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Nature Journals for the English Classroom

Henry D. Thoreau's Ant Battle

Contemplations

Thoreau had the uncanny ability to begin with close observations on a mundane incident or the minutiae of nature then develop his observations into profound ruminations on the most fundamental human concerns. Credited with influencing Tolstoy, Ghandi, and other thinkers, Walden remains a masterpiece of philosophical reflection. Here, Thoreau is comparing his observations of an "ant battle" to the legendary Greek army of Achilles, the Myrmidons (Walden, Dover



Thrift ed.) When you are doing your nature journal this week, try to find an everyday, “mundane” incident of nature and enlarge it to comment on another historical human event.

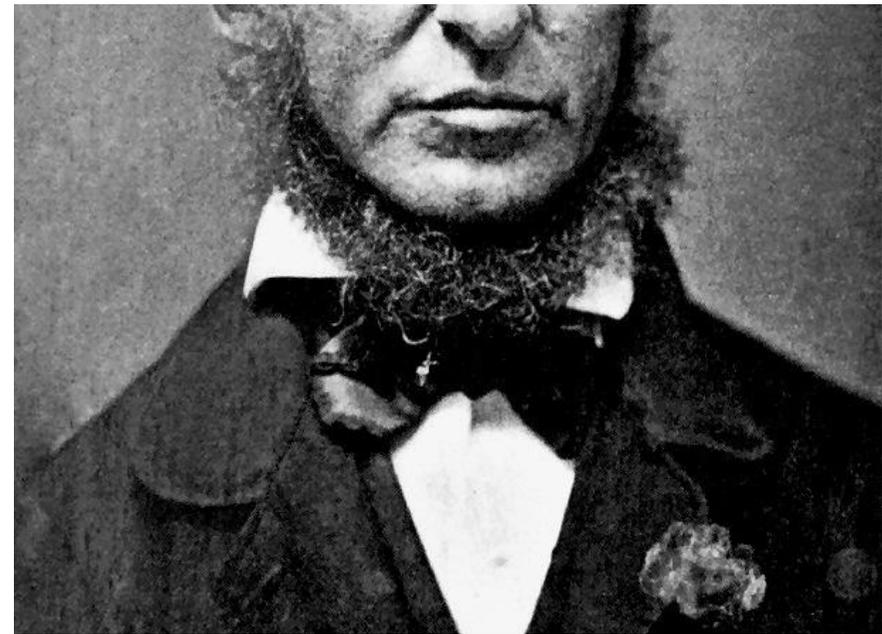
“Nature will bear the closest inspection. She invites us to lay our eye level with her smallest leaf and take an insect’s view of its plain.”

—Thoreau

“I love to think of nature as an unlimited broadcasting station, through which God speaks to us every hour, if we will only tune in.”

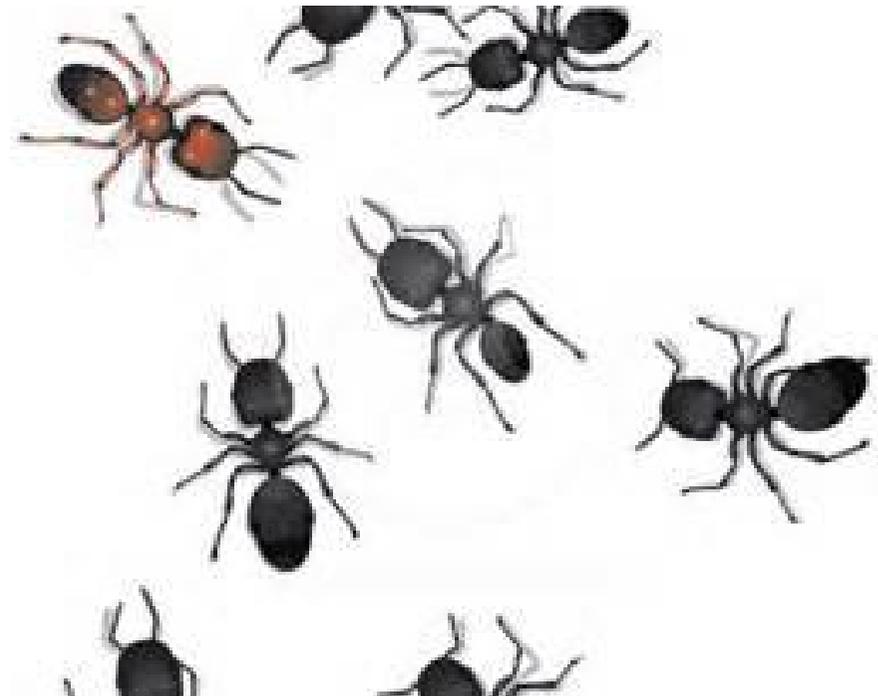
—George Washington Carver

From Angelica’s Journal: [Angelica’s poem \(pdf\)](#)



Literary Connection

I was witness to events of a less peaceful nature. One day when I went out to my woodpile, or rather my pile of stumps, I observed two large ants, the one red, the other much larger, nearly half an inch long, and black, fiercely contending with one another. Having once got hold, they never let go, but struggled and wrestled and rolled on the chips incessantly. Looking farther, I was surprised to find that the chips were covered with such combatants, that it was not a duellum, but a bellum, a war between two races of ants, the red always pitted against the black, and frequently two red ones to one black. The legions of these Myrmidons covered all the hills and vales in my wood-yard, and the ground was already strewn with the dead and dying, both red and black. It was the only battle which I have ever witnessed, the only battlefield I ever trod while the battle was raging, intercine war; the red republicans on the one hand, and the black imperialists on the other.



An allusion is brief, usually indirect reference to a person, place, or event—real or fictional. Here, Thoreau refers to the Myrmidians, who were very skilled Greek soldiers led by Achilles, to emphasize the ferocity of the battle.

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