

# READING THOREAU IN THE SHADOW OF THE CONCORD GALLOWS TREE:

IN HIS WRITINGS WE FIND PENDING ISSUES



January 27, 1840: The poem is drawn out from under the feet of the poet —  
his whole weight has rested on this ground.  
It has a logic more severe than the logician's.

HANGING

- “hanging suspended, with their heads downward, over flames”
- “No man was ever more honored in the character of his raisers than I.”
- “TINKERing upon our *lives* to improve *them*”
- “the still living heads were hanging on either side of him  
like ghastly trophies at his saddle-bow”
- “Tom Hyde, the tinker, standing on the gallows”
- “hang conspiracies / From the tough rafters of the trees!”
- “Shall a man go and hang himself ...”
- “hang by the beam of the scale and try to weigh less”
- “When a man dies he kicks the dust.”
- “Easily, with a few convulsive quirks, they give up their watery ghosts,  
like a mortal translated before his time to the thin air of heaven.”
- “an underground  
a ground under the feet also”



## GALLOWS HUMOR

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I would maintain that [WALDEN](#), and Thoreau's writing in general, is chock-full of references to the gallows, references that nowadays we don't "get" simply because we no longer live in the sort of culture, in which public execution is an unchallenged holiday convention. For instance, I would maintain that this particular paragraph, apparently so innocent, includes an implicit reference to being [hanged](#).

[WALDEN](#): At length, in the beginning of May, with the help of some of my acquaintances, rather to improve so good an occasion for neighborliness than from any necessity, I set up the frame of my house. No man was ever more honored in the character of his raisers than I. They are destined, I trust, to assist at the raising of loftier structures one day. I began to occupy my house on the 4th of July, as soon as it was boarded and roofed, for the boards were carefully feather-edged and lapped, so that it was perfectly impervious to rain; but before boarding I laid the foundation of a chimney at one end, bringing two cartloads of stones up the hill from the pond in my arms. I built the chimney after my hoeing in the fall, before a fire became necessary for warmth, doing my cooking in the mean while out of doors on the ground, early in the morning; which mode I still think is in some respects more convenient and agreeable than the usual one. When it stormed before my bread was baked, I fixed a few boards over the fire, and sat under them to watch my loaf, and passed some pleasant hours in that way. In those days, when my hands were much employed, I read but little, but the least scraps of paper which lay on the ground, my holder, or tablecloth, afforded me as much entertainment, in fact answered the same purpose as the Iliad.

PEOPLE OF  
WALDEN

BRONSON ALCOTT  
WALDO EMERSON  
ELLERY CHANNING  
BURRILL CURTIS  
GEORGE W. CURTIS

While the raisers of a house frame are the friends and neighbors who push with poles and pull with ropes as a frame is being lifted from its temporary horizontal position to its permanent vertical position, the raisers of a person may by extension be the outraged citizens who are pulling on the rope that elevates a criminal by the neck toward the extending horizontal branch of a tree. This is not the sort of gallows humor which would have gone unnoticed in the first half of the 19th Century, not in America it wouldn't. As a case in point we should note that Edmund Quincy Sewall, Jr.'s "raisers" were not only his mother and father, the Reverend and Mrs. Edmund Quincy Sewall of Scituate, Massachusetts, and not only his teachers at the Concord Academy, the Thoreau brothers, but also his ancestors in general including that hanging Judge Samuel Sewall of Salem MA with his blood guilt. If "no man was ever more honored in the character of his raisers" than Edmund's teacher Henry Thoreau, then it follows that the character of "gentle boy" Edmund's Sewall ancestors was not more honorable than was the character of Thoreau's [Huguenot](#) ancestors of honored memory, who rather than tugging together upon the indecent public end of that hanging rope, had sometimes found themselves tugging alone upon the noose at the decent end. I think I will get your attention if I say that we should not avoid noticing that, after what had happened in France during the Huguenot diaspora (and this is something which we have, by chance, entirely forgotten), for a descendant of these Huguenot religious refugees to jest lightly about being elevated would be equivalent, say, to a Jewish stage comic of our own era, jesting lightly at a hotel in the Berkshires about soap made from human bodies. I will go further: forgetting must fill an utterly vital function in human society, for our having entirely forgotten what Catholics did to Protestants in France in the 17th Century was seemingly one of the forgettings which



## GALLOWS HUMOR

## GALLOWS HUMOR

was an enabling condition for our being able to go on, to go on for instance to be able to do what Christians did to Jews in Germany in the 20th Century. –And here, I would contend, with his gallows humor, Thoreau is refusing to forget.

After the fact, we can perceive that in antebellum America Thoreau became so caught up in the exigencies of an overriding concern –that of rescuing the black slave– that his earlier concern in regard to state murderousness needed to take a back seat. We should also be able to perceive, however, that, had this antislavery agenda not become so immediate and so necessary, his life work could have taken another form — that of determined opposition to “capital punishment.”

1840

January 27, Monday: Charles Gounod arrived in Rome, for his Prix de Rome year.



January: No definition of poetry is adequate unless it be poetry itself. The most accurate analysis by the rarest wisdom is yet insufficient, and the poet will instantly prove it false by setting aside its requisitions.' It is indeed all that we do not know.

The poet does not need to see how meadows are something else than earth, grass, and water, but how, they are thus much. He does not need discover that potato blows are as beautiful as violets, as the farmer thinks, but only how good potato blows are.

The poem is drawn out from under the feet of the poet — his whole weight has rested on this ground. It has a logic more severe than the logician's.

HANGING



GALLOWS  
HUMOR

You might as well think to go in pursuit of the rainbow, and embrace it on the next hill, as to embrace the whole of poetry even in thought. The best book is only an advertisement of it, such as is sometimes sewed in with its cover.

Its eccentric and unexplored orbit embraces the system.



January 27, Monday: What a tame life we are living! How little heroic it is! Let us devise never so perfect a system of living, and straightway the soul leaves it to shuffle along its own way alone. It is easy enough to establish a durable and harmonious routine; immediately all parts of nature consent to it. The sun-dial still points to the noon mark, and the sun rises and sets for it. The neighbors are never fatally obstinate when such a scheme is to be instituted; but forthwith all lend a hand, and ring the bell, and bring fuel and lights, and put by work and don their best garments, with an earnest conformity which matches the operations of nature. There is always a present and extant life which all combine to uphold, though its insufficiency is manifest enough. Still the sing-song goes on.

