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Laundry!

Abstract: The "laundry sneer"—finding fault with Thoreau for not doing his own washing—is a relatively recent phenomenon. This article seeks to trace the history of the laundry sneer and to explain why it is misguided. Further, we inquire whether Thoreau might have actually tried to do his own washing on the banks of Walden Pond—some textual evidence suggests that he did—and we reconstruct what it might have been like, and why he would have given it up. Laundry was "the American housekeeper's hardest problem" in Thoreau's day, and it remained so throughout the nineteenth century, despite the best efforts of technologists, entrepreneurs, and social reformers, as well as philosophers. Thoreau probably regretted not figuring out a way to manage clothes-washing for himself. But if spoiled twenty-first century critics want to fault him for it: Let he whose own clothes are washed by hand cast the first stone.

Keywords: Henry David Thoreau, laundry/washing, vocation, self-sufficiency, gendered labor

While Henry David Thoreau lived at Walden Pond, he outsourced the washing of his clothes. From what we can tell, they probably went into the hamper with the rest of the family laundry back home.

People who know very little about Thoreau are likely to know at least this fact. And readers who are put off by his prose style or his attitude or his message are often inclined to wave Thoreau's dirty laundry in his face. By calling him a hypocrite, they excuse themselves from taking his ideas seriously.

This is unfortunate. And it is strange. One thing that is particularly strange is just how recent the "laundry sneer" (as we might call it) is. Nineteenth-century readers found nothing worthy of comment in Thoreau's laundry arrangements at Walden Pond. Those who were inclined to sneer at him picked on his dining habits instead: his accepting pies and doughnuts baked by his mother, and dining out at the Emerson's home and with his own family.[1]

American essayist Rebecca Solnit, in her spirited defense of Thoreau published in 2013 in *Orion*, gathered in a haul of laundry sneers by way of a literature review. Unfortunately, she caught a dolphin in her tuna net: "In 1983, a ponderous gentleman named Joseph Moldenhauer got in early on the accusation that he 'brought his mother his dirty laundry'" (20). Seasoned Thoreauvians will of course recognize Joe as a leading Thoreau scholar, and they might be surprised to hear him accused of Thoreau-slandering. In fact, those are not Joe's words at all. The quotation Solnit offers is from an introductory essay written by travel writer Paul Theroux, which Princeton University Press included in a reprint of Joe Moldenhauer's scholarly edition of Thoreau's *The Maine Woods*.

What Theroux wrote in the introductory essay was that Thoreau "did not mention that he brought his mother his dirty laundry and went on enjoying her apple pies" (ix). This could be read as more of a gentle dig than a sneer. But even the dig is a little unfair, since Thoreau does forthrightly state that he sent out his laundry, and he implies, clearly enough, that it was sent to his family, even if he doesn't name names. (In *Walden* he very rarely names names.) Thoreau's actual words were: "washing and mending . . . for the most part were done out of the house, and their bills have not yet been received" (60).

Solnit assigned a date of 1983 to the Moldenhauer-cum-Theroux accusation, but that's too early. 1983 was the year Princeton University Press released the first paperback edition of *The Maine Woods* as edited by Moldenhauer (first printed in hardcover in 1972). Theroux's introduction first appeared in a 2004 reprint. In my own literature search, I was surprised to find not a single laundry sneer in print prior to 2004. I did find a 1992 acknowledgment that some cynical academics had been known to grumble about Thoreau's laundry, but such grumbles evidently did not make their way into the wider discourse during the twentieth century; they did not shape the way the public viewed Thoreau.[2] Biographers Henry S. Salt (51), Walter Harding (*Days* 184), and Henry Seidel Canby (216), writing in 1908, 1939, and 1965, respectively, saw fit to rebut the pie-and-doughnut slanders, but not a single twentieth-century biographer appears to have seen any need to comment on or explain Thoreau's laundry arrangements.[3] Prominent twentieth-century takedowns of Thoreau, like those penned by Vincent Buranelli in 1957 and George Hochfield in 1988, were silent on the question.[4]

And then something changed early in the twenty-first century. It may very well be that Theroux's introduction to *The Maine Woods*, distributed to high schools and colleges and libraries from Princeton's printing presses from 2004 onward, laid the groundwork for the modern assault on Thoreau's laundry habits. Theroux, it appears, placed into the hands of a new generation of disgruntled Thoreau readers a weapon they could not resist wielding against their tormentor (author of required reading, author of dense and allusive prose, author who doesn't flatter his audience but requires them to meet him halfway).

But even if Theroux did start the ball rolling, the blame can't simply be pinned on him either. There have always been disgruntled readers of Thoreau, and if they didn't have the "scandal" of laundry ready at hand they would reach for some other cudgel. The fact that the laundry sneer has taken on a life of its own in the twenty-first century—after nineteenth- and twentieth-century critics passed over the issue with hardly a comment—suggests that the cultural moment is now ripe for it. In other words, even if the laundry sneer is directed at Thoreau, it tells us more about ourselves. The twenty-first century husband who considers his wife and himself to be equal partners but leaves dirty dishes in the sink, the millennial child who finishes college and returns to the parental home as a semi-dependent adult: these are people and stories we in the twenty-first century can relate to. These and others like them help make "laundry-hypocrite Thoreau" relatable.

