

Civil Disobedience, and Other Essays Study Guide

Civil Disobedience, and Other Essays by Henry David Thoreau

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Plot Summary

"Civil Obedience and Other Essays" contains five of Thoreau's most frequently published essays outlining his unique principles on the role of man in society and his proper relationship to his government, his fellow man, and to nature.

The first essay in the book, entitled "Civil Disobedience" is a call by Thoreau for people to take responsibility for the actions of the government their taxes support. He is writing specifically about the government of Massachusetts, which while outlawing slavery had recently allowed for the return of escaped slaves to their owners in the South. Men have a moral responsibility to withhold support of a government engaged in immoral actions, Thoreau claims. He writes the essay after he himself is jailed for a short time for refusing to pay a poll tax.

In "Slavery in Massachusetts," Thoreau returns to his criticism of the Massachusetts government for supporting the return of fugitive slaves to their southern owners. He attacks the laws of the state as not being based on truth, and again calls for just men to resist them. An unjust government is truly harmful to its subjects, he argues. Thoreau also criticizes popular newspapers for their treatment of the issue, saying they all miss the real issue, which is one of morality.

In "A Plea for Captain John Brown," Thoreau praises the violent actions of the leader of a raid on the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry who is condemned to death for his actions, which were intended to bring on a slave revolt and the end of slavery. Thoreau compares Brown to Christ and argues that his death may be the impetus needed to finally end slavery in the US.

"Walking" is a description of the joy Thoreau finds in hiking through natural, unspoiled areas. In this essay, Thoreau outlines what he feels is the proper relationship between society and nature. Men should not spend their time draining swamps and trying to improve the land, he argues. By doing so they subvert their relationship with nature. Improved properties lead to towns and cities, he implies, which lead to an even further separation from nature. In the expansion of the young US toward the West, Thoreau sees a desire for men to return to nature and the wilderness.

In "Life Without Principle," Thoreau condemns the idle pursuit of money and riches at the expense of being true to one's own calling. People who work only for money, or go prospecting for gold, will never learn to truly sustain themselves, he argues. He criticizes newspapers and their influence, and the shallow interactions that most members of society engage in. Thoreau advocates removing oneself from these activities to become truly self-sufficient and happy.



Civil Disobedience

Civil Disobedience Summary and Analysis

"Civil Disobedience" is Thoreau's essay on the moral responsibilities of a citizen of a democracy. When one's government is acting immorally, he argues, it is a citizen's duty to disobey and withdraw his support from the government. Thoreau challenges the role of government and describes his own incarceration for refusing to pay a tax.

Thoreau begins by proposing a motto, "That government is best which governs not at all." (p.1) Government is actually a hindrance to society and the individual, he argues. It is concerned with control of trade and commerce and politics and does not in itself accomplish anything except to get in the way.

Thoreau is quick to add that he is not an anarchist. He does not call for the abolition of government, but a better government that is based on justice. Justice, however, is not necessarily what the majority rules, he argues. In fact some questions should not be decided by the majority, but by conscience. Thoreau argues that the American system of government has no room for conscience. Soldiers in the service of the government are like machines, he says, expected to mindlessly carry out the will of the government.

Thoreau has the abolition of slavery in mind. He points out that his own government is the same that governs the slaves of the south. This he finds shameful. Thoreau does not find fault with the slaveholders of the southern states as much as he blames his fellow citizens of Massachusetts who are mainly too concerned with politics and commerce to consider the moral aspects of government. In this situation, Thoreau says, the just man will not wait for a majority to form on the abolition of slavery but will take action himself.

The action Thoreau calls for is the withdrawal of financial support of the state government by a refusal to pay taxes. He has done this himself and has spent a night in his town jail as a result.

Thoreau does not find his stay unpleasant. His cell is clean and his cellmate friendly. He is teased by his neighbors, he says, but they seem even more ridiculous for it to Thoreau, because he does not feel as if he has really been restrained at all. The state has the physical force to restrain his body and his physical senses, he says, but not his mind or his moral sense.