## GALLOWS HUMOR

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1845

Early May: [Henry Thoreau](#) hired a horse and pulled stumps in [Waldo Emerson](#)'s 11-acre plot, for firewood as well as to clear it, and then plowed 2 1/2 acres to plant in *Phaseolus vulgaris* var. *humilis* common small navy pea bush white beans.<sup>1</sup> This clearing of the exhausted farmland beyond the Concord Alms House and Poor Farm, which had been timbered some time before and had lain fallow for some seventeen years partly restoring its fertility, was Thoreau's deal with Emerson by which he would be allowed to build a cabin for his occupancy in Emerson's woodlot where it touched on Walden Pond. Thoreau then bought the shanty of



a departing family of impoverished Irish immigrants, the James Collinses who were moving on at the completion of work on the railway, standing near the new tracks, for its materials, tore it apart, and hauled the recovered boards some rods along the hilltop and down to Walden Pond on a hand-cart of some sort,

1. Brad Dean has calculated that to plant seven miles of rows, each row fifteen rods in length, spaced three feet apart, the dimensions of the beanfield would have been 247.5 by 447 feet or 110,632.5 square feet, and that this amounts to 2.534 acres or slightly over one hectare.

These are beans that ripen prior to harvest and are threshed dry from the pods. Only the ripe seeds reach market. Four main types are grown as follows: (1) the Pea or Navy which Henry was growing; (2) Medium type, which includes Pinto, Great Northern, Sutter, Pink Bayo, and Small Red or Mexican Red; (3) Kidney; and (4) Marrow. Seeds vary in size from about 1/3-inch long in Thoreau's pea or navy bean to 3/4-inch in the Kidney. All these plants are of bush type. They are usually cut or pulled when most pods are ripe, and then vines and pods are allowed to dry before threshing. This is a bean thought to have originated in Central America from southern Mexico to Guatemala and Honduras. Evidence of the common bean has been found in two widely separated places. Large seeded common beans were found at Callejon de Huaylas in Peru, and small seeded common beans were found in the Tehuacan Valley in Mexico, with both finds carbon-dating as earlier than 5,000 BCE. This crop is associated with the maize and squash culture which predominated in pre-Columbian tropical America. In our post-Columbian era this bean has come to be grown in all areas of the world.

However, that's only the literal bean, not the metaphorical or literary bean, and once upon a time in Europe, there had been a form of commercial counting in use very much like the abacus of the East, in which beans were used. In those days to "know how many beans make up five" was to be commercially numerate. —Sort of like today knowing how to count one's change. It might be suggested therefore that Thoreau's determination to know beans was a play upon this archaic usage in which not knowing one's beans amounted to innumeracy, and in addition a play upon the common accusation "You don't know beans about xxxxx!" It might also be suggested that this is scatological humor similar to Shakespeare's — the following is from his "Comedy of Errors":

A man may break a word with you sir; and words are but wind;  
Ay, and break it in your face, so he break it not behind.

## GALLOWS HUMOR

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to dry in the sun:



A 19th-Century Irish shanty in the Merrimack Valley

TIMELINE OF WALDEN

**WALDEN:** At length, in the beginning of May, with the help of some of my acquaintances, rather to improve so good an occasion for neighborliness than from any necessity, I set up the frame of my house. No man was ever more honored in the character of his raisers than I. They are destined, I trust, to assist at the raising of loftier structures one day. I began to occupy my house on the 4th of July, as soon as it was boarded and roofed, for the boards were carefully feather-edged and lapped, so that it was perfectly impervious to rain; but before boarding I laid the foundation of a chimney at one end, bringing two cartloads of stones up the hill from the pond in my arms. I built the chimney after my hoeing in the fall, before a fire became necessary for warmth, doing my cooking in the mean while out of doors on the ground, early in the morning; which mode I still think is in some respects more convenient and agreeable than the usual one. When it stormed before my bread was baked, I fixed a few boards over the fire, and sat under them to watch my loaf, and passed some pleasant hours in that way. In those days, when my hands were much employed, I read but little, but the least scraps of paper which lay on the ground, my holder, or tablecloth, afforded me as much entertainment, in fact answered the same purpose as the Iliad.

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The “acquaintances” who participated in this rustic “raising”<sup>2</sup> ceremony on the Walden Pond shore were:

- [Bronson Alcott](#)
- [Ellery Channing](#)
- [Waldo Emerson](#)

## GALLOWS HUMOR

## GALLOWS HUMOR

- Edmund Hosmer
- Edmund Hosmer's three sons Edmund Hosmer, Jr., John Hosmer, and Andrew Hosmer
- the brothers [George William Curtis](#) and James [Burrill Curtis](#)



[Emerson](#) of course resided in the Coolidge mansion just on the other side of the poorhouse farm (Gleason F7) and was the owner of the woodlot in which this shanty was being erected, and would be the owner of that shanty, and the Curtis brothers, having come from Brook Farm to Ponkawtasset Hill (Gleason D7) a year earlier, and the Alcotts, having only recently returned to [Concord](#) from their Fruitlands near Harvard, Massachusetts to reside near the Edmund Hosmer home on a road leading toward Lincoln (Gleason G9/66), were of course quite conveniently situated to come over to the pond for this neighborly little ceremony.



**Index to  
the Text**

**Index to  
the Subtext**

2. “No man was ever more honored in the character of his raisers than I.” I would maintain that [WALDEN](#) is chock-full of references to the gallows, references that nowadays we don’t “get” simply because we no longer live in the sort of culture, in which public execution is an unchallenged holiday convention. For instance, I would maintain that this particular paragraph, apparently so innocent, includes an implicit reference to being [hanged](#). While the raisers of a house frame are the friends and neighbors who push with poles and pull with ropes as a frame is being lifted from its temporary horizontal position to its permanent vertical position, the raisers of a person may by extension be the outraged citizens who are pulling on the rope that elevates a criminal by the neck toward the extending horizontal branch of a tree. This is not the sort of gallows humor which would have gone unnoticed in the first half of the 19th Century, not in America it wouldn’t. This is an implicit reference to [Thoreau](#)’s Huguenot ancestors of honored memory, who rather than tugging together upon the indecent public end of that hanging rope, in *la belle France*, had sometimes found themselves tugging alone upon the noose at the decent end. [But there is more on this topic at:](#)