How then can we move past "laundry-hypocrite Thoreau"? If we want to make Thoreau relatable in a way that is more authentic, how best to parry the laundry critique?

One line of defense offered by Solnit is: it's not fair to demand moral perfection from our writers and creators. If Thoreau had character flaws, that doesn't change the fact that his writing and his ideas are immensely valuable. This line of argument is entirely valid, and I certainly wouldn't want to defend the proposition that Thoreau was without character flaws. But it sells Thoreau short on the laundry question, because—even if only for the sake of argument—it concedes hypocrisy.

Thoreau's own contemporaries saw no hypocrisy in Thoreau's outsourcing his laundry to womenfolk. This is no doubt because, as historians of the era have amply documented, laundry was "one of the most powerfully gendered of domestic tasks" (Mohun 15). Thoreauvians have made use of this fact as a second line of argument. Victor Curran, for example, who helps educate the public as a historical interpreter at the Old Manse in Concord, says: "When visitors ask me about this, I usually ask them if they can think of one American man in the 1840s who did his own laundry" (comment on July 21, 2019, Thoreau Society Facebook post, confirmed by email). But as valuable as this is as historical perspective, it still doesn't do Thoreau justice. In defending Thoreau against the charge of hypocrisy, it casts him as an unimaginative conformist, which is very much against type.

Solnit offers a variation on this line of argument, and it is echoed by Laura Dassow Walls as well in her recent Thoreau biography. This approach is to dismiss the accusation against Thoreau as special pleading, the application of a standard not imposed on other authors. "There is [only] one writer in all literature whose laundry arrangements have been excoriated again and again," Solnit writes: "only Henry David Thoreau" (*Henry* 18). In Walls's words: "No other male American writer has been so discredited for enjoying a meal with loved ones or for not doing his own laundry" (195). Walls's dismissal of the sneer is all the more effective for its brevity—treating the issue as worth no more than a single passing mention in the 500-page biography. Nevertheless, this one passage from the Walls biography has been featured in numerous book reviews and author interviews.[5] The truth is, the laundry charge is just not that easy to dismiss. The critic will simply retort: the standard to which we are holding the author of *Walden* is not a double standard; it is Thoreau's own standard of personal independence and self-sufficiency.

To really answer the laundry critic (and the pie-and-doughnut critic), the arguments above aren't enough. It is necessary to directly tackle the accusation that Thoreau violated his own standard of independence and self-sufficiency. I'd like to sketch out what I think is an adequate response (drawing further on insights from Solnit, Walls, and others).

Responding to the Laundry Critic

In saying that Thoreau violates his own standards of independence and self-sufficiency, the laundry critic simply misunderstands those standards. It is easy to think of "independence" as living off the grid or in isolation, and Thoreau unfortunately encouraged that sort of misinterpretation by describing himself, with hyperbole, as a "hermit." But in fact the independence that Thoreau was pursuing was first and foremost *moral* independence: living life without regard to other people's expectations, stepping to one's own music (the beat of "a different drummer . . . however measured or far away") (*Walden* 326). Moral independence requires courage and clarity of vision. The opposite of this sort of independence is not *interacting with other people* (doing and receiving favors and engaging in market transactions); it is bowing to external pressure, failing to be true to oneself.

And independence isn't even the ultimate goal. Independence is a means to a nobler end, which is discerning and pursuing one's proper vocation. "I do not speak to those who are well employed, in whatever circumstances," Thoreau writes in *Walden*. Those "strong and valiant natures" who are already "well employed" in their proper vocation have already reached the goal Thoreau is aiming at and therefore don't need his advice about independence or anything else (16).

And self-sufficiency? As independence was a secondary goal, a means to the end of living to the fullest, self-sufficiency was only a tertiary goal for Thoreau. He found the pursuit of self-sufficiency—simplifying his routine, reducing his wants to a minimum, practicing thrift—congenial to the project of cultivating independence in part because the endeavor was a living, breathing *metaphor* for cultivating independence—Walls describes it as "performance art" (194). And at the same time, the practice of self-sufficiency freed up resources—most importantly, time—for primary vocational pursuits, which in Thoreau's case meant sauntering and writing.

Since the "performance art" of self-sufficiency made up such a significant and memorable part of the Walden experience, as described so vividly in the first chapter of the book, it is no wonder that self-sufficiency is the aspect of *Walden* that many readers tend to latch on to. This was true even of the book's earliest readers. Thoreau complained that some admirers, like Daniel Ricketson, dismissed other parts of *Walden* as "namby-pamby" and "stuff" and urged him to devote more space to teaching men how to live a simpler life. "To what end," Thoreau asks in exasperation, "do I lead a simple life at all, pray? That I may teach others to simplify their lives?—and so all our lives be *simplified* merely, like an algebraic *formula*? Or not rather that I may make use of the ground I have cleared—to live more worthily and profitably?" (Thoreau, *Correspondence* 2/348).

This is how the project of self-sufficiency should be seen, then: as a trope that illustrates the ideal of moral independence required for vocational pursuits, and as a way of freeing up time for vocational pursuits. *That* is the standard against which Thoreau judged each aspect of the self-sufficiency project, and that is the standard we should use as well if we want to understand the Walden experiment.

Building his own house? A supreme illustration of the ideal of moral independence. Growing his own food? Another good source of metaphors about independence, but not worth carrying to extremes, since it was not economical and it took time away from his writing. Decluttering? An opportunity to demonstrate and practice the ruthless singularity of vision required to prioritize vocation.