Without the consent of the governed, the government should not expect to have any authority, Thoreau argues. A citizen has the right to withdraw his consent, and should withdraw that consent, until his government begins to rule based on justice.



Slavery in Massachusetts

Slavery in Massachusetts Summary and Analysis

"Slavery in Massachusetts" is an Independence Day address given at an anti-slavery meeting in Framingham, Massachusetts. It comes just a month after a Boston judge, Edward Loring, has ruled that a former slave named Anthony Burns should be returned to his former owner in Virginia. While Burns is being held, a party attacks the Boston Courthouse in an attempt to free him. Their attack is unsuccessful and martial law is imposed to restore order. Thoreau's address is a condemnation of Loring and the state government of Massachusetts and a call for a more principled form of government, and praises the "heroic" attack on the courthouse.

Thoreau first refers to a previous anti-slavery meeting at which he was asked to speak. This meeting was mostly about the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which he found to be disappointing, he tells his audience. The Nebraska Bill, as Thoreau calls it, is about slavery in Nebraska. He is more interested in slavery in Massachusetts. He criticizes the politicization of slavery, arguing that it is a moral issue.

Thoreau is highly critical of the governor of Massachusetts, who he implies is ineffective and next to useless for not enforcing the law based on principle. He has backed the Virginia slave owner Charles Tuttle over the slave Anthony Burns and subjected Boston to martial law during Burns' trial to keep order. Thus, Thoreau argues, "the whole military force of the State is at the service of... Mr. Tuttle." (p. 21) Thoreau points out the irony in celebrating Independence Day so shortly after an innocent citizen has been deprived of his independence by the government and with the assistance of federal troops.

Thoreau moves on to indict the federal government for recognizing only the Constitution as an authority and ignoring a higher, moral authority. "The law will never make men free," Thoreau says (p. 23). Men should be free by nature, and their laws should reflect this.

Thoreau decries the politicization of the slavery issue, and notes that he finds it more prevalent in cities than in the country. Newspapers, which are located in cities, reflect this attitude. Thoreau calls on his audience to not let the opinions of the cities become so widespread that people stop thinking for themselves. Newspapers, he claims, are published only to gain the approval of their readers and do not reflect the truth.

Thoreau praises the attackers of the Boston Courthouse as truly heroic. Caught in the act, they have plead guilty, Thoreau notes, but in fact they are the most innocent of anyone for having the courage to do what is right.

The attackers should serve as an example of innocence, Thoreau argues. Their contempt for the court is a model, as he sees it, of how all citizens should treat the



courts and the government as long as it serves injustice and is led by "unprincipled rulers." (p. 29) They should remove their support.

Thoreau finishes with an appeal to nature. He tells of a recent walk when he picks a pure white lily and enjoys its fragrance. As long as nature continues to revive, he suggests, there is hope that society will one day decide to be governed by justice.



A Plea for Captain John Brown

A Plea for Captain John Brown Summary and Analysis

In October, 1859, the abolitionist John Brown led 21 others in a raid at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, taking several local people hostage and seizing the US arsenal. His intention was to build an army that would free slaves and create an army that would fight to end slavery. Brown was captured and sentenced to death for his actions. While Brown was imprisoned and awaiting execution, Thoreau delivered an address in Concord on the man.

Thoreau's address defends Brown's actions and condemns slavery. He also criticizes the federal government and the government of Massachusetts for supporting slavery, and the political parties and newspapers of the day for acting in their own interests and not in the interest of citizens. Thoreau is particularly critical of the way in which many newspapers characterize Brown's intentions.

Thoreau begins his address with a brief description of Brown, his background as a religious man, and his previous endeavors in Kansas and the surrounding area to keep slavery out of new US territories.

Thoreau objects to the common characterization of Brown as "insane." What many call insanity, he claims, is really a form of bravery that most people cannot imagine themselves ever possessing. Since they cannot see themselves ever acting in such a way, he says, they assume a man who does is insane. He notes that he finds no sympathetic coverage of Brown or his raid in the newspapers of the day.