**GALLOWS  
HUMOR**

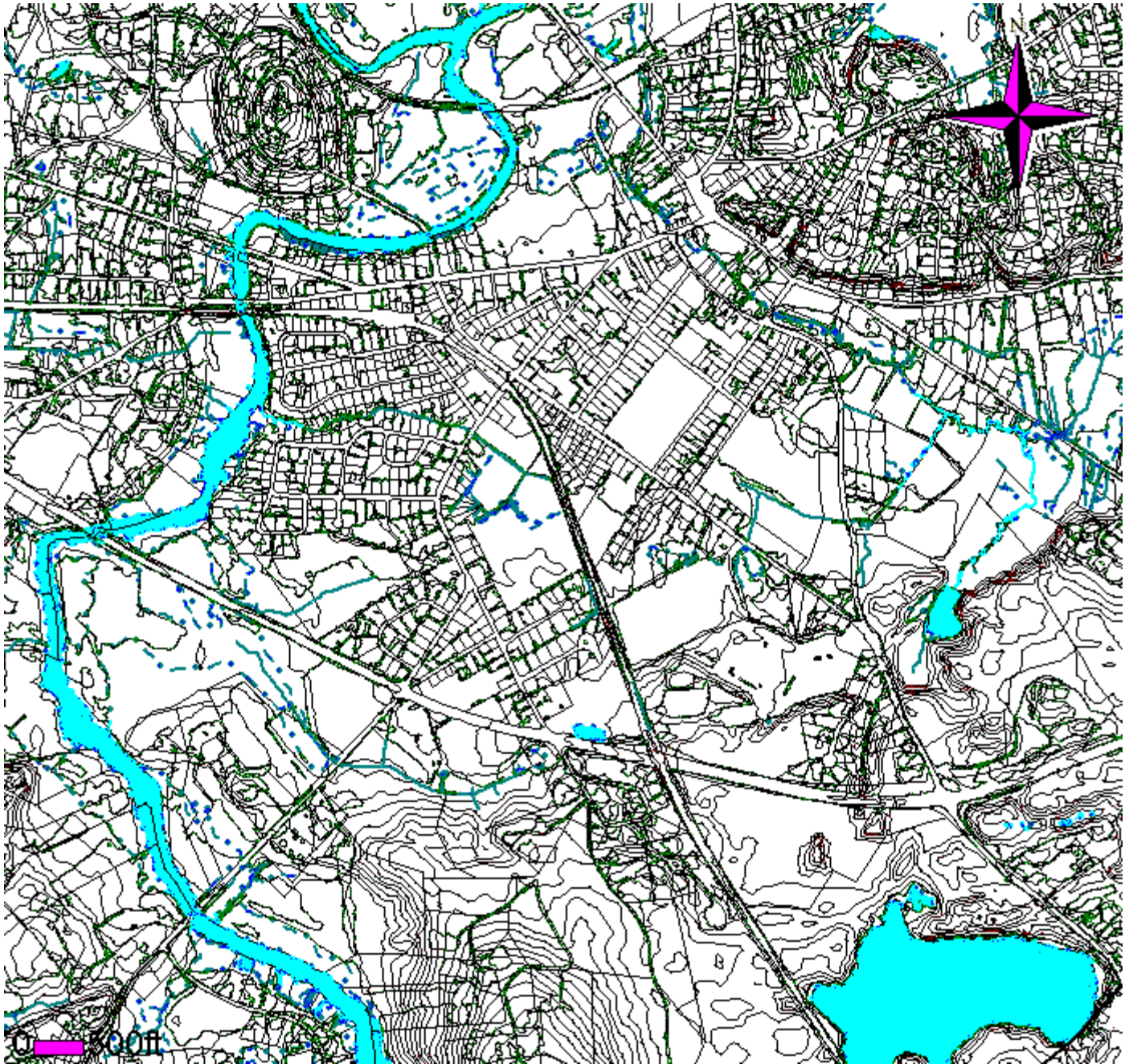
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WHAT?

INDEX

## GALLOWS HUMOR

## GALLOWS HUMOR





## GALLOWS HUMOR

## GALLOWS HUMOR

**WALDEN:** It was a singular experience that long acquaintance which I cultivated with beans, what with planting, and hoeing, and harvesting, and threshing, and picking over, and selling them, -the last was the hardest of all,- I might add eating, for I did taste. I was determined to know beans. When they were growing, I used to hoe from five o'clock in the morning till noon, and commonly spent the rest of the day about other affairs. Consider the intimate and curious acquaintance one makes with various kinds of weeds, -it will bear some iteration in the account, for there was no little iteration in the labor,- disturbing their delicate organizations so ruthlessly, and making such invidious distinctions with his hoe, levelling whole ranks of one species, and sedulously cultivating another. That's Roman wormwood, -that's pigweed, -that's sorrel, -that's piper-grass, -have at him, chop him up, turn his roots upward to the sun, don't let him have a fibre in the shade, if you do he'll turn himself t'other side up and be as green as a leek in two days. A long war, not with cranes, but with weeds, those Trojans who had sun and rain and dews on their side. Daily the beans saw me come to their rescue armed with a hoe, and thin the ranks of their enemies, filling up the trenches with weedy dead.

Many a lusty crest-waving Hector, that towered a whole foot above his crowding comrades, fell before my weapon and rolled in the dust.

Those summer days which some of my contemporaries devoted to the fine arts in Boston or Rome, and others to contemplation in India, and others to trade in London or New York, I thus, with the other farmers of New England, devoted to husbandry. Not that I wanted beans to eat, for I am by nature a Pythagorean, so as far as beans are concerned, whether they mean porridge or voting, and exchanged them for rice; but, perchance, as some must work in fields if only for the sake of tropes and expression, to serve a parable-maker one day. It was on the whole a rare amusement, which, continued too long, might have become a dissipation. Though I gave them no manure, and did not hoe them all once, I hoed them unusually well as far as I went, and was paid for it in the end, "there being in truth," as Evelyn says, "no compost or lätation whatsoever comparable to this continual motion, repastination, and turning of the mould with the spade." "The earth," he adds elsewhere, "especially if fresh, has a certain magnetism in it, by which it attracts the salt, power, or virtue (call it either) which gives it life, and is the logic of all the labor and stir we keep about it, to sustain us; all dungings and other sordid temperings being but the vicars succedaneous to this improvement." Moreover, this being one of those "worn-out and exhausted lay fields which enjoy their sabbath," had perchance, as Sir Kenelm Digby thinks likely, attracted "vital spirits" from the air. I harvested twelve bushels of beans.

But to be more particular; for it is complained that Mr. Colman has reported chiefly the expensive experiments of gentlemen farmers; my outgoes were,-

|  |                                  |
|--|----------------------------------|
| For a hoe, .....                         | \$0 54                           |
| Ploughing, harrowing, and furrowing, ... | 7 50, Too much.                  |
| Beans for seed, .....                    | 3 12 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> |
| Potatoes " .....                         | 1 33                             |
| Peas " .....                             | 0 40                             |
| Turnip seed, .....                       | 0 06                             |
| White line for crow fence, .....         | 0 02                             |



## GALLOWS HUMOR

## GALLOWS HUMOR

Horse cultivator and boy three hours, ...1 00  
Horse and cart to get crop, .....0 75

-----  
In all, .....\$14 72½

My income was, (patrem familias vendacem, non emacem esse oportet,) from

Nine bushels and twelve quarts of beans sold,\$16 94

Five “ large potatoes, .....2 50

Nine “ small “ .....2 25

Grass, .....1 00

Stalks, .....0 75

-----  
In all, .....\$23 44

Leaving a pecuniary profit, as I have elsewhere said, of \$8 71½.

This is the result of my experience in raising beans. Plant the common small white bush bean about the first of June, in rows three feet by eighteen inches apart, being careful to select fresh round and unmixed seed. First look out for worms, and supply vacancies by planting anew. Then look out for woodchucks, if it is an exposed place, for they will nibble off the earliest tender leaves almost clean as they go; and again, when the young tendrils make their appearance, they have notice of it, and will shear them off with both buds and young pods, sitting erect like a squirrel. but above all harvest as early as possible, if you would escape frosts and have a fair and saleable crop; you may save much loss by this means.

