

Henry David Thoreau

QUICK FACTS

NAME

Henry David Thoreau

OCCUPATION

Poet, Journalist

BIRTH DATE

July 12, 1817

DEATH DATE

May 6, 1862

EDUCATION

Concord Academy, Harvard University

PLACE OF BIRTH

Concord, Massachusetts

PLACE OF DEATH

Concord, Massachusetts

American essayist, poet, and practical philosopher, Henry David Thoreau was a New England Transcendentalist and author of the book *Walden*.

Henry David Thoreau was born on July 12, 1817, in Concord, Massachusetts. He began writing nature poetry in the 1840s, with poet Ralph Waldo Emerson as a mentor and friend. In 1845 he began his famous two-year stay on Walden Pond, which he wrote about in his master work, *Walden*. He also became known for his beliefs in Transcendentalism and civil disobedience, and was a dedicated abolitionist.

One of America's most famous writers, Henry David Thoreau is remembered for his philosophical and naturalist writings. He was born and raised in Concord, Massachusetts, along with his older siblings John and Helen and younger sister Sophia. His father operated a local pencil factory, and his mother rented out parts of the family's home to boarders.

A bright student, Thoreau eventually went to Harvard College (now Harvard University). There he studied Greek and Latin as well as German. According to

some reports, Thoreau had to take a break from his schooling for a time because of illness. He graduated from college in 1837 and struggled with what to do next. At the time, an educated man like Thoreau might pursue a career in law or medicine or in the church. Other college graduates went into education, a path he briefly followed. With his brother John, he set up a school in 1838. The venture collapsed a few years later after John became ill. Thoreau then went to work for his father for a time.

After college, Thoreau befriended writer and fellow Concord resident Ralph Waldo Emerson. Through Emerson, he became exposed to Transcendentalism, a school of thought that emphasized the importance of empirical thinking and of spiritual matters over the physical world. It encouraged scientific inquiry and observation. Thoreau came to know many of the movement's leading figures, including Bronson Alcott and Margaret Fuller.

Emerson acted as a mentor to Thoreau and supported him in many ways. For a time, Thoreau lived with Emerson as a caretaker for his home. Emerson also used his influence to promote Thoreau's literary efforts. Some of Thoreau's first works were published in *The Dial*, a Transcendentalist magazine. And Emerson gave Thoreau access to the lands that would inspire one of his greatest works.

Walden Pond

In 1845, Thoreau built a small home for himself on Walden Pond, on property owned by Emerson. He spent more than two years there. Seeking a simpler type of life, Thoreau flipped the standard routine of the times. He experimented with working as little as possible rather than engage in the pattern of six days on with one day off. Sometimes Thoreau worked as a land surveyor or in the pencil factory. He felt that this new approach helped him avoid the misery he saw around him. "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation," Thoreau once wrote.

His schedule gave him plenty of time to devote to his philosophical and literary interests. Thoreau worked on *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849). The book drew from a boating trip he took with his brother John in 1839. Thoreau eventually started writing about his Walden Pond experiment as well. Many were curious about his revolutionary lifestyle, and this interest provided the creative spark for a collection of essays. Published in 1854, *Walden*;

or, *Life in the Woods* espoused living a life close to nature. The book was a modest success, but it wasn't until much later that the book reached a larger audience. Over the years, *Walden* has inspired and informed the work of naturalists, environmentalists and writers.

While living at Walden Pond, Thoreau also had an encounter with the law. He spent a night in jail after refusing to pay a poll tax. This experience led him to write one of his best-known and most influential essays, "Civil Disobedience" (also known as "Resistance to Civil Government"). Thoreau held deeply felt political views, opposing slavery and the Mexican-American War. He made a strong case for acting on one's individual conscience and not blindly following laws and government policy. "The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right," he wrote.

Since its publication in 1849, "Civil Disobedience" has inspired many leaders of protest movements around the world. This non-violent approach to political and social resistance has influenced American civil rights movement activist Martin Luther King Jr. and Mohandas Gandhi, who helped India win independence from Great Britain, among many others.

Later Years

After leaving Walden Pond, Thoreau spent some time looking after Emerson's house while he was on tour in England. Still fascinated with nature, Thoreau wrote down his observations on plant and wildlife in his native Concord and on his journeys. He visited the woods of Maine and the shoreline of Cape Cod several times.