Thoreau condemns the government of Massachusetts and its citizens for being hypocritical in their condemnation of slavery. While slavery is illegal in Massachusetts, its government still returns fugitive slaves to their owners if they are caught in the state, Thoreau points out. Also, the state supports the federal government, which has condemned Brown for his actions against slavery.

Thoreau defends Brown's opinion that violent force is justified to end slavery, and he praises Brown for his willingness to risk his own life for what he feels is right. It is this quality of Brown's that makes all criticism of him hollow and empty, Thoreau suggests, for very few of his critics have the integrity or commitment to their beliefs as Brown. Finally, Thoreau compares Brown directly with Christ, although Brown is being crucified in part by those who claim to believe in the same thing he does. Thoreau goes so far as to suggest that like Christ, Brown perhaps must be killed, as in death he and his beliefs will become stronger. Thoreau is not pleading to save John Brown's life, as the title of the address first suggests, but is pleading for his fellow citizens to look to Brown as an example.



Walking

Walking Summary and Analysis

In "Walking" Thoreau explains his love of taking long, aimless walks through natural surroundings, something that he does for several hours a day. He describes his walks as liberating, and invites his readers to join him in declaring themselves citizens of "Nature" with a capital N. Thoreau's independent walking serves as a metaphor for an independent way of thinking and of viewing society.

Thoreau begins his essay with an entreaty to his readers to think of themselves as inhabitants of nature rather than of society. He realizes this is a radical statement, he writes, but asks permission to elaborate.

Thoreau enjoys walking without any practical purpose. While he may have no specific destination in mind when he sets out walking, however, his walking is not without meaning. He says that like a camel, a proper walker should "ruminate" as he walks, meaning that he should be thoughtful and studious as he passes through nature. Nature will inform the walker's thoughts, bringing them "air and sunshine." (p. 52) Thoreau calls for a way of thinking that lets our thoughts wander "outside," unrestrained by artificial walls.

At the time he is writing, Thoreau explains, much of the wilderness around the town where he lives is not in private hands and he is able to walk freely without fear of trespassing. He notes that society's idea of "improvement" means destroying nature to make it orderly, like a house yard, and fears the day when there may no longer be any truly wild places to walk.

Thoreau uses the image of the American West to further elaborate his metaphor between walking independently and thinking independently. He speaks about the decision that each walker must make when setting out of which direction to walk in. Men tend to walk to the east, he says, meaning that America has always looked to Europe for learning and guidance. He prefers to walk to the west, meaning the vast wilderness of the American West which is being settled at the time Thoreau is writing. Just as the American people seem to gravitate toward the west and its wildness, Thoreau suggests the natural tendency of human thought is toward independence.

Wildness is the natural state of the world, and humans should strive for a kind of wildness, as well, Thoreau argues. Just as the cultivation of the earth ruins the wilderness, cultivation of the mind as it is commonly meant ruins thought. "I would not have every man nor every part of a man cultivated, any more than I would have every acre of earth cultivated," he writes. (p. 69)

Thoreau concludes his essay with a beautiful description of nature and its eternal beauty. As he watches a sunset, he realizes that this glorious event will go on forever,



unaffected by the actions of humans. In this he sees the proper relationship of humans to nature, reinforcing his philosophy that humans should seek to walk through life unencumbered by the trivial traditions of society and seek true independence.



Life Without Principle

Life Without Principle Summary and Analysis

In "Life Without Principle" Thoreau condemns the pursuit of money as a guiding force in the choice of a man's work. Mankind has become distracted from truly important things by the economic and political aspects of society. These should only be minor parts of a man's life, he argues, not all-consuming purposes.

Thoreau begins the essay by describing how constantly busy society is. Trains run non-stop and everyone seems mostly interested in obtaining more money. However, working only for money is not the best use of a person's time, Thoreau argues. It is demeaning. He proposes that anyone working at a job ask himself if he would not leave that job for another if he were offered more money. If so, then he has subverted the purpose of work. The object of the craftsman, Thoreau argues, should be to perform his craft as well as possible and not simply to make money. A person should choose his work based on what he loves to do and not for money, he claims. Only then can he truly "sustain" himself. Even if a man labors all day, Thoreau argues, if he does it for money and not of his own desire, he is just wasting his time.