What about dining out and entertaining, accepting and offering gifts of food? If one's primary goal was *self-sufficiency*, narrowly defined, one might cut off social contact. But moral independence does not require cutting off social contact. If anything, it demands discipline and courage even in the parlor and the post office, where social pressures are likely to be encountered. Neither does discerning and pursuing a vocation require one to cut off social contact. How can one be effective in one's vocation if one lives in a bubble? Besides which, to take Thoreau's case concretely, it seems highly likely that the love and support of his family, and the companionship of close friends like Bronson Alcott and Ellery Channing, and the continuing goodwill of his patron Ralph Waldo Emerson, all helped to provide the emotional balance his vocation required. From the perspective of his vocation, it is safe to assume that the time and energy Thoreau invested in maintaining social relationships was time and energy well spent, not wasted.

So it is with laundry. If Thoreau chose to outsource his washing, we needn't treat that as any different from his choice to bring his shoes to the cobbler, or to purchase bricks for his chimney rather than fashion them from scratch. In each case Thoreau chose the option that left more time for pursuit of his vocation. If he left his laundry in care of his family rather than taking his "bachelor bundle" to some stranger in town, we can be sure that this was not only more economical, but that it was part of a whole web of mutual aid that helped maintain both households, emotionally and materially. As Solnit writes, quoting Thoreau biographer Michael Sims, "Thoreau did visit the village almost every day, and see his parents, and do chores around the house for them. . . . While he was at Walden, they were in a house he helped build the year before he moved to the cabin . . . so he had considerable goodwill in the bank" (21).

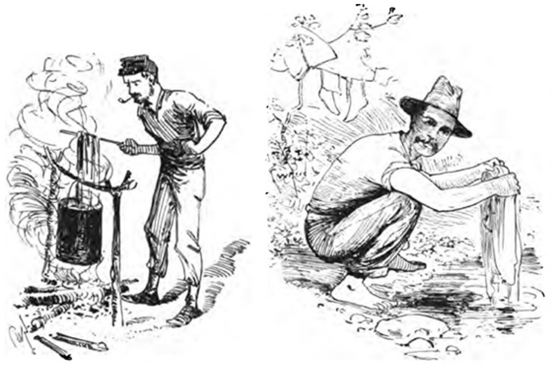
Thoreau never promised his readers complete self-sufficiency. He certainly didn't promise to shut out his family. He promised a candid account of his experiment in deliberate living, and he delivered on that.

The Laundry Question: A Deeper Dive

As satisfied as I am with the explanation given above as a response to the laundry *critique*, I must confess that in my own mind it does not entirely close the book on the laundry *question*. Granted that Thoreau's principles did not *require* him to wash his own clothes, it seems strange to me that he would not have at least made the experiment.

Let's review the facts.

Men sometimes did laundry. Laundry had a well-earned reputation as a gendered chore in the nineteenth-century U.S. But more fundamentally it was simply a hated chore—the "most hated task," in the words of historian Susan Strasser (105). Within households, convention permitted men to offload it onto women. If a family or a bachelor had the means, laundry would be outsourced to hired help, whether in-house or "put out"—and in either case generally to women, who had relatively few other economic paths open to them.[6] In the South it would be added to the burden of the enslaved; in cities it might be outsourced to businesses (owned by men, staffed by women); in the West it might be outsourced to Chinese family-run businesses. When push came to shove, though, Euro-American men were perfectly capable of doing the hated task. Bachelor pioneers washed their own clothes. When the services of washerwomen weren't available to Civil War regiments, soldiers washed their own clothes or hired other soldiers to do it for them. (See Figures 1 and 2.) Historian Virginia Mescher records: "In 1865, George C. Lawson, of the Union Army, wrote, 'I spent the afternoon in washing, mending and baking. I was very tired at night and wondered how women get through with as much work as they do. Washing, etc. is the hardest work I have to do'" (14).[7]



BOILING THEM. CLEANING UP.

Figure 1. Soldiers washing clothes. Illustrations by Charles W. Reed, a former Union soldier, in *Hardtack and Coffee: or, The Unwritten Story of Army Life*, by John D Billings.

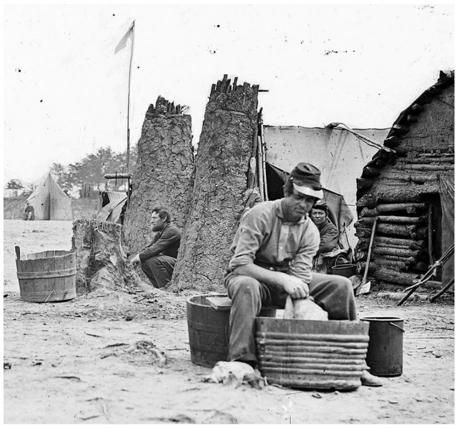


Figure 2. Union soldier washing clothes. Photograph by Mathew Brady. (National Archives and Records Administration, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/524664)

Thoreau willingly took on other feminine-gendered work. As Walls has written, Thoreau's adoption of the role of both housebuilder and housekeeper "creates a gender fluidity," even as his philosophy "turns the basis for gender conventions into rubble" ("'Walden' as Feminist Manifesto," 139-140). In his bachelor cabin Thoreau took on all the roles that traditionally fell to women in mixed-gender households: cooking, washing dishes, sweeping, dusting, etc. It seems like it would have been quite natural to extend that to clothes-washing.