This further experience also I gained. I said to myself, I will not plant beans and corn with so much industry another summer, but such seeds, if the seed is not lost, as sincerity, truth, simplicity, faith, innocence, and the like, and see if they will not grow in this soil, even with less toil and manurance, and sustain me, for surely it has not been exhausted for these crops. Alas! I said this to myself; but now another summer is gone, and another, and another, and I am obliged to say to you, Reader, that the seeds which I planted, if indeed they were the seeds of those virtues, were wormeaten or had lost their vitality, and so did not come up. Commonly men will only be brave as their fathers were brave, or timid. This generation is very sure to plant corn and beans each new year precisely as the Indians did centuries ago and taught the first settlers to do, as if there were a fate in it. I saw an old man the other day, to my astonishment, making the holes with a hoe for the seventieth time at least, and not for himself to lie down in! But why should not the New Englander try new adventures, and not lay so much stress on his grain, his potato and grass crop, and his orchards? -raise other crops than these? Why concern ourselves so much about our beans for seed, and not be concerned at all about a new generation of men? We should really be fed and cheered if when we met a man we were sure to see that some of the qualities which I have named, which we all prize more than those other productions, but which are for the most part broadcast and floating in the air, had taken root and grown in him. Here comes such a subtle and ineffable quality, for instance, as truth or justice, though the slightest amount or new variety of it, along the road. Our ambassadors should be instructed to send home such seeds as these, and Congress help to distribute them over all the land. We should never stand upon ceremony with sincerity.



## GALLOWS HUMOR

## GALLOWS HUMOR

We should never cheat and insult and banish one another by our meanness, if there were present the kernel of worth and friendliness. We should not meet thus in haste. Most men I do not meet at all, for they seem not to have time; they are busy about their beans. We would not deal with a man thus plodding ever, leaning on a hoe or a spade as a staff between his work, not as a mushroom, but partially risen out of the earth, something more than erect, like swallows alighted and walking on the ground.-

“And as he spake, his wings would now and then  
Spread, as he meant to fly, then close again,”

so that we should suspect that we might be conversing with an angel. Bread may not always nourish us; but it always does us good, it even takes stiffness out of our joints, and makes us supple and buoyant, when we knew not what ailed us, to recognize any generosity in man or Nature, to share any unmixed and heroic joy.

Ancient poetry and mythology suggest, at least, that husbandry was once a sacred art; but it is pursued with irreverent haste and heedlessness by us, our object being to have large farms and large crops merely. We have no festival, nor procession, nor ceremony, not excepting our Cattle-shows and so called Thanksgivings, by which the farmer expresses a sense of the sacredness of his calling, or is reminded of its sacred origin. It is the premium and the feast which tempt him. He sacrifices not to Ceres and the Terrestrial Jove, but to the infernal Plutus rather. By avarice and selfishness, and a grovelling habit, from which none of us is free, of regarding the soil as property, or the means of acquiring property chiefly, the landscape is deformed, husbandry is degraded with us, and the farmer leads the meanest of lives.

He knows Nature but as a robber. Cato says that the profits of agriculture are particularly pious or just, (*maximeque pius quæstus*,) and according to Varro the old Romans “called the same earth Mother and Ceres, and thought that they who cultivated it led a pious and useful life, and that they alone were left of the race of King Saturn.”

We are wont to forget that the sun looks on our cultivated fields and on the prairies and forests without distinction. They all reflect and absorb his rays alike, and the former make but a small part of the glorious picture which he beholds in his daily course. In his view the earth is all equally cultivated like a garden. Therefore we should receive the benefit of his light and heat with a corresponding trust and magnanimity. What though I value the seed of these beans, and harvest that in the fall of the year? This broad field which I have looked at so long looks not to me as the principal cultivator, but away from me to influences more genial to it, which water and make it green. These beans have results which are not harvested by me. Do they not grow for woodchucks partly? The ear of wheat, (in Latin *spica*,” obsolete *specā*, from *spe*, hope,) should not be the only hope of the husbandman; its kernel or grain (*granum*, from *gerendo*, bearing,) is not all that it bears. How, then, can our harvest fail? Shall I not rejoice also at the abundance of the weeds whose seeds are the granary of the birds? It matters little comparatively whether the fields fill the farmer’s barns. The true husbandman will cease from anxiety, as the squirrels manifest no concern whether the woods will bear chestnuts this year or not, and finish his labor with every day, relinquishing all claim to the produce of his fields, and sacrificing in his mind not only his first but his last fruits also.

## GALLOWS HUMOR

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## GALLOWS HUMOR

## GALLOWS HUMOR

Did anyone suppose that Thoreau included the occupational title —“the tinker”— of a man being [hanged](#), in [WALDEN](#), merely because he thought it would be a nice piece of local color, interesting to his readership, sort of like including the color of the man’s hair or whether he had gone to school or how much he weighed and how far his executioner was calculating that he would need to drop in order to effect a clean snap of his spinal column at the neck?

[WALDEN](#): Say what you have to say, not what you ought. Any truth is better than make-believe. Tom Hyde, the tinker, standing on the gallows, was asked if he had any thing to say. “Tell the tailors,” said he, “to remember to make a knot in their thread before they take the first stitch.” His companion’s prayer is forgotten.

PEOPLE OF  
WALDEN

TOM HYDE

I would offer that when we get to page 327-8 of [WALDEN](#) and come upon a tinker, specifically a tinker, standing on the scaffold telling us the sum of his life, it becomes clear that Thoreau is doing more than indulging in another of his fits of gallows humor, but, the fact is, he had already begun this gallows humor on page 92 — and nobody noticed they were being set up.



## GALLOWS HUMOR

## GALLOWS HUMOR



**WALDEN:** Still we live meanly, like ants; though the fable tells us that we were long ago changed into men; like pygmies we fight with cranes; it is error upon error, and clout upon clout, and our best virtue has for its occasion a superfluous and evitable wretchedness. Our life is frittered away by detail. An honest man has hardly need to count more than his ten fingers, or in extreme cases he may add his ten toes, and lump the rest. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb nail. In the midst of this chopping sea of civilized life, such are the clouds and storms and quicksands and thousand-and-one items to be allowed for, that a man has to live, if he would not founder and go to the bottom and not make his port at all, by dead reckoning, and he must be a great calculator indeed who succeeds. Simplify, simplify. Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one; instead of a hundred dishes, five; and reduce other things in proportion. Our life is like a German Confederacy, made up of petty states, with its boundary forever fluctuating, so that even a German cannot tell you how it is bounded at any moment. The nation itself, with all its so called internal improvements, which, by the way, are all external and superficial, is just such an unwieldy and overgrown establishment, cluttered with furniture and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense, by want of calculation and a worthy aim, as the million households in the land; and the only cure for it as for them is in a rigid economy, a stern and more than Spartan simplicity of life and elevation of purpose. It lives too fast. Men think that it is essential that the *Nation* have commerce, and export ice, and talk through a telegraph, and ride thirty miles an hour, without a doubt, whether *they* do or not; but whether we should live like baboons or like men, is a little uncertain. If we do not get out sleepers, and forge rails, and devote days and nights to the work, but go to tinkering upon our *lives* to improve *them*, who will build railroads? And if railroads are not built, how shall we get to heaven in season? But if we stay at home and mind our business, who will want railroads? We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us. Did you ever think what those sleepers are that underlie the railroad? Each one is a man, an Irish-man, or a Yankee man. The rails are laid on them, and they are covered with sand, and the cars run smoothly over them. They are sound sleepers, I assure you. And every few years a new lot is laid down and run over; so that, if some have the pleasure of riding on a rail, others have the misfortune to be ridden upon. And when they run over a man that is walking in his sleep, a supernumerary sleeper in the wrong position, and wake him up, they suddenly stop the cars, and make a hue and cry about it, as if this were an exception. I am glad to know that it takes a gang of men for every five miles to keep the sleepers down and level in their beds as it is, for this is a sign that they may sometime get up again.




