoreau’s writings on nature—such as might be found in *Walden*, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, the *Journal*, *Walking*, *The Maine Woods*, or *Cape Cod*—and then write a short essay explaining the central role that the natural world played in this author’s life, work, and thought.

7. Halfway through Act Two, Henry and Waldo quarrel bitterly about politics. Waldo rhetorically asks Henry: “Could your woodchucks, with all their wisdom, have saved [the murdered fugitive slave] Henry Williams? Are your fish going to build roads, teach school, put out fires?” (p. 88) Discuss these pointed questions as critiques of Henry’s way of thinking about life—and living it.

8. Reread the nightmare scene near the end of *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail*, and describe the main characters and primary events in Henry’s nightmare. (pp. 92-6) Also, discuss this scene in particular, and this play in general, as a work of protest against war itself. Do you recognize parallels or discrepancies between the war depicted in this drama and any other war(s) in American history? If so, identify these similarities or differences, and then explore them in the classroom.

9. In the “Production Notes” following the play, the playwrights call for a spare and uncomplicated staging of their work. Why? Comment on the relationship

between the play's subject matter and its conceptual and theatrical design. Plays are meant to be seen and heard, not just read. In light of this, how would you—if given the task—go about directing, casting, and staging *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail*? What choices would you make? Why would you make them? Be specific.

10. As an independent project, seek out poems by Henry David Thoreau (he wrote poetry throughout his life). Next, copy down a few poems and memorize them. Finally, recite them before your class—and then compare and contrast the “voice” behind these poems with the title character in *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail*.

OTHER READINGS AND RESOURCES

A perennial favorite among Theater departments and English classes nationwide, this play functions on several levels: historical, literary, biographical, personal, philosophical, and political. To that end, teachers might wish to follow *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail* with another play about issues in American history. A few dramatic works, old as well as new, that could be productively studied in terms of how they reflect or refract this play include: *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* (by Robert Sherwood), *The Crucible* (by Arthur Miller), *Inherit the Wind* (also by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee), *Spinning into Butter* (by Rebecca Gilman), and *Waiting for Lefty* (by Clifford Odets). There are many others; teachers should look for them independently, according to their individual lesson plans.

Teachers would also do well to remember that this is a play about ideas, especially political, personal, and philosophical ideas. More to the point, it is about the great lives and great lessons behind the idea of transcendentalism. Interested students should thus be directed to the very literature that launched and shaped transcendentalism. Emerson's essays (especially “Self-Reliance”) and the varied writings of Thoreau (any of those listed in Question #6 on the previous page) should be considered primary sources. The poems of Emily Dickinson (“The Brain Is Wider Than the Sky” and several others) and Walt Whitman (particularly “Song of Myself”) will also shed light and context on this subject. And echoes of transcendentalism can likewise be experienced in the work of Margaret Fuller, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and other American writers of this period.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRITERS

Jerome Lawrence was on the faculty at USC and Robert E. Lee (1918-94) was a professor of playwriting at UCLA. They collaborated on sixteen plays, including *Inherit the Wind*, *Auntie Mame*, the musical *Mame*, and *First Monday in October*.

Scott Pitcock, who wrote this Teacher's Guide, lives and works in New York City.

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