The project of "keeping house" seems sadly incomplete without clothes-washing. At Walden, Thoreau set out to revolutionize housekeeping, to set a "solid and honest . . . foundation" for "beautiful housekeeping and beautiful living" (38). It would have been a real coup for his performance art project if he had been able to cap it by somehow finding a thrifty, practical solution to the problem of the "hated task."

Clothes-washing would have provided Thoreau with a cornucopia of material to write about. From the experiment of growing a cash crop of beans—even if it was financially unsuccessful and he gave it up after one season—Thoreau harvested a full chapter's worth of excellent material to write about. Given the potent imagery of Walden water as a cleansing agent, imagine what rich prose he could have wrung out of the experiment of washing his own clothes, even if it were a failed experiment.

Everything we know about Thoreau and his project points toward the conclusion that he ought to have at least made the experiment. So why didn't he?

Well, let us consider the possibility that he did.

Washerwoman Thoreau

Everything that we know, or think we know, about Thoreau's laundry habits at Walden Pond is based on that one line in *Walden*: "washing and mending . . . for the most part were done out of the house, and their bills have not yet been received." But the very first draft of the book—the one that might reflect how he represented the Walden experience to lecture audiences in Concord in February of 1837, while he was still living at the Pond—said something different. It said: "washing and mending . . . for the most part were done out of the house, as we say, and their bills have not been received." There are two differences: as Thoreau revised, he dropped the expression "as we say" and he changed "not" to "not yet." What is the significance of these small changes? In the first draft, "as we say" is a signpost indicating wordplay. In the first draft, Thoreau appears to be saying that his laundry was literally done "out of the house"—i.e., in the clearing in front of the house at Walden Pond, or nearby on the shoreline. In the later draft, the removal of the signpost language appears to indicate that now he wants his words to be understood in the conventional sense: laundry done "out of the house" is laundry outsourced to another household or a commercial establishment. The other change, the addition of the word "yet," supports this interpretation of the two versions. In the first draft, "their bills have not been received" can be read simply as an extension of the joke that his wordplay earlier in the sentence had introduced. In the revised version, "their bills have not *yet* been received" is a concession that some actual service of pecuniary value has been provided under the heading of "washing & mending" that is not captured in Thoreau's accounting ledger, even though it really should be (as he and his local audience both well know—it would be no use to pretend otherwise).

Thus, while the final version of the passage makes a sly joke about how his family helped with the laundry (we can reasonably infer that it was his family, because only his family would have failed to submit a bill for the services rendered, spoiling his accounting), the original version—though differing only by a few words—makes an entirely different joke, one that tells us that he did his own clothes-washing at the pond.

Backing up this interpretation is the phrase "for the most part" that Thoreau retained through to the final published version of

Walden. If washing and mending were done *for the most part* out of the house, some presumably were not outsourced at all but done by the bachelor himself.[8]

One more (seeming) piece of evidence that must be mentioned is the following sentence that appears in Ronald Earl Clapper's concordance of all seven draft versions of *Walden*: "The whole of my winters, as well as most of my summers, I have free and entire for study, having only to get my fuel, the dead and for the most part unmerchantable wood behind my house, to bake my bread, *and to wash my clothes*. I can invent for society" (225, emphasis added). In manuscript, the passage—a crossed-out scribble in the margin—is very difficult to read, but the word Clapper set down as "clothes" is almost certainly "chores." Elizabeth Witherell kindly examined the manuscript page at *The Concord Saunterer*'s request, and she interprets the passage as saying: "to bake my bread, and do such other chores as I can invent for variety." I find this reading entirely convincing.[9]

I propose that the evidence available—slender as it is—supports both the conventional interpretation that his family did the bulk of his laundry, and also the idea that he made the experiment of washing his own clothes at the pond.

It is easy to fit this into a complete picture: Thoreau started with the intention of washing his own clothes, consistent with the spirit of his performance art project, and actually began doing it. And then at some point he gave it up, probably finding that it was uneconomical and kept him from his writing. His earliest draft of *Walden* contains a trace of the early intention and practice, and the final manuscript conceded the final reality. Both his local lecture audience and his local reading audience would have known the truth of the matter; we can be fully confident that his changing description reflected a changing reality that was publicly on display.

"The American Housekeeper's Hardest Problem"

Why did Thoreau give up doing his own washing over time? We can speculatively reconstruct what happened. In the first place, it would have been a time-consuming task. Contemporary housekeeping manuals describe the process as taking a full day for washing plus a second full day for ironing. Strasser writes:

> Even the most simplified hand-laundry process consumed staggering amounts of time and labor.

> One wash, one boiling, and one rinse used about 50 gallons of water—or four hundred pounds—which had to be moved from pump or well or faucet to stove and tub, in buckets and wash boilers that might weigh as much as forty or fifty pounds. . . . It took all day. (105-106)

Even if Thoreau skipped the ironing, and even if he stretched out what was conventionally a weekly washing cycle over some longer period (wearing clothes for an extra-long time, and waiting until he had accumulated enough dirty clothes and bedsheets to make the operation worthwhile), he would occasionally have had to sacrifice the better part of an entire day to the chore: hauling water, boiling it, hauling more water, scrubbing, rinsing, wringing.[10] No other household-maintenance chore would have required sacrificing such large blocks of time that could otherwise have been spent writing. Among his other occupations at Walden Pond, only construction of the cabin itself and maintenance of the beanfield would have rivaled or exceeded it as time sinks—and he finished one and largely abandoned the other after the first season at the pond.

