Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), transcendentalist essayist, naturalist, editor, and social critic, was born David Henry Thoreau in Concord, Massachusetts. Thoreau graduated from Harvard University and taught briefly at a school in Concord but resigned rather than be expected to strike his students. He ran his own school from 1838 to 1841, teaching Latin, Greek, and science. In 1838 Thoreau also began lecturing, which he continued intermittently, often emphasizing his strong opposition to slavery, but his message was not always well received. Thoreau began his lifelong friendship with Ralph Waldo Emerson when he tutored Emerson’s brother William in 1843 on Staten Island, boarding with Emerson and his wife. He helped Emerson edit the Transcendentalist magazine The Dial. Thoreau kept a journal at Emerson’s urging, which aided him in his writing.

He took a canoe trip with his brother John during the first two weeks of September 1839, which experience he transformed into a volume of poems and essays entitled A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers (1849). While he published 1000 copies himself, only about 300 sold.

On July 4, 1845 Thoreau moved into a cabin on the shores of Walden Pond, on land belonging to Emerson, about two miles from Concord, and lived there alone for over two years. Thoreau condensed this outdoor life as if it were a single year in his classic Walden: Or, Life in the Woods (1854), in which he describes his lifestyle as experimental, emphasizing meditative awakening, the result of a wish “to live deliberately,” to shed materialism and to cultivate self-reliance.

In July 1846 Thoreau spent a night in the Concord jail because he refused to pay a local poll tax in protest against the Mexican War and America’s persistence in slavery. This experience led to the lecture written as “Resistance to Civil Government” and published as his best-known essay, “Civil Disobedience.” In 1857 Thoreau met John Brown and wrote “A Plea for Captain John Brown,” which became his most widely read piece during his lifetime, although it failed to save Brown. He even called for Massachusetts to secede from the Union in “Slavery in Massachusetts” (1854). Other of his well-known works are Cape Cod (1865) and The Maine Woods (1864). According to his sister Sophia, Thoreau’s last words, as he died of tuberculosis, were, “Now comes good sailing.”

The Battle of the Ants

Henry David Thoreau

One day when I went out to my wood-pile, or rather my pile of stumps, I observed two large ants, the one red, the other much larger, nearly half an inch long, and black, fiercely contending with one another. Having once got hold they never let go, but struggled and wrestled and rolled on the chips incessantly. Looking farther, I was surprised to find that the chips were covered with such combatants, that it was not a duellum, but a bellum,¹ a war between two races of ants, the red always pitted against the black, and frequently two red ones to one black. The legions of these Myrmidons² covered all the hills and vales in my woodyard, and the ground was already strewn with the dead and dying, both red and black. It was the only battle which I have ever witnessed, the only battle-field I ever trod while the battle was raging; internecine war; the red republicans on the one hand, the black imperialists on the other. On every side they were engaged in deadly combat, yet without any noise that I could hear, and human soldiers never fought so resolutely. I watched a couple that were fast

¹ not a duellum . . . bellum not a duel but a war.
² Myrmidons soldiers who followed the Greek warrior Achilles. Myrmes is the Greek word for ant.
locked in each other's embraces, in a little sunny valley amid the chips, now at noon-
day prepared to fight till the sun went down, or life went out. The smaller red cham-
pion had fastened himself like a vise to his adversary's front, and through all the
rumblings on that field never for an instant ceased to gnaw at one of his feelers
near the root, having already caused the other to go by the board; while the stronger
black one dashed him from side to side, and, as I saw on looking nearer, had already
divested him of several of his members. They fought with more pertinacity than
bulldogs. Neither manifested the least disposition to retreat. It was evident that their
battle-cry was "Conquer or die." In the meanwhile there came along a single red ant
on the hillside of this valley, evidently full of excitement, who either had dispatched
his foe, or had not yet taken part in the battle; probably the latter, for he had lost
none of his limbs; whose mother had charged him to return with his shield or upon it.3
Or perchance he was some Achilles, who had nourished his wrath apart, and had
now come to avenge or rescue his Patroclus.4 He saw this unequal combat from afar,—
for the blacks were nearly twice the size of the red,—he drew near with rapid pace
till he stood on his guard within half an inch of the combatants; then, watching
his opportunity, he sprang upon the black warrior, and commenced his operations
near the root of his right fore leg, leaving the foe to select among his own mem-
bers; and so there were three united for life, as if a new kind of attraction had been
invented which put all other locks and cements to shame. I should not have won-
dered by this time to find that they had their respective musical bands stationed on
some eminent chip, and playing their national airs the while, to excite the slow
and cheer the dying combatants. I was myself excited somewhat even as if they had
been men. The more you think of it, the less the difference. And certainly there is
not the fight recorded in Concord history, at least, if in the history of America,
that will bear a moment's comparison with this, whether for the numbers engaged in
it, or for the patriotism and heroism displayed. For numbers and for carnage it was an
Austerlitz or Dresden.5 Concord fight! Two killed on the patriot's side, and Luther
Blanchard wounded! Why here every ant was a Buttrick,—"Fire, for God's sake
fire!"—and thousands shared the fate of Davis and Hosmer.6 There was not one
hireling there. I have no doubt that it was a principle they fought for, as much as our
ancestors, and not to avoid a three-penny tax on their tea; and the results of this bat-
tle will be as important and memorable to those whom it concerns as those of the
battle of Bunker Hill, at least.