## GALLOWS HUMOR

## GALLOWS HUMOR

It is my feeling that Thoreau most assuredly would have expected an adequate reader to have been able to remember when he or she got to the tinker's parting advice upon the gallows that the author had previously spoken of our need to go **tinkering** upon our lives to improve them. Thoreau had done this while exploring the fine art of "stay[ing] at home and mind[ing] our business," which is I think you will agree an excellent topical category for Tom's "Tell the tailors to remember to make a knot in their thread before they take the first stitch."

Why is this an excellent topical category? —Because if the tinker's words are interpreted this way they become an example of their own violation, and therefore entirely ironic. Interpreted this way, the parable fits Thoreau's macabre sense of humor, interpreted another way, it fails to generate any particular interest and fails the general test that if some scrap of paper in Thoreau's pocket has found its way into his stack of papers for his WALDEN book, and remained there, it found its way there and it remained there because it had something entirely profound to offer — it was a scrap of paper which had been generative of much deep musing thought.

It was on Sunday, October 2, 1849  that Thoreau recorded in his journal the Tom-Hyde-the-tinker-standing-on-the-gallows story. The story was slightly more elaborate in the original, however, in that after Tom's ghastly stab at gallows humor he goes on to add some blubbery and tendentious pseudo-poetry, suggesting that the people who are killing him are making a mistake which is going to inconvenience them, which they are going to have to recognize in the future, but are only going to recognize after it has become too late for them to do anything about it — because in actuality, if they would only realize it, Tom Hyde the tinker would be worth more to them alive than he would be worth to them dead:

Tom Hyde's dying speech When Tom standing on the gallows was asked if he had anything to say— He said—  
Tell the tailors to remember & make a knot in their thread before they take the first stitch. also  
You Boston folks & Roxbury people  
Will want Tom Hyde to mend your kettle

The lead-in sentences to this stuff about two gallows speeches in **WALDEN**, one memorable and one not even worth recording, are "Say what you have to say, not what you ought. Any truth is better than make-believe." Therefore many readers seem to have assumed that the parable which follows was being offered merely as a graphic example of a person under duress who is forced to spit out what he actually has to say rather than be polite and indirect and say only what he ought to say, Tom who under the noose is being forced to speak that truth which in our polite society so often goes uncommented. I think not. I think that a trivial and uninteresting reading, entirely missing the involvement of some of the most significant elements which Thoreau is using WALDEN to communicate to us, such as: our crying need to see to it that all our improvements in the world originate as local improvements, as improvements in ourselves, rather than our constant wasting of our time and breath attempting to force others to be better people, or our constant insolent railroading of our Maker by attempting to prove we are better at creating a universe than this bumbling Creator has been.

Thoreau had said on page 92, in regard to the rail road —a dubious road to heaven if ever there was one— that "If we do not get out sleepers, and forge rails, and devote days and nights to the work, but go tinkering upon our **lives** to improve **them**, who will build railroads?" In many quarters this has been interpreted as a typically shallow anti-machine, anti-progress, Luddite fantasy typical of Nature-Boy Thoreau,<sup>3</sup> but the word that I would point to is the word "tinkering." Raise your hand if you know what a tinker was.

3. These same people typically react to this "Stack of the Artist of Kouroo" computerization project with comments such as "Henry must be rotating in his grave!" —God knows how we will ever succeed in communicating with such poor people, but maybe we can make a start by repeating and repeating to them that the man we are dealing with was an industrial engineer who made machine drawings for factories, visited locomotive works, etc. until somehow they become able to hear.



## GALLOWS HUMOR

## GALLOWS HUMOR

Thoreau topped off his irony with another question even more rhetorical, apparently not intended for the salvation of the Tom who was going to meet his Maker with his words upon his lips, but intended rather for the edification of those among his readers who suppose it to be more significant for human society that our going is being improved than that our being is remaining unimproved: “And if railroads are not built, how shall we get to heaven in season?” Well, Tom: you might say that Tom would be the paradigm case of a man who was going to get to heaven in season. In fact, Tom, as of course he was well aware, was going to drop into heaven through its trap door the instant he paused in this little speech. You will notice that Tom chose to go to his Maker without making any apologies for whatever it was that had made people angry with him, and also without any protest of innocence, and also without any expression of forgiveness for his tormentors, and also –unlike his companion on that gallows-tree that day on Boston Neck between [Boston](#) and Roxbury, before that crowd of “You Boston folks & Roxbury people” – without any final forgettable words of prayer upon his lips. One is left to wonder, then, how Tom’s speech could possibly serve as a fulfillment of Thoreau’s previous remarks about saying what one has to say rather than what one ought to say. If that were merely what Thoreau had been up to, in including this parable in his book, then Thoreau would be here revealed as a poor guide, entirely incapable of leading his readers to deep thought and forcing them to drink.

The lovely thing about Thoreau’s writing is, however, that he sets you up.

No, Thoreau has only led his readership to suppose that what we are going to read next is an example of saying what one has to say rather than what one ought to say, in order to feed us a parable which, if it were anything at all, would on its surface be a paradigm case of not saying what one ought to say, and thus to defeat all our easy expectations, and thus to force us to interrogate and interrogate further and further. If we haven’t done that in a century and a half, this is not to be attributed to the fact that Thoreau was rather a poor writer but is to be attributed to the fact that we have constituted a rather poor and inattentive readership.



Winter 1845-1846 before February 22d: ... up the soil –or that there is a “Brest Shipping” that now at length only after some years of this revolution there should be some falling off in the importation of sugar– I am strangely surprised– Perhaps I had thought they sweetened their coffee? their water? with Revolution still.