In the second place, there was the equipment required. According to one 1845 housekeeping manual by Catherine E. Beecher, a prudent housekeeper will have on hand

> four tubs, of different sizes . . . also, a large *wooden* dipper, (as metal is apt to rust;) two or three pails; a grooved wash-board; a clothes-line, (sea-grass, or horse-hair is best;) a wash-stick to move clothes, when boiling, and a wooden fork to take them out. Soap-dishes, made to hook on the tubs, save soap and time. Provide, also, a clothes-bag, in which to boil clothes; an indigo-bag, of double flannel; a starch-strainer, of coarse linen; a bottle of ox-gall for calicoes; a supply of starch, neither sour nor musty; several dozens of clothes-pins, which are cleft sticks, used to fasten clothes on the line; a bottle of dissolved gum Arabic; two clothes-baskets; and a brass or copper kettle, for boiling clothes, as iron is apt to rust. (284-85)

Of these, we know that Thoreau had only the kettle and dipper in his spartan inventory. We can be sure that he would have found ways to economize on equipment, but even so he would likely have had to borrow a certain number of tubs and tools from home or friends and then return them. It certainly seems unlikely that he would have been able to store such equipment in his cabin. Housekeeping manuals recommended a "large deep closet" for laundry supplies, at least three feet deep, four feet wide, and six feet tall (Leslie 9; Beecher 285).

Finally, the results were probably not particularly good. As the maxim goes, there is no such thing as unskilled labor: an inexperienced washerwoman like Thoreau would inevitably have made mistakes. (Compare Thoreau the novice bean farmer, who planted too late in the season and whose crop mostly went to feed the wildlife.) Contemporary housekeeping manuals identify all kinds of things that can go wrong. Beecher devotes seventeen full pages to the proper washing and care of fabrics. Another manual, by Eliza Leslie, also published in Thoreau's breakthrough year of 1845, devotes seventy-five pages to the topic. The probability that Thoreau sought to economize rather than go by the book makes suboptimal results even more likely. And if all of our speculation about kettles and tubs is wildly off the mark, and Thoreau's idea of washing was simply to dip clothing in cold pond water and rub it with soap and then hang it out to dry, like he and his male companions did when hiking and canoeing in the Maine woods (*The Maine Woods* 221, 225-226), the result might have been abysmal by middle-class standards.

"I think his laundry work must have been his own personal care. No washerwoman would have risked her laundry reputation and turned off such work." That is how Cecilia P. R. Frease, a friend of Horace Greeley's, remembered Thoreau when recalling her acquaintance with him long afterward (Douthat 35; c.f. Harding, *Seen* 208-09; 229-30). Their meeting did not take place during the Walden Pond years—we know it happened later, because Thoreau presented her with a copy of one of his books. We might speculate that they met in New York City or some other location far from Concord, where Thoreau would have been away for an extended period from the family members who would have taken a keen interest in his hygiene and their own laundry reputation.[11] Frease's negative appraisal gives us an idea of the likely expected quality of the results if Thoreau's laundry work had indeed "been his own personal care" during the early days at Walden Pond.

A variety of factors, then, would have pushed and pulled Thoreau to give up the experiment: we may presume that it took an unreasonable amount of time and that the results were poor, and that he realized that any attempt to solve one problem would exacerbate the other. His family, naturally, would have insisted that letting them take care of his washing would be much more sensible—it would add almost nothing to their own burden (they would already have been set up to manage large loads of laundry weekly—one more bachelor bundle wouldn't make much difference) and it would free him of a large burden. Maybe friends like Channing also gave him a good ribbing for reproducing on the banks of Walden the sort of stultifying drudgery he had moved to Walden to avoid.

A key factor would have been that clothes-washing evidently failed to inspire Thoreau's muse. I speculated above that if Thoreau had washed his own clothes he might have stirred up from the experiment a wealth of metaphors, as he harvested a crop of lively imagery and life lessons from the experiment of the beanfield. But this evidently didn't happen. From the very earliest drafts of the book Thoreau has much to say about clothes—the merits of old clothes versus new clothes, the fickleness of fashion, etc.—but he has nothing to say about the washing of clothes. There is no meditation on stirring a pot of shirts as there is on hoeing a row of beans. Even in his private Journals from 1845-47, as they have come down to us, there is nothing about the experience of doing the laundry. If Thoreau was washing clothes but not describing it in the Journal, we might infer that the experience was merely prosaic: that, like most of daily life, it didn't rise to the level of being interesting enough to record, and that it didn't inspire edifying thoughts and moral insights. We could infer even more: Thoreau's silence could also mean that he found the experience troubling, that he needed time to wrestle with it before he dared commit the experience to paper. Even as he maintained in *Walden* that "housework was a pleasant pastime" (112), the fact that he had sidestepped clothes-washing meant that he could not claim the satisfaction of having fully set housekeeping on a "solid and honest . . . foundation" (38). He had not cracked the hardest nut; he had not personally solved what contemporary authorities considered "the American housekeeper's hardest problem" (Beecher and Stowe 334). Even if (as described above) it was not essential to the Walden project, and even if his unkindest neighbors and critics thought nothing of it, it may well have irked him.