I took up the chip on which the three I have particularly described were strug-
gling, carried it into my house, and placed it under a tumbler on my window-sill, in
order to see the issue. Holding a microscope to the first-mentioned red ant, I saw that,
though he was assiduously gnawing at the near fore leg of his enemy, having severed
his remaining feeler, his own breast was all torn away, exposing what vitals he had

3 To return with his shield . . . upon it  Spartan mothers told their sons this as they departed for war.

4 Patroclus  Achilles’ close friend, when Patroclus was killed, Achilles, who had not been fighting because of wounded pride, returned to
battle the Trojans, especially to avenge the death of his friend by killing the Trojan hero, Hector.

5 Austerlitz or Dresden  two fierce battles of the Napoleonic wars.

6 Concord fight . . . Hosmer  The first battle of the American Revolution was fought at Concord Bridge. In that famous fight, Major John
Buttrick and his militiamen repelled the British regular army and hired soldiers. Davis and Hosmer were Americans killed, Blanchard an American
wounded.
there to the jaws of the black warrior, whose breastplate was apparently too thick for him to pierce; and the dark carbuncles of the sufferer's eyes shone with ferocity such as war only could excite. They struggled half an hour longer under the tumbler, and when I looked again the black soldier had severed the heads of his foes from their bodies, and the still living heads were hanging on either side of him like ghastly trophies at his saddle-bow, still apparently as firmly fastened as ever, and he was endeavoring with feeble struggles, being without feelers and with only the remnant of a leg, and I know not how many other wounds, to divest himself of them; which at length, after half an hour more, he accomplished. I raised the glass, and he went off over the window-sill in that crippled state. Whether he finally survived that combat, and spent the remainder of his days in some Hôtel des Invalides, I do not know; but I thought that his industry would not be worth much thereafter. I never learned which party was victorious, nor the cause of the war; but I felt for the rest of that day as if I had had my feelings excited and harrowed by witnessing the struggle, the ferocity and carnage of a human battle before my door.

Questions for Discussion
1. What does this piece tell you about scientific observation and about how one should do science?
2. Why might a writer care to observe ants so closely? What would a person learn by watching ants?
3. What might have been the real reason that the ants were fighting? Why does Thoreau choose to describe what he sees as a “battle”?
4. What links to human activities does Thoreau make? Why? Might he have a purpose other than describing ants? If so, what would his implied thesis be?
5. Thoreau makes several allusions to the Greek classics. Why would the allusions not need explaining at the time Thoreau wrote this? What does the use of these allusions suggest about the readers of the time? Have readers changed?
6. What other allusions does Thoreau make? Why might they be difficult for a modern reader?
7. Where does Thoreau use humor? What does this say about how Thoreau pictures himself?

Questions for Reflection and Writing
1. Closely observe some natural process and write an essay as detailed as Thoreau’s to describe it.
2. Thoreau uses personification—applying human characteristics to objects or animals—as a central technique to make sense of what he sees the ants doing. In an essay, discuss how Thoreau uses personification and what you find effective or ineffective about this technique.
   As an alternative, use personification yourself to describe the process you observed in question 1, above.
3. Read more of Thoreau’s writings on nature and describe how he viewed nature. To what extent were Thoreau’s views representative of his times?

Hôtel des Invalides  a veteran’s hospital in Paris.