Thoreau goes on to condemn those who are either born into money or go looking for quick riches. To be an "heir of fortune is not to be born, but to be still-born," he writes (p. 78.) Prospectors, such as those who rushed to California in the 1850s in search of gold, are no better, Thoreau claims. They leave their native land, which can offer them something of real value if they will only stop chasing riches.

Thoreau next attacks the shallow and superficial interactions between people. Most conversation is only idle gossip, he claims, often only repeated from newspapers. The newspapers encourage this shallow interaction by making much out of small things. He is especially scathing in his condemnation of newspapers. "The newspapers are the ruling power," he writes (p. 90), meaning that all the actions of government are ultimately geared toward how they will appear in the newspapers and be received by the shallow gossipers who have made politics a central part of their lives.

Thoreau implies that a truly principled person will remove himself from these behaviors of society. He will choose an occupation that he does for love and not for money. He will not consume his time worrying about the government or chasing after imagined fortunes. He will not occupy his mind repeating the mindless gossip of the newspapers and will put politics in its place.



Characters

Henry D. Thoreau

Thoreau is a resident of Concord, Massachusetts. He describes himself as working as a surveyor and also as a schoolmaster, but only part time. He spends several hours of each day walking through the wilderness, sometimes alone, sometimes with a companion. He is an ardent abolitionist and is asked on more than one occasion to give addresses at anti-slavery meetings.

At the time the first three essays are published, Thoreau is a rising author beginning to gain some celebrity for his thoughtful celebrations of nature and independent living. As he describes his own position within the community of his hometown, he is often viewed as odd by his fellow citizens for his unusual behavior and way of thinking, but is apparently accepted in his important and useful roles as a surveyor and teacher. He also mentions briefly in "Civil Disobedience" that a group of his neighbors are eager to have him lead them on a hike to gather huckleberries, presumably because he knows the best places to find them from his wide-ranging hikes in the area.

Thoreau considers himself highly-principled, but does not hold to the same principles that others do. He values self-reliance and independent thought over material success, and does not hold much traditional respect for government.

John Brown

The abolitionist who led an armed raid at the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia in 1859 with the intention of arming the slaves of Virginia and leading them into revolt. Brown is trapped inside the arsenal with his followers when the US Marines respond. In the ensuing battle, several men are killed on both sides. Brown is captured and put on trial for murder and treason against the state of Virginia. He is sentenced to be executed.

Brown's cause is taken up by some northern abolitionists who regard him as a hero willing to take action against the evil of slavery. Others feel his methods go too far. Thoreau is among those who praise Brown as a Christ-like figure who is willing to die in the service of his cause.

In "A Plea for Captain John Brown," Thoreau describes Brown as being cool and determined, even in the face of almost certain death. He uses the military title of "Captain" out of respect for Brown, even though Brown does not belong to the US military. At the time of Thoreau's address, Brown has not yet been sentenced or executed, but Thoreau assumes that this will be the eventual outcome. Thoreau does not call for his life to be spared, however. In fact he argues that by putting Brown to death, the state of Virginia will be helping the anti-slavery cause more than Brown could



have had he lived. This prediction of Thoreau's turns out to be true, as the Civil War begins about eighteen months after Brown's execution.

Edward Greely Loring

US Slave Commissioner at the time Thoreau is writing "Slavery in Massachusetts." It is Loring's decision to return the fugitive slave Anthony Burns to his owner in Virginia that prompts Thoreau's address.

William Paley

Author of "Duty of Submission to Civil Government" from which Thoreau quotes a passage in "Civil Disobedience."

Thomas Simms

A fugitive slave that was returned to his owner by Massachusetts in 1851. Thoreau refers to Simms in "Slavery in Massachusetts."

Anthony Burns

Another fugitive slave turned over by the government of Massachusetts to his former Virginia owner. It is Burns that the attackers on the Boston Courthouse are trying to free, as described by Thoreau in "Slavery in Massachusetts."