When Thoreau accidentally set a fire that burned down acres of Concord woodland, he did not write about the experience in his Journal right away. It was only after years of digesting the experience, working through the guilt and coming to some sort of equipoise, that he committed his thoughts on the subject to paper—laying out the facts and his ambivalent feelings and his final conclusion that in setting the fire he was no more culpable than Nature herself. If Thoreau had been similarly troubled by his failure to solve the hardest problem of housekeeping at Walden Pond, he never put a full confession into his Journal. But the Journal does contain traces of evidence that clothes-washing continued to trouble his mind, and that he sought and perhaps found some kind of equipoise. Starting in 1852, when the weather was windy and also bright and beautiful, he would describe it in his Journal as a "washing day." "Decidedly fair weather at last—a bright breezy flowing *washing* day" (May 17, 1852, Journal 5/63). "Now is the summer come. A breezy washing day" (May 30, 1852, *PJ* 5: 75). "For a week past we have had *washing* days—The grass waving and trees having leafed out their boughs wave and feel the effect of the breeze" (June 9, 1952, *PJ* 5: 81).[12] In a June 23, 1852, Journal entry he gives this explanation:

> [Today] is what I call a *washing* day—such as we sometimes have when buttercups first appear in the spring—an agreeably cool & clear & breezy day—when all things appear as if washed bright & shine—and at this season especially the sound of the . . . wind rustling the leaves is like the rippling of a stream—and you see the light-colored underside of the still fresh foliage—& a sheeny light is reflected from the bent grass in the meadows. Haze and sultriness are far off— The air is cleared & cooled by yesterday's thunderstorms. The river too has a fine cool silvery sparkle or sheen on it. You can see far in to the horizon. & you hear the sound of crickets with such feelings as in the cool morning. (*PJ* 5: 124)

Thoreau appears to be making a concerted effort in these passages to take firm hold of the expression "washing day," scrub it clean of its negative connotations (domesticity, drudgery), and impress on it new connotations more to his taste (nature, joy). Whereas the old sort of washing day was one in which men slunk guiltily away to pretend that their own occupations were important enough to justify leaving the women of the house to carry the burden of the "hated task," Thoreau's new sort of washing day was one in which men were transfigured into articles of laundry, to be buffeted by the washing-stick of a benevolent celestial Female who renewed both Nature and Man in one stroke.[13]

This is Thoreau's old trick of calling things what they are not—praising wild mountains for their domestic air and calling snow and ice sultry, as Emerson expressed it in his eulogy for Thoreau (see Harding, *Seen* 29). It is creative, but not generative. It amounts to denial. In the end, Thoreau did not solve the problem of laundry. But this can hardly be counted against him. Many, many others had tried to solve the problem, and would continue to try, for generations.

There were those who sought a cooperative solution. Catherine Beecher, who used her soapbox as a popular writer on domesticity to teach women that they should take pride in housekeeping and do as much as possible for themselves, went in an entirely different direction with laundry, advising women to offload the hated task. Her idea was that neighborhoods should form cooperative associations to handle the laundry communally (Beecher and Stowe 334; Strasser 112). Cooperative neighborhood solutions to laundry would probably not have been to Thoreau's taste any more than the communal living experiment at Brook Farm. In the event, they were equally precarious—practical experiments in cooperative laundry rarely lasted long (Strasser 112-113).[14]

Then there were the technologists. Thousands of patents for clothes-washing technology were issued in nineteenth century in Britain and the U.S. (Strasser 116). An example is given in Figure 3. One imagines the male tinkerers and engineers scurrying to their workshops early on Monday morning to be well out of sight when the washing started, and believing that by filing patents they were doing their part in solidarity with their womenfolk. Some inventions, like the zinc or galvanized scrub board, patented in the United States in 1833 and in fairly wide use by the 1840s, were tangible improvements over old methods (Larkin, *Where We Worked* 122). Many other machines were unwieldy and unworkable. In the words of Sigfried Giedion:

> By and large, they are cumbrous constructions moved by cranks, wheels, levers, and balances. Like the early steam engines they employ a mighty apparatus to little effect, amid great agitations of pistons, hammers, or sliding trays. Even when it claimed domesticity—and the inventor hopefully entitles his drawing "Washerwoman's assistant or Housewives' Economist"—such machinery was out of the question for the household. (560-561)

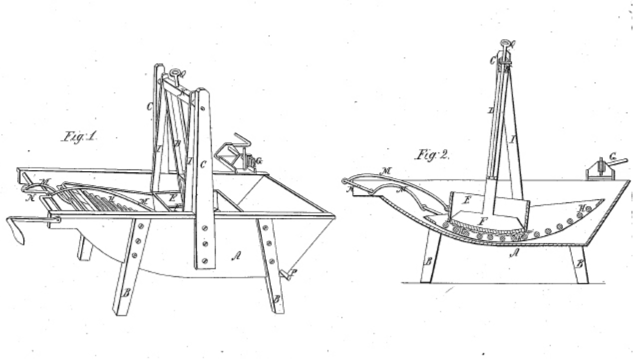


Figure 3. Washing machine. Patented December 15, 1846, by E.D. Wilson; U.S. patent no. 4891. The curved receptacle slides over a curved bed of rollers. The receptacle and bed swing in opposite directions. (U.S. Patent & Trademark Office Patent Full Text and Image Database)

Thoreau was respectfully wary of technology, no blind techo-optimist. He might have dismissed contraptions like these with arguments like those employed in his 1843 essay "Paradise (to be) Regained": technology's benefits are balanced by costs. And however beneficial technology may be, it can't ameliorate the human condition. It can't scratch the real itch.

