Henry David Thoreau’s Romantic Imagination of the Telegraph Harp

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Stanford University, Second Year Master of Liberal Arts
• Born
  ○ July 12, 1817
  ○ Concord, MA

• Died
  ○ May 6, 1862
● Lived at Walden Pond
  ○ 1845 - 1847

● Publication Date
  ○ 1854

Replica of Thoreau’s one-room cabin at Walden Pond, image: Library of Congress
July 4th, 46

Yesterday I came here here. My house maker and friend. 18th mountain house. I have seen which named to have a garden around atmosphere where I am as I long. I have had the house. 2nd million last summer in the Garden mountain high up in the blue heaven in the west. The quiet and cleaning and cool. The wind on the winds had that wonderful character. The winds of the Parkerville field. They were a clean and wholesome family inside and out of the house. The little man and Mrs. Thoreau, my called and the woman there was not going to the house near.
Pay attention
Be amazed
Tell about it
The Telegraph Key, Smithsonian Museum
• Born
  ○ April 27, 1791
  ○ Charlestown, MA

• Died
  ○ April 2, 1872
• April 1844
  ○ Washington to Baltimore Line

• 24 May, 1844
  ○ First Message
What hath God Wrought!

Annie G. Ellsworth, 1844
“I went to the woods because I wished to live \textit{deliberately}, to front only the \textit{essential facts of life}, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear…”

Henry David Thoreau, \textit{Walden}
Railroad Tracks near Walden Pond, photograph by Andrew Zander
“As I went under the new telegraph wire, I heard it vibrating like a harp high overhead. It was as the sound of a far-off glorious life, a supernal life, which came down to us, and vibrated the lattice-work of this life of ours.”

The Journal of Henry David Thoreau, September 3rd, 1851
“Yesterday and to-day the stronger winds of autumn have begun to blow, and the telegraph harp has sounded loudly... I put my ear to one of the posts, and it seemed to me as if every pore of the wood was filled with music.”

The Journal of Henry David Thoreau, September 22, 1851.
“... the winds caused this wire to vibrate so that it emitted harp-like and æolian music in all the lands through which it passed, as if to express the satisfaction of the gods in this invention.”

The Journal of Henry David Thoreau, September 22, 1851.
Aeolian harp made by Henry David Thoreau, Concord Museum
“Every swell and change or inflection of tone pervaded and seemed to proceed from the wood, the divine tree or wood, as if its very substance was transmuted. What a recipe for preserving wood, per chance, — to keep it from rotting, — to fill its pores with music!”

Journal of Henry David Thoreau, September 22, 1851.
“To have a harp on so great a scale, girdling the very earth, and played on by the winds of every latitude and longitude”

The Journal of Henry David Thoreau, September 22, 1851
“The Telegraph harp ... allies Concord to Athens and both to Elysium.”

“Thus as ever the finest uses of things are accidental. Mr Morse did not invent this music.”

The Journal of Henry David Thoreau, January 23, 1852
“We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate.”

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*
Suggestions for Further Reading

- https://www.walden.org/collection/journals/

- *Henry David Thoreau: A Life*
  - by Laura Dassow Walls
Thank You

Questions?
Extra Slides
“As if the main object were to talk fast and not to talk sensibly. We are eager to tunnel under the Atlantic and bring the Old World some weeks nearer to the New; but perchance the first news that will leak through into the broad, flapping American ear will be that the Princess Adelaide has the whooping cough.”

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*
“And that the invention thus divinely honored and distinguished—on which the Muse has condescended to smile—is this magic medium of communication for mankind!”

Journal of Henry David Thoreau, September 22, 1851.