Governor Wise

Governor of Virginia at the time of John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry, Virginia. Thoreau quotes Wise's description of Brown in "A Plea for Captain John Brown."

Colonel Washington

A relative of George Washington who led the force that captured John Brown and his raiders at Harper's Ferry. Thoreau quotes Colonel Washington's impressions of Brown in the essay "A Plea for Captain John Brown."

Abolitionists

Those opposed to slavery and advocating the abolition of slavery throughout the United States. Thoreau is himself an abolitionist, but sometimes differs with their priorities, as he suggests in the opening of "Slavery in Massachusetts."



William Walker

A southern man who attempted to spread slavery and southern influence into Central America by establishing colonies of white, English-speaking people sympathetic to the South. Thoreau disagrees with Walker's beliefs, but admires his willingness to take up arms for them, comparing him to John Brown in "A Plea for Captain John Brown."

Thoreau's Fellow Prisoner

The man with whom Thoreau shares a cell when he spends the night in the jail in Concord for not paying a poll tax. The unnamed prisoner quickly acquaints Thoreau with the customs of the inmates.

Peter the Hermit

A priest who led people on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Thoreau uses the metaphor of a crusade or pilgrimage in his essay "Walking."

Charles Suttle

The owner of the slave Anthony Burns. Thoreau refers to Suttle in "Slavery in Massachusetts."

Stephen Douglas

The Democratic senator who supported the controversial Kansas-Nebraska Act granting popular sovereignty to settlers in the new territories of the US. Thoreau refers to Douglass at the end of the essay "Slavery in Massachusetts."



Objects/Places

Massachusetts

The state where Thoreau is a resident. He is very critical of the state government and the governor in particular for its tacit support of slavery even though slavery is outlawed within the state. Thoreau also refers to Massachusetts by its formal name, the Commonwealth.

Framingham

The Massachusetts town which is the location of Thoreau's fiery anti-slavery address "Slavery in Massachusetts" that he delivers at an Independence Day meeting.

Concord

The Massachusetts town where Thoreau lives and works as a surveyor and schoolmaster.

Old Marlborough Road

An abandoned road near Thoreau's home town on which he enjoys walking. He includes a poetic ode to the road in the essay "Walking."

Kansas and Nebraska

Two new territories created by the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854. Under the act, the settlers of these territories were allowed to determine for themselves if slavery would be allowed within the territories or not. This controversial aspect of the act was opposed by anti-slavery activists like Thoreau. He refers to the act in the address "Slavery in Massachusetts."

Rhine River

One of the great rivers of Europe. In the essay "Walking" Thoreau refers to the river as a metaphor for the rich history of Europe and asserts that the Mississippi River will one day serve as a similar symbol for the United States.



Boston Courthouse

The scene of a violent encounter between state officials and anti-slavery protesters who attempted to free a fugitive slave being held there.

Concord Bridge, Lexington Common, Bunker Hill

Scenes of well-known battles during the Revolutionary War. Thoreau refers to them in the essay "A Plea for Captain John Brown."

Mexican War

The war between the United States and Mexico in the late-1840s over the possession of Texas. Thoreau opposes the war, and it is partly in protest of it that he refuses to pay his poll tax, as he describes in "Civil Disobedience."

Harper's Ferry

The site of a federal arsenal which was raided by John Brown and his party of anti-slavery followers. Brown was captured and eventually sentenced to death.

Missouri Compromise

An act of Congress in 1820 that prohibited slavery in some parts of US territory but allowed it in others.

Nebraska Bill

The Kansas-Nebraska Act, which repealed the Missouri Compromise and allowed the settlers in US territories to decide the question of slavery.

Themes

The Abolition of Slavery

Three of the five essays in the collection "Civil Disobedience and other Essays" concern the subject of slavery. Thoreau is an ardent opponent of slavery and a supporter of the anti-slavery movement in Massachusetts.