And then, emerging in the late nineteenth century, there were the business entrepreneurs who hired women to wash laundry—or mind the machines that washed the laundry—in factory-like settings during set business hours (Strasser 113ff). Thoreau's opinion of a factory system for cleaning clothes would undoubtedly echo his opinion of the factory system for making clothes: the "condition of the operatives" is concerning, and so is the condition of the customer, since the "principal object" of a factory is not the quality of the service or the well-being of the workers but "that corporations may be enriched" (*Walden* 26-27).

Ultimately the technologists prevailed. By the middle of the twentieth century, good-quality washing machines were available for the consumer market. The factory-like commercial laundry system declined, and the locus of laundry shifted definitively back into the home, where it could now be contested on gender lines: was laundry still women's work? Or was it now the responsibility of the whole household?

If Thoreau were a bachelor today, would he use a washing machine? For all his distrust of the corporation that built it, and for all his deprecation of undue faith in technology, the answer can only be yes: yes, he would make use of the washing machine, as he made calculated use of the railroad and other contemporary innovations. The washing machine can't redeem the human condition, but it surely can—and did—solve the most difficult problem of housekeeping, the one that no nineteenth-century technologist, entrepreneur, social reformer, or philosopher managed to solve, not even Thoreau himself at Walden Pond. Thoreau would approve the use of the washing machine, but with a caveat. He would pose this challenge to us, both women and men: having been blessed with the terrifying gift of so much more free time (up to two solid days per week), are we using that time well or are we squandering it?

In the end, this is how I would summarize the laundry situation at Walden Pond: the scant information available to us suggests that Thoreau *may have tried to do his own laundry at first*, and then (as with his beanfield) gave it up to spend more time on his writing. Being able to focus his attention on writing was, after all, the whole point of his experiment in "simple living." Clothes-washing in the nineteenth century was not like clothes-washing today. It filled entire days and it required specialized skills and equipment. It would have made as little sense for Thoreau to wash his own clothes as it would have for him to cobble his own shoes. I suspect that Thoreau regretted not figuring out a way to manage clothes-washing for himself. But if any spoiled twenty-first century critic wants to fault him for it—well, let he whose own clothes are washed by hand cast the first stone.

Notes

[1] Nineteenth-century food sneers came from John Keyes (Harding, *Seen* 174, 206), an anonymous detractor quoted by George Cooke (Harding, *Seen* 82), an "old Concordian" (Harding, *Seen* 71-72), and Nathaniel Hawthorne's daughter Rose (Lathrop 26). Defenses came from an anonymous admirer quoted by Cooke (Harding, *Seen* 85) and from Edward Emerson (10, 61-62). Edward Emerson's recitation of the list of Thoreau's supposed crimes—"He, while living at Walden, actually often went out to tea, and carried pies home from his mother's larder" (10)—read carelessly, is probably the source of the bizarre slander that Thoreau "stole pies."

[2] In 1992, R. Scott LaMascus wrote of Thoreau cynicism in academe: "Graduate students in literature are perhaps the worst. When my

colleagues respond to *Walden*, too often I still hear their stories about him sending laundry into town or having meals sent out. They seem to think these historical artifacts make the Walden Pond experiment fake and morally bankrupt. Maybe theirs is a post-Watergate, post-Vietnam, post-televangelism, post-everything kind of response" (1). The only other pre-2004 tidbit I found was that around the turn of the twentieth century, scientist George W. Hill entered a marginal comment in his personal copy of *Walden*, which is now housed at The Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Columbia University: "His Ma did these things for him! Ahha!" ("Notes & Queries").

[3] The following twentieth-century biographies were consulted: Annie Russell Marble (1902), Henry S. Salt (composed 1908, though not published until 1993), Léon Bazalgette (1924), Henry Seidel Canby (1939), Hildegarde Hawthorne (1940), Joseph Wood Krutch (1948), Walter Harding (*Days*; 1965), and Robert D. Richardson (1986).

[4] Also silent on the laundry question, to her credit, is Kathryn Schulz in her widely read 2015 broadside against Thoreau in *The New Yorker* (first published as "Pond Scum").

[5] E.g., Bakewell, Harrison, Kuhner, Flyn.

[6] Popular media sought to inculcate the "putting out" of laundry as a middle-class value. One anonymous piece of popular fiction from 1848 is narrated by a beneficent paterfamilias who is tired of coming home to cold dinners and crying children and a distracted, exhausted wife. At first unable to persuade his thrifty spouse that it would be worth spending the money to put out the laundry, he finally forces the issue—banishing the "spirit of discord—the washing day fiend" (144)—by breaking apart the washtub to use as kindling. On the other hand, fear of potential exposure to disease sometimes led middle class families to prefer to hire help in rather than send the laundry out (Mohun 21).

