

## ANALYSIS

"Civil Disobedience" (1849)

Henry David Thoreau

(1917-1862)

"Civil Disobedience" became a world classic with an inspirational moral argument and strategy that influenced Gandhi, Tolstoy, Martin Luther King, Jr. and many others. Thoreau's most influential point: "A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority; it is not even a minority then; but it is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight." After the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. the civil rights movements that began in the 1960s used this strategy to replace the metaphor of America as a "melting pot" with identity politics, dividing Americans into groups.

As indicated at the end of his opening paragraph, Thoreau was provoked to write this essay by the Mexican War, which he saw as an effort to extend slavery. Here in 1849 he advocates passive resistance, but 10 years later he celebrated violence against the government over slavery, proclaiming John Brown a hero for his attack at Harper's Ferry. In arguing for the supremacy of conscience over civil law he was preceded in American cultural history by Anne Hutchinson (1591-1643). The fictional characters Natty Bumppo and Huck Finn also exemplify the view of Thoreau.

Many have claimed that Thoreau was an anarchist. To the contrary, he opens his essay by declaring that although no government at all would be ideal, men are not yet prepared for that. In paragraph 3 he adds, "I ask for, not at once no government but at once a better government." Many have claimed that Thoreau opposed the free enterprise system and technology. To the contrary, paragraph 2 gives all credit for all accomplishments in America to "the character inherent in the American people" and their "trade and commerce." Government accomplishes nothing, it just gets in the way of free enterprise and puts "obstructions on the railroads."

In paragraph 4 he poses a utopian question: "Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience?" This argues against democracy and the judicial system in favor of, in effect as of today, allowing over 250 million individuals--including hundreds of thousands of psychopaths--to follow their "consciences" or impulses, disregarding laws and effects on other people. Thoreau's extreme Romanticism disposes him to advocate the absolute sovereignty and freedom of the individual. But if "any man more right than his neighbors constitutes a majority of one," is such a man obligated by his "conscience" to impose his will by violence like John Brown?

Terrorists and tyrants agree with Thoreau. He bases his argument on a Romantic trust in the basic goodness of human Nature and the universality of "conscience," then he contradicts himself in paragraph 10: "There are nine hundred and ninety-nine patrons of virtue to one virtuous man." If this is true, conscience as an alternative to laws is 99% unreliable. Thoreau's idealistic argument does not accord with what even he knew to be human nature: "Reform keeps many scores of newspapers in its service, but not one man." Furthermore, Twain shows us through Huck Finn that "conscience" is often social conditioning. What most whites like Miss Watson considered their "consciences" allowed them to own slaves.

In paragraph 5 Thoreau introduces his dominant metaphor--the machine. The dominant machine is the State, a word used countless times in the essay: "The mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies." The machine of the State that turns men into machines is opposed to Nature and the organic: "If a plant cannot live according to its nature, it dies; and so a man" (paragraph 27). This polarity of mechanism versus organism is one of the major themes in the Romantic Movement, as well exemplified in "The Artist of the Beautiful" by Hawthorne. Thoreau's essay is Romantic also in its rebellious declamatory tone, dramatization of the Self, expressive style and organic form: intuitive, emotive, non-linear, digressive and redundant.

In paragraph 6, Thoreau declares his independence from the government in protest to slavery. In 7 he calls upon "honest men to rebel and revolutionize." In 8 he demands that the American people end slavery and the Mexican War even if it destroys the Union. Having no property or family to lose himself, "It costs me less in every sense to incur the penalty of disobedience to the State than it would to obey." Unlike him, "the freest of my neighbors...cannot spare the protection of existing government, and they dread the consequences to their property and families of disobedience to it." Thoreau condemns them nonetheless.

In paragraph 16 he denounces all governments, democracies as well as tyrannies, as equally corrupt. His refusal to recognize the American government extends to his version of history: "Why does it [government] always crucify Christ, and excommunicate Copernicus and Luther, and pronounce Washington and Franklin rebels?" Washington and Franklin were rebels to our enemies the British, who had established slavery in this country. They helped create our government, which was soon to fight the Civil War to end slavery. America is not the Catholic Church and did not crucify Christ. Thoreau is oblivious to the contributions of Washington, Franklin, Jefferson, Adams, Madison and the others: "No man with a genius for legislation has appeared in America." In paragraph 39 he contradicts himself again by declaring that somehow "the Constitution, with all its faults, is very good."

Paragraph 18 contains the crux of the essay: The government that Lincoln was to define as "of the people, by the people, and for the people," is reduced by Thoreau to a machine that should be stopped at once, regardless of the effects upon his neighbors: If a law "is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine." Stop not merely the enforcement of *any* law perceived to be unjust--stop the *entire* government--by *any* means, if it *feels* good. This view has been immensely popular since the 1960s. Not so popular since the Holocaust: "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison."

In paragraph 26, when some neighbor pays his tax and he is released from jail, Thoreau "felt as if I alone of all my townsmen had paid my tax." He expresses contempt for his neighbors and in the next paragraph he denies any responsibility whatsoever toward others. His "conscience" is unmoved by human suffering except of slaves. His puritanical indictment is finally interrupted with a humorous anecdote about verses on the wall of his cell written by some young men who got caught trying to escape and "avenged themselves by singing them." As soon as he gets out of jail he resumes his indignant preaching against his neighbors, resenting them even more than before, seeing them as prejudiced like "Chinamen and Malays are." His neighbors, including whoever paid his tax, are all cowardly and immoral for having a jail. Yet in paragraph 39 he claims that, "I do not wish to...set myself up as better than my neighbors."

As a literary composition, Thoreau's famous essay is too long, rambling, weakened by redundancy, poorly organized and self-contradictory. For example, it would have been more effective if it began with the account of his experience in jail, climaxed by the humanizing anecdote, then proceeded with a rationally consistent argument that omitted the most questionable and insulting generalizations--especially the hypocrisy and racism--which subvert his authority as a moralist. It goes to show that the spirit of his message transcends faults, like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Contrast the political prose of Thomas Paine, Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson, who are Neoclassical stylists.

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