While slavery is illegal in Massachusetts, it is still legal throughout the South, and at the time of Thoreau's writing the national government is considering whether slavery should be expanded into the newly formed territories of the US. Thoreau is impatient with the political process and calls for more immediate measures.

Thoreau's impatience stems from two sources. First, he argues there is a higher justice that is ignored by politicians and legislators. Slavery is a moral wrong, he claims, which should supersede any consideration based on law. It is pointless to argue whether slavery is "constitutional," he argues, because even the Constitution is subject to this higher moral law.

Second, Thoreau feels that the government is an intermediary that separates citizens from the immoral actions that are performed with their consent. Thoreau implies that supporting a government that in turn supports slavery, or at least does not act immediately to abolish it, is the same as supporting slavery as an individual. Thoreau uses this logic to call for the withdrawal of support for the state government of Massachusetts for allowing escaped slaves to be turned back over to their owners. He himself refuses to pay a poll tax for this reason and is jailed overnight for it.

Thoreau goes so far as to commend the attempts to use violence against slavery. In "Slavery in Massachusetts" he praises as heroes the party that tries to free by force a fugitive slave from the Boston Courthouse who is about to be returned to his former owner. The entire essay "A Plea for Captain John Brown" is a eulogy in defense of John Brown's violent raid on the arsenal at Harper's Ferry in an attempt to start an armed slave uprising.

Thoreau presents the theme of slavery in a figurative way, as well, using it as a contrast to the kind of truly principled and independent life he tries to live.

Subverting Common Convention

Throughout Thoreau's essays he uses the rhetorical strategy of taking commonly accepted ideas and reversing them to accentuate a certain point. More than just a rhetorical device, however, this technique underscores Thoreau's philosophy that calls for a person not to be restrained by common thought or social convention, but to take a critical look at his actions and the actions of others and decide for himself how to live.



Beginning in the choice of the titles of his essays, Thoreau presents his audience with reversals. "Civil Disobedience" seems to be drawn from the essay by William Paley entitled "Duty of Submission to Civil Government," which Thoreau mentions in his own essay. "Slavery in Massachusetts" is a provocative title because of course Massachusetts is a "free" state that does not allow slavery. Thoreau goes on to show how even though there is no slavery within the state, there may as well be as long as its citizens support the government which in turn supports slavery. "A Plea for Captain John Brown" is also an interesting twist, for it is not a plea to save the condemned man's life. In fact, Thoreau concludes that by dying for his cause Brown will have done more for it than he could while alive. It is a plea to the rest of the world to take Brown as an example.

This kind of reversal can be found throughout Thoreau's essays, as well. In "Civil Disobedience" he describes looking out from his jail cell and thinking that it is the rest of society that has been imprisoned by their lack of independent thought, while his mind is completely free even while his body is restrained. In "Slavery in Massachusetts" he notes that the nation is celebrating Independence Day at a time when nobody is truly independent. "Walking" is a salute to nature that elevates the most dismal swamp above the most neatly tended yards of his village and calls the blacksmith who stays at work all day a "vagrant." In "Life Without Principle" Thoreau advances the idea that even the hardest-working person is simply wasting his time if he does not labor out of love for his work.

Thoreau uses this technique to cement his position as an outside observer of his own society who is able to see things as they truly are. He invites his readers to join him in turning everything they think they know upside down and reexamining their society from a new vantage point.

The Role of a Citizen in a Democratic Society

Throughout Thoreau's essays runs a thread that is critical of American society and American democracy. However Thoreau does not go so far as to advocate for the complete destruction of society or the government, but instead calls for a better government based on justice and a new perspective on society that will allow citizens to truly achieve the freedom promised by democracy.

The means by which Thoreau imagines this change will take place are radical. First, he proposes that it is a person's duty to withdraw his support of a government that supports immoral causes. One of the supposedly basic tenets of American democracy is the majority rule, Thoreau states, but majority rule does not guarantee justice. There is a higher moral law that is still in effect even if the majority of one group vote against it, he argues. It is the duty of the citizen of a democracy to obey this higher law. When the laws of the State oppose this higher law, it is the duty of the citizen of a democracy to disobey the State.