We want one or two chapters out of some English or German Almanac at least –headed “work for the month”– Including Revolution work of course– Altitude of the sun” –“State of the Crops” “State of the markets” “Meteorological observations” “Attractive Industry” “Day labor” just to remind the reader that the French peasantry –did something beside go without breeches –burning chateaus, or getting ready knotted cords –embrace & throttle one another ie we want not only a back ground and a fore ground to a picture –but literally a ground [written in over the line and not canceled: an underground] under the feet also.<sup>4</sup>

An omission common to most epics –a want of epic integrity

HANGING

4. In 1847 this gallows humor would be inserted into the essay “Thomas Carlyle and His Works.”

**GALLOWS  
HUMOR**





## GALLOWS HUMOR

## GALLOWS HUMOR

1847

March-April: After much exchange of correspondence and much intercession by Horace Greeley, “Thomas Carlyle and his Works,” which had been submitted for paid publication before August 16, 1846,<sup>5</sup> appeared as the leading article in Graham’s American Monthly Magazine 30, Issue #3, pages 145-52 and was completed in Issue #4, pages 238-245.<sup>6</sup>

In the course of this essay Thoreau makes a critical remark about [Sir Archibald Alison](#)’s MODERN HISTORY OF EUROPE FROM THE FRENCH REVOLUTION TO THE FALL OF NAPOLEON:

One improvement we could suggest in this last, as indeed in most epics – that he should let in the sun oftener upon his picture. It does not often enough appear, but it is all revolution, the old way of human life turned simply bottom upward, so that when at length we are inadvertently reminded of the “Brest Shipping,” a St. Domingo colony, and that anybody thinks of owning plantations, and simply turning up the soil there, and that now at length, after some years of this revolution, there is a falling off in the importation of sugar, we feel a queer surprise. Had they not sweetened their water with revolution then? It would be well if there were several chapters headed “Work for the Month,” – Revolution-work inclusive, of course – “Altitude of the Sun,” “State of the Crops and Markets,” “Meteorological Observations,” “Attractive Industry,” “Day Labor,” etc., just to remind the reader that the French peasantry did something beside go without breeches, burn châteaux, get ready knotted cords, and embrace and throttle one another by turns. These things are sometimes hinted at, but they deserve a notice more in proportion to their importance. We want not only a background to the picture, but a ground under the feet also. We remark, too, occasionally, an unphilosophical habit, common enough elsewhere, in Alison’s History of Modern Europe, for instance, of saying, undoubtedly with effect, that if a straw had not fallen this way or that, why then – but, of course, it is as easy in philosophy to make kingdoms rise and fall as straws.

### READ THE FULL TEXT

**“a ground under the feet also”:** This, like the previous knotted cords (garotte) and the previous throttling of one another by turns, is an obvious reference to [hanging](#), since the important

5. See early draft of this reference by [Thoreau](#) to [hanging](#), written during Winter 1845-1846 before February 22d. Thoreau would undertake much more correspondence before finally receiving payment from that magazine. In fact [Thomas Carlyle](#) would obtain a copy, in England, and would peruse it “with due entertainment and recognition,” before Thoreau would receive \$50.<sup>00</sup> on May 17, 1848.

6. For the manner in which this gallows humor which had originated in the journal during the winter before February 22, 1846 would be inserted into the essay “Thomas Carlyle and His Works,” see:

GALLOWS  
HUMOR





## GALLOWS HUMOR

## GALLOWS HUMOR

life support of which a hanging person has been deprived would be the ground underfoot.

1849

January 15, Monday: In downtown [Boston](#)—where everything that happens of course happens for the greater glory of God—Chief Justice [Lemuel Shaw](#) lectured [Washington Goode](#) for an hour and a half on the habits of “intemperance” which he had had, the “ungodly” associates which he had had, the “dens of crime” which he had frequented, etc., informed him that having led such a life there was simply “no hope” that the governor of the state might reduce his sentence. The lecture probably was just what Seaman Goode needed. The judge then consigned him to be [hanged](#) by the neck, on May 25, Friday, 1849 (this seems to have been a traditional day upon which to conduct public hangings), until he was dead.<sup>7</sup> The opponents of the death penalty, to wit, the Standing Committee of the Massachusetts Society for the Abolition of Capital Punishment, would have a little more than four months to mobilize public opinion to bring pressure to bear on Governor George Nixon Briggs:

Why Sir, even the boys, and they are worth saving, for we have nothing else to make men, and even Governors of, are now saying in our streets, “it is only a nigger.”

During those four months 24,440 signatures would be collected, petitioning the Governor Briggs to commute Seaman Goode’s sentence, from death by hanging to life in prison without any possibility of parole. For instance, [Friend Joseph Ricketson](#), [Friend Daniel Ricketson](#)’s brother who, if I mistake not, was a birthright [Quaker](#) in good standing with his Monthly Meeting, reported that:

I have exerted myself very much for the last month in behalf of Washington Goode; there were several petitions here and we obtained 746 signatures.

In addition to the 24,440 signatures mentioned, there was one petition, from Woburn, Massachusetts, bearing a total of nine signatures, which demanded that Governor Briggs remain steadfast in the plan of “exicution.”

An article would appear in the [Boston Republican](#), pointing up the fact that in France the guillotine had been adopted, after consultation with medical men, as the least painful mode of execution, and that since the last hanging in Boston, “the [Ether](#) discovery has taken place.”

The question now arises, how shall the *hanging* be performed here in Boston.... Shall not the convict share also the advantage of this benign discovery? He is to be hanged by the neck. Shall not this be done *with the least possible pain*? If we follow the spirit of the law, there would seem to be no doubt that it must be done with the least possible pain. And it seems equally clear that it is within the *discretion* of the Sheriff, to permit any form of alleviating the pain, which is consistent with the one thing imposed upon him by the law; namely, the hanging of Goode, by the neck, until he is dead. We will not undertake to determine, whether Humanity does not

7. In fact, [Boston](#) had not [hanged](#) anyone for simple homicide since 1826, almost a quarter of a century before, and there was another prisoner, Augustus Dutée, whose sentence to be hanged was being commuted during this period to life in prison — but then, we may presume that Augustus Dutée was a white man, not only because his sentence was commuted but also because the documents do not comment on his race as they would most assuredly have commented had he been anything other than white. In addition to Dutée, seven other murderers were then serving life in Massachusetts prison after having had their sentences to be hanged commuted by the state governor.



## GALLOWS HUMOR

## GALLOWS HUMOR

require, that the convict, if he chooses, shall be allowed the benefit of ETHER. We content ourselves with saying that it is clearly within the *discretion* of the Sheriff to permit the pains of the convict to be thus alleviated.



## GALLOWS HUMOR

## GALLOWS HUMOR

The petition to commute the sentence of seaman Goode to life in prison without opportunity for parole that was being circulated and sponsored in Concord (either by Anna Maria Whiting, one of the town's leading abolitionists, or by Caroline Hoar, the wife of Rockwood Hoar) is still in existence and bears, on the men's side of the sheet, the signature of [Henry David Thoreau](#) as second in that column. It bears, on the women's side of the sheet, the signature of his younger sister, [Sophia Elizabeth Thoreau](#), as 5th in that column, followed in immediate succession by the signature of his mother, [Cynthia Dunbar Thoreau](#), the signature of his elder sister, [Helen Louisa Thoreau](#), the signature of his aunt [Louisa Dunbar](#), and the signature of his [Aunt Jane Thoreau](#). The signature of his father [John Thoreau, Sr.](#), however, appears nowhere on this petition.