[7] In addition to the images reproduced here, the Civil War sketchbook of John Jacob Omenhausser (housed at the University of Maryland Libraries Digital Collections, https://hdl.handle.net/1903.1/4939) contains a drawing of two soldiers boiling, scrubbing, wringing, and beating laundry by the shore of Chesapeake Bay. Omenhausser was a Confederate soldier who sketched scenes during his time at the Union prison camp in Point Lookout, Maryland. In this drawing, titled "Washing," the prisoner-soldiers are given speech bubbles: "Bob! Why don't you holler out, and let the fellers know we take in washing";

and "If there are any more Greybacks [i.e., lice] left in this shirt, I'll bedog'd if I don't make them suffer."

[8] It is worth noting here that *mending* was solidly in Thoreau's repertoire, as we might expect from the author who champions the respectability of "a patch . . . over the knee" (*Walden* 22). Thoreau recalls in his Journal for March 26, 1860 (Online Journal Transcript 31/114): "I once went into the woods with a party for a fortnight— I wore my old & common clothes which were of Vermont gray— They wore no doubt the best they had for such an occasion—of a fashionable color & quality— I thought that they were a little ashamed of me while we were in the towns— They all tore their clothes badly but myself, & I who it chanced was the only one provided with needles & thread, enabled them to mend them— When we came out of the woods I was the best dressed of any of them."

[9] Those who wish to study the page for themselves will find it at https://cdm16003.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16003coll16/id/70.

[10] Our focus has been on clothing, but bedding too would have required cleaning. At least one Concord housewife judged that Thoreau's bedsheets at did not meet her high standards of housekeeping: "How came Mrs. ------- to know that my sheets were not as clean as hers?" (*Walden* 153).

[11] One possibility is that the encounter with Frease happened in late 1854, shortly after the publication of *Walden*, when Thoreau passed through New York City en route from Philadelphia and spent time with Greeley, who "appeared to know & be known by everybody" (Online Journal Transcript 18/85). It could also have been in 1856, when Thoreau spent a month surveying and lecturing in New Jersey and made side trips to the city. It certainly didn't happen in upstate New York in the 1840s, as assumed by Douthat.

[12] See also entries for May 31, 1855; May 12, 1856; May 10, 1857; and June 2, 1857.

[13] One reviewer of this essay asked whether by "washing day" Thoreau did not mean a day that has weather ideal for doing the washing. That could have been the genesis of Thoreau's alternative usage, but it is, regardless, an alternative usage, an idiosyncratic coinage meant to express Thoreau's own enjoyment of the weather. Actual washing was generally done on a set schedule, irrespective of the weather. Monday was traditionally washing day in the U.S., according to Strasser (106); a reminiscence by William French confirms that this was true of the

Emerson household (8). Larkin (*Reshaping of Everyday Life*, 30) says it was Monday in some households or communities and Friday in others. Anna Laetitia Barbauld describes the gamble on the weather in her 1797 poem "Washing-Day":

The silent breakfast-meal is soon dispatch'd
Uninterrupted, save by anxious looks
Cast at the lowering sky, if sky should lower.
From that last evil, oh preserve us, heavens!
For should the skies pour down, adieu to all
Remains of quiet; then expect to hear
Of sad disasters — dirt and gravel stains
Hard to efface, and loaded lines at once
Snapped short — and linen-horse by dog thrown down,
And all the petty miseries of life.
Saints have been calm while stretched upon the rack,
And Montezuma smil'd on burning coals;
But never yet did housewife notable
Greet with a smile a rainy washing-day.

[14] The communalists did have another trick up their sleeve. Charles Fourier (as reported by Emerson in his 1844 lecture "The Young American") proposed that in each communal Phalanx there be an elite group, known as the Sacred Band, that would voluntarily take on "whatever duties were disagreeable, and likely to be omitted" in the maintenance of the community (236). Thoreau reflected on the wisdom of this after a round of overdue dishwashing in the Maine wilderness (Online Journal Transcript 24/99). This raises another point. However much Thoreau (and we) might resent certain tasks as "chores," it is important to note that Thoreau does not categorically condemn *any* task as inherently degrading or unworthy of human effort. He himself found satisfaction in shoveling manure (Journal 1/302). When he discards the decorative pieces of limestone at Walden, he does so not because he thinks dusting is an objectively unworthy occupation, but because dusting would take *him* away from *his own* urgently felt vocation. But: "I desire that there may be as many different persons in the world as possible" (*Walden* 71). We cannot assume, *a priori*, that one who dusts or washes laundry does not find genuine vocational satisfaction in it. It could be the satisfaction of the labor itself (like the satisfaction Thoreau's friend Alex Therien takes in woodchopping), or satisfaction in performing a task excellently (getting out a difficult stain, demonstrating mastery at or beyond the level

of the housekeeping manuals), or the satisfaction of manifesting care and love for another person (in the caring professions, or perhaps as a parent—should we look down on Cynthia Thoreau if she found genuine satisfaction in baking pies for Henry or washing his shirts?), or perhaps the satisfaction of entrepreneurship. It could also be the satisfaction of the Sacred Band, taking ownership of the success of the community (like all the good people who volunteer to serve on committees). These considerations need not prevent Thoreau or Thoreauvians from holding that some vocations (e.g., involving creative self-expression, intimacy with nature, or service) are higher than others (e.g., mere mastery).

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