Thoreau himself chooses a peaceful way to disobey. In protest of the government's support of slavery and the Mexican war, Thoreau refuses to pay poll tax and is jailed overnight. However Thoreau also advocates violence as a means of disobedience. He praises John Brown's attack at Harper's Ferry in the cause of the abolition of slavery and calls heroes the attackers of the Boston Courthouse who tried to free a fugitive slave.

Just as Thoreau calls for Americans to resist the government when it becomes morally corrupt, he asks them to resist the conventions of society that corrupt their ability to think and act independently. He condemns as idle gossipers those who mindlessly repeat what they read in the newspapers. He calls working indoors all day a kind of vagrancy that prevents ones mind from truly being free. As the citizen of a democracy should still obey a higher moral law, Thoreau believes that nature supersedes society, and that the proper role of a member of society is to act as an inhabitant of nature first and a member of society second.

Style

Perspective

In both subject and point of view, Thoreau casts himself as outside society. His essays and addresses criticize what he feels is mindless conformity among his fellow citizens and he is often entreating them to join him by removing themselves from the social conventions that are inhibiting them.

Thoreau removes himself from political society when he refuses to pay his poll tax, as he describes in "Civil Disobedience." There is a higher justice that the present government does not recognize, Thoreau argues, and when this happens it is a citizen's moral duty to remove himself from the governed, he claims. He describes the strange looks he receives from his neighbors after he is released from jail for not paying his tax, which accentuates his sometime outsider status even in his own small community.

Thoreau is often critical of the newspapers of his day and critical of their readers who have given up all independent thought in favor of merely repeating what they have read in the papers. Thoreau encourages his readers to break away from this shallow gossip and to develop an outsider's viewpoint on issues that is informed by independent reflection.

In "Walking," Thoreau describes his own life as a literal "outsider," spending four or more hours a day wandering through the wilderness around his home. This he contrasts with others who spend all day working inside, who remain unaware of the beauty of nature.

As an observer of his own society, Thoreau seeks to inform his readers of aspects of their own lives they may not be aware of, or may not see in the same light as someone looking from outside. Thoreau uses this perspective to make his argument for change more persuasive.

Tone

The tone of Thoreau's essays and addresses is of a person who wants to persuade and motivate his audience. He frequently strikes an indignant stance which sometimes rises to an angry tone on issues he seems passionate about, such as the abolition of slavery.

Many of Thoreau's written essays are originally oral addresses, and his writing is personal in tone. He addresses his listeners or readers directly, asking rhetorical questions of them and calling on their own experiences to make his persuasive points.

On the subject of slavery, which he addresses in "Civil Disobedience," "Slavery in Massachusetts," and "A Plea for Captain John Brown," Thoreau's tone sometimes becomes quite heated. He views slavery as a grave injustice and is scathing in his



criticism of the government and his fellow citizens in not condemning it forcefully enough. Even when he is addressing a sympathetic audience, such as in "Slavery in Massachusetts" which is originally given at an anti-slavery meeting, Thoreau is somewhat critical of his fellow abolitionists for politicizing the issue and losing sight of the higher goal.

It is this higher goal of independent thought and action that Thoreau tries to lead his audience toward through his use of a personal, persuasive and sometimes agitated tone.

Structure

"Civil Disobedience and Other Essays" contains five of Thoreau's best-known essays and addresses. After a short introduction, each essay is presented as a complete chapter. The essays included are "Civil Disobedience," "Slavery in Massachusetts," "A Plea for Captain John Brown," "Walking," and "Life Without Principle."

The essays are presented in chronological order, with the earliest from 1849 and the latest from 1863. The first three, which precede the Civil War, are largely over the subject of slavery in the United States and Thoreau's home state of Massachusetts' complicity in supporting it. The final two essays in the collection are more general in scope and outline Thoreau's philosophy of living a self-reliant, independent life.