**Why not?** Thoreau's father was 62 years old at this point and still very actively engaged in his home business. Is one to suppose that he, quite alone in his home, **wanted** Seaman Goode to dance on air?

The full text of that petition, as it came to be circulated in the [Prisoner's Friend](#), had been as follows:



## GALLOWS HUMOR

## GALLOWS HUMOR

WE, THE UNDERSIGNED, solemnly protest against the intended execution of Washington Goode, as a crime in which we would under no circumstances participate, which we would prevent, if possible, and in the guilt of which we will not, by the seeming assent of silence, suffer ourselves to be implicated.

We believe the execution of this man will involve all who are instrumental in it in the crime of murder – of the murder in cold blood of a helpless fellow being.

The arguments by which executions are generally defended are wholly wanted here. The prisoner is not one who in spite of good instruction and example, for purposes of avarice, revenge or lust, deliberately planned the murder of a fellow-being. The intended victim of law was a man of misfortune from birth, made by his social position, and still more by the color which God gave him, the victim of neglect, of oppression, of prejudice, of all the evils inflicted upon humanity by man. If in a paroxysm of drunken rage, he killed his opponent, (and this is the utmost alleged against him,) his case comes far short of premeditated murder.

But even this fact is extremely doubtful. It is supported only by the most suspicious testimony, and such as would not have weighed with any jury to touch the life of a white man. And since the trial, facts have come to light materially lessening the credibility of the evidence which led to conviction.

The glaring unfairness of his mode of trial is of itself sufficient ground for this protest. The maxim which gives to the accused a trial by his peers was essentially violated. In a community where sympathy with a colored man is a rare and unpopular sentiment, the prisoner should have been tried by a jury composed partly, at least, of his own race. This violation of the principles of equal justice demands our solemn protest.

We claim also that the petition of more than 20,000 of our fellow-citizens to have this man's life spared, demands respect. Such a number of voluntary petitioners, all upon one side, indicates the will of the sovereign people of the State, that the penalty should be commuted. Our respect for the right of the people to a voice and a just influence in the administration of public justice, also demands this solemn protest against the legal murder of Washington Goode.



## GALLOWS HUMOR

## GALLOWS HUMOR

1853

During this year and the following one, Draft F of [Henry Thoreau](#)'s [WALDEN](#) *ms*:

[WALDEN](#): Ah, the pickerel of Walden! when I see them lying on the ice, or in the well which the fisherman cuts in the ice, making a little hole to admit the water, <sup>^golden and emerald</sup> I am always surprised by their rare beauty, as if they were fabulous fishes—~~fresh water dolphins~~ ~~dauphins~~ ~~eldest sons of Walden~~, they are so foreign to the streets, even to the woods, foreign as Arabia to our Concord life. They possess a <sup>^quite</sup> dazzling and transcendent beauty which separates them ~~far~~ <sup>^by a wide interval</sup> from the cadaverous cod and haddock ~~at least two days old~~ whose fame is trumpeted in our streets. ~~handsome art-lovers~~ [ILLEGIBLE] ~~& gems—they~~ <sup>^They</sup> are not green like the pines, nor gray like the stones nor blue like <sup>^the</sup> sky; but they have, to my ~~eye~~ <sup>^eyes</sup>, if possible, yet rarer colors, like <sup>^flowers</sup> and precious stones, as if they were the pearls, ~~of this great shell—~~ <sup>^some</sup> ~~solid opied &~~ <sup>^the</sup> animalized *nuclei* or crystals of the Walden water. They, of course, are ~~composed of Walden wholly~~ <sup>^Walden all over</sup> and all through; are <sup>^themselves small</sup> Waldens in the animal kingdom, <sup>^Waldenses</sup> ~~^perhaps dolphins~~ ~~dauphins~~ ~~eldest sons of Walden, for~~ ~~whose behalf this whole world is but a dauphin edition to study—~~ It is surprising that ~~these fishes~~ <sup>^fish</sup> <sup>^they</sup> are caught here, —that in this deep and capacious spring, far beneath the rattling teams and chaises and tinkling sleighs that travel the Walden road, this great gold and emerald fish swims. I never chanced to see its kind in any market; it would be the cynosure of all eyes there. <sup>^Easily</sup>, with a few convulsive quirks, they give up their ~~diluted~~ <sup>^watery</sup> ghosts, like a mortal translated before his time to the ~~subtle~~ <sup>^thin</sup> air of heaven.

**“like a mortal translated before his time to the thin air of heaven”:** This is a reference not only to [hanging](#), but to the hanging of the [Huguenot](#) saints in France after revocation of the Edict of Nantes, while the members of [Thoreau](#)'s family, the intermarried Thoreaus and Guillests, were fleeing to the relative safety offered by the Isle of [Jersey](#) in the English Channel.

## GALLOWS HUMOR

## GALLOWS HUMOR

The pickerel of Walden Pond was of course a small pike, and the pike is named of course for its pointy head. Per FACTS ON FILE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF WORD AND PHRASE ORIGINS, this is the fish that lifted its head from the water to observe the Crucifixion — and it bears images of the cross, three nails, and a sword. You will remember that on page 40 of A WEEK ON THE CONCORD AND MERRIMACK RIVERS, Thoreau imagines that his soul is “bright invisible green.” These great gold and emerald Waldenses are the ghosts of Thoreau’s Huguenot ancestors, translated before their time, by the believers of France, to the thin air of heaven. Hanged! I show, on the next page, an old illustration of Anne du Bourg dancing on air, and a 20th Century painting by N.C. Wyeth titled “Fishing Through the Ice,” and what I suggest is that the one is quite as apt an illustration of this passage from WALDEN; OR, LIFE IN THE WOODS as the other.

No, more than that. I suggest that the painter Wyeth had no **clue** what Thoreau was talking about in this passage. He was trapped in the pikeresque, and might as well have been drawing Norman-Rockwellish kitsch covers for the Saturday Evening Post. But WALDEN; OR, LIFE IN THE WOODS is a book of pending issues, a book in which Brahmins hang suspended over flames on page 4, in which we hang conspirators from the tough rafters of the trees on page 208, in which still-living heads hang on either side of a warrior like ghastly trophies on page 231, in which a man thinks to hang himself because he belongs to the race of pygmies on page 326, in which a man stands on the gallows on page 327 and says “Tell the tailors to remember to make a knot in their thread before they take the first stitch” —although his companion’s prayer is forgotten,— and in which on page 330 our author chooses not to hang by the beam of the scale and try to weigh less.

GALLOWS  
HUMOR



You may well wonder how I am going to make a connection between these two illustrations, of Anne du Bourg dancing on air and of a pickerel dancing on air, other than by offering that the pickerel, being a fish, evokes that old graphitum of primitive Christianity scratched into the walls of the catacombs of Rome.

ιχθυς = “fish”

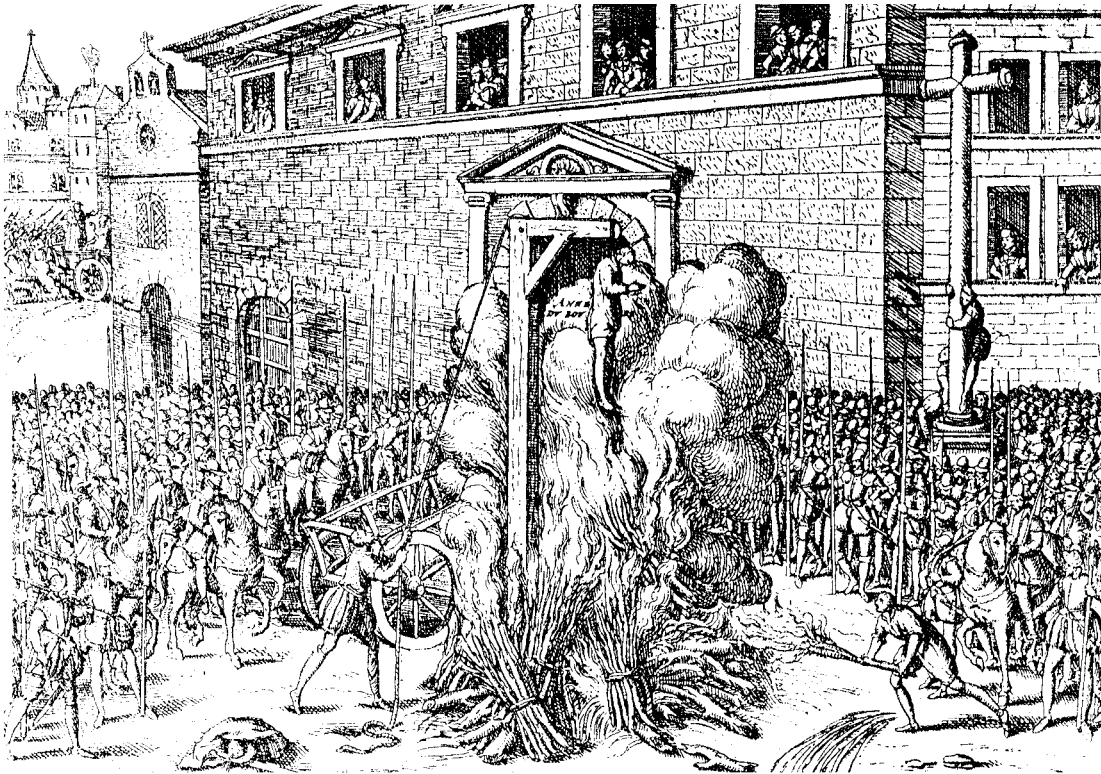
ι = Jesus  
 χ = Christ  
 θ = God’s  
 υ = Son  
 ς = Savior



But the pickerel connection, once it is made, will be obvious to you, for Thoreau speaks of them as “Waldenses” and that word is only from the Medieval Latin *Valdenses* via the French *Vaudois* and the Italian *Valdese*. The followers of that “Peter Waldo” or “Pierre Vaudès” —who, in AD1170, in his thirtieth year, hired two priests to translate the Bible into common French, and then accepted the invitation of Luke 18:23 to sell all he had and give the proceeds to the poor— were medieval convinced persons who strived, until they were suppressed by Christians, to live in the manner of life portrayed in the Gospels. At his point of greatest acceptability, Waldo was confirmed in his vow of poverty by Pope Alexander III, although this dangerous man was most pointedly **not** granted permission to teach or preach about his convictions. His teaching was banned by Pope Lucius III in the bull *Ad Abolendam* issued at the Synod of Verona in AD1184. Innocent VIII declared in AD1487 that when a Christian kills one of the Waldenses —followers of the way of Waldo— he inherit his property if any. Those who embraced this discipline were variously termed *Pauperes* or “poor ones” (the entire subject of the first chapter of WALDEN; OR, LIFE IN THE WOODS), *Picards* or “those who read the Bible for themselves” (thus Thoreau’s “pickerel” metaphor), *Waldenses* (to get this reference into his text, Thoreau pretends that “Waldenses” is merely a plural form for “Walden” like the more obvious “Waldens,” whereas “Waldenses” is a collective term), *Vaudois* and *Valdese* or “those who live in the valleys,” and finally “Huguenots” or people who have made a covenant, people who have “sought individual perfection apart from the Roman Church, rejected the official clergy, abstained from oaths and the use of force, and attempted in general to reintroduce primitive Christian fellowship and apostolic simplicity of living.”<sup>8</sup>

## GALLOWS HUMOR

## GALLOWS HUMOR



**Anne du Bourg said, in the presence of Henry II, in regard to his execution of a primitive Christian, that it was no small thing to condemn those who, amidst the flames, invoked the name of Jesus Christ.**

**The penalty for saying this to the king was the usual penalty accorded to heretics in France in the late 1550s: suspension over a fire by a rope, and dipping in and out of the flames until death.**

## GALLOWS HUMOR

## GALLOWS HUMOR



**Pickerel dancing on air;  
N.C. Wyeth fishing for meaning through the ice of his own incomprehension**



## GALLOWS HUMOR

## GALLOWS HUMOR



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"It's all now you see. Yesterday won't be over until tomorrow and tomorrow began ten thousand years ago."

– Remark by character "Garin Stevens"  
in William Faulkner's INTRUDER IN THE DUST



Prepared: June 7, 2013

# ARRGH AUTOMATED RESEARCH REPORT

## GENERATION HOTLINE



This stuff presumably looks to you as if it were generated by a human. Such is not the case. Instead, upon someone's request we have pulled it out of the hat of a pirate that has grown out of the shoulder of our pet parrot "Laura" (depicted above). What these chronological lists are: they are research reports compiled by ARRGH algorithms out of a database of data modules which we term the Kouroo Contexture. This is data mining. To respond to such a request for information, we merely push a button.



## GALLOWS HUMOR

## GALLOWS HUMOR

Commonly, the first output of the program has obvious deficiencies and so we need to go back into the data modules stored in the contexture and do a minor amount of tweaking, and then we need to punch that button again and do a recompile of the chronology – but there is nothing here that remotely resembles the ordinary “writerly” process which you know and love. As the contents of this originating contexture improve, and as the programming improves, and as funding becomes available (to date no funding whatever has been needed in the creation of this facility, the entire operation being run out of pocket change) we expect a diminished need to do such tweaking and recompiling, and we fully expect to achieve a simulation of a generous and untiring robotic research librarian. Onward and upward in this brave new world.

First come first serve. There is no charge.  
Place your requests with <Kouroo@kouroo.info>.  
Arrgh.