Within each essay, the structure is that of a persuasive address. Thoreau begins each essay by addressing his audience directly and presenting the subject of the piece. He frequently makes reference to actual events both public and in his own life, and structures his essays around these events. He concludes his essays with a summary and a call for his audience to join him in his independent life course.



Quotes

"I heartily accept the motto - 'That government is best which governs least;' and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe, - 'That government is best which governs not at all;' and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have." Civil Disobedience, p. 1

"I do not hesitate to say, that those who call themselves abolitionists should at once effectually withdraw their support, both in person and property, from the government of Massachusetts, and not wait till they constitute a majority of one, before they suffer the right to prevail through them." Civil Disobedience, p. 8

"The authority of government, even such as I am willing to submit to, - for I will cheerfully obey those who know and can do better than I, and in many things even those who neither know nor can do so well, - is still an impure one: to be strictly just, it must have the sanction and consent of the governed. It can have no pure right over my person and property but what I concede to it." Civil Disobedience, p. 18

"They who have been bred in the school of politics fail now and always to face the fact. Their measures are half measures and make-shifts, merely. They put off the day of settlement indefinitely, and meanwhile, the debt accumulates." Slavery in Massachusetts, p. 19

"The law will never make men free; it is men who have got to make the law free. They are the lovers of law and order, who observe the law when the government breaks it." Slavery in Massachusetts, p. 23

"I would remind my countrymen, that they are to be men first, and Americans only at a late and convenient hour. No matter how valuable law may be to protect your property, even to keep soul and body together, if it do not keep you and humanity together." Slavery in Massachusetts, p. 26

"A man of rare common sense and directness of speech, as of action; a transcendentalist above all, a man of ideas and principles, - that was what distinguished him. Not yielding to a whim or transient impulse, but carrying out the purpose of a life." A Plea for Captain John Brown, p. 33

"The slave-ship is on her way, crowded with its dying victims; new cargoes are being added in mid ocean; a small crew of slaveholders, countenanced by a large body of passengers, is smothering four millions under the hatches, and yet the politician asserts that the only proper way by which deliverance is to be obtained, is by 'the quiet diffusion of the sentiments of humanity,' without and 'outbreak.'" A Plea for Captain John Brown, p. 39



"I see now that it was necessary that the bravest and humanest man in all the country should be hung. Perhaps he saw it himself. I almost fear that I may yet hear of his deliverance, doubting if a prolonged life, if any life, can do as much good as his death." A Plea for Captain John Brown, p. 48

"I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil, - to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society." Walking, p. 49

"I believe in the forest and in the meadows, and in the night in which the corn grows. We require an infusion of hemlock-spruce or arbor-vitae in our tea." Walking, p. 61

"The weapons with which we have gained our most important victories, which should be handed down as heirlooms from father to son, are not the sword and the lance, but the bush-whack, the turf-cutter, the spade, and the bog-hoe, rusted with the blood of many a meadow, and begrimed with the dust of many a hard-fought field." Walking, p. 64

"The ways by which you may get money almost without exception lead downward. To have done anything by which you earned money merely is to have been truly idle or worse." Life Without Principle, p. 77

"The gold-digger in the ravines of the mountains is as much a gambler as his fellow in the saloons of San Francisco. What difference does it make, whether you shake dirt or shake dice?" Life Without Principle, p. 80

"Just so hollow and ineffectual, for the most part, is our ordinary conversation. Surface meets surface. When our life ceases to be inward and private, conversation degenerates into mere gossip. We rarely meet a man who can tell us any news which he has not read in a newspaper, or been told by his neighbor; and, for the most part, the only difference between us and our fellow is, that he has seen the newspaper, or been out to tea, and we have not." Life Without Principle, p. 84

Topics for Discussion

What role does Thoreau think the press takes in society. What role does he think it should take?

Does Thoreau support violence as a means of protest against the government?

What would Thoreau say are the responsibilities of a citizen of a democracy?

How does Thoreau use metaphor and imagery to support his arguments?

How is Thoreau's view of nature connected to his views on civil disobedience?

What principles does Thoreau advocate in "Life Without Principle?"

How does Thoreau feel about the westward expansion of the US?