Thoreau also remained a devoted abolitionist until the end of his life. To support his cause, he wrote several works, including the 1854 essay "Slavery in Massachusetts." Thoreau also took a brave stand for Captain John Brown, a radical abolitionist who led an uprising against slavery in Virginia. He and his supporters raided a federal arsenal in Harpers Ferry to arm themselves in October 1859, but their plan was thwarted. An injured Brown was later convicted of treason and put to death for his crime. Thoreau rose to defend him with the speech "A Plea for Capt. John Brown," calling him "an angel of light" and "the bravest and humanest man in all the country."

In his later years, Thoreau battled an illness that had plagued him for decades. He had tuberculosis, which he had contracted decades earlier. To restore his health, Thoreau went to Minnesota in 1861, but the trip didn't improve his condition. He finally succumbed to the disease on May 6, 1862. Thoreau was heralded as "an original thinker" and "a man of simple tastes, hardy habits, and of preternatural powers of observation" in some of his obituaries.

While other writers from his time have faded into obscurity, Thoreau has endured because so much of what he wrote about is still relevant today. His writings on government were revolutionary, with some calling him an early anarchist. Thoreau's studies of nature were equally radical in their own way, earning him the moniker of "father of environmentalism." And his major work, *Walden*, has offered up an interesting antidote to living in the modern rat race.

Civil Disobedience Summary and Analysis of Section I

Section I: Government and Democracy

Summary

Thoreau opens his essay with the motto "That government is best which governs least." His distrust of government stems from the tendency of the latter to be "perverted and abused" before the people can actually express their will through it. A case in point is the Mexican war (which would extend slavery into new US territories), orchestrated by a small élite of individuals who have manipulated government to their advantage against popular will. Government inherently lends itself to oppressive and corrupt uses since it enables a few men to impose their will on the majority and to profit economically from their own position of authority. Democracy is a tradition, and with each succeeding generation, it drifts from its original ideals of freedom and becomes increasingly burdensome and compromised. Thoreau views government as a fundamental hindrance to the people that it purports to represent. Far from furthering any creative enterprise, it has only stifled human accomplishment. Thoreau cites as a prime example the regulation of trade and commerce, and its negative effect on the forces of the free market.

Thoreau objects to the notion of majority rule on which democracy is theoretically founded, noting that the views of the majority do not always coincide with the morally right one. A man has an obligation to act according to the dictates of his conscience, even if the latter goes against majority opinion, the presiding

leadership, or the laws of the society. Thoreau evokes the figure of soldiers marching to their deaths in the cause of a conflict that they perceive as unjust, and asks if they retain their humanity by deferring their fate to legislators. Once a man resigns himself to the decisions of others, he becomes a machine, his body an instrument. Many men consider service to their country to be an automatic virtue, but any act of service must always be conjoined with the exercise of conscience. In cases where the government supports unjust or immoral laws, Thoreau's notion of service to one's country paradoxically takes the form of resistance against it. Resistance is the highest form of patriotism because it demonstrates a desire not to subvert government but to build a better one in the long term. Along these lines, Thoreau does not advocate a wholesale rejection of government, but resistance to those specific features deemed to be unjust or immoral. Later in the essay, he will qualify his position by refusing to pay a poll tax (used to fund the Mexican war), but readily pays taxes for education and road maintenance.

Analysis

The opening paragraph expresses Thoreau's seemingly libertarian political sentiments< the idea that the most ideal form of government is one which exercises the least power and control over its citizens. Thoreau pushes this line of thinking to its logical limit by envisioning a society in which government is eliminated altogether because men have the capacity to be self-regulating and independent. The implied dissolution of the State is as much an expression of Thoreau's idealism< a utopic vision that cannot be realistically achieved< as it is the theoretical endpoint of the way societies develop and evolve.

There is an inherent tension between Thoreau's desire to limit the power of the State and the guarantee of freedom and equality that the State should provide to all of its citizens in the context of abolishing slavery. Whereas this theoretical tension remains largely unresolved in the essay, it is important to keep in mind from a purely historical standpoint that Thoreau is writing [Civil Disobedience](#) some twenty years before passage of the Fourteenth Amendment (guaranteeing equal protection and due process under the law), which substantially increased the role of the federal government in enforcing constitutional rights and freedoms. Ultimately, Thoreau's position cannot be accurately characterized as anti-government, since he is indeed willing to support some forms of social welfare with his tax dollars. His resistance to civil government springs not from some anarchic impulse or ideologically motivated hatred of the State, but from a more pragmatic understanding of how tax dollars enable the continuation of oppressive government policies.

Thoreau's frequent italicizing of pronouns underscores, on the level of language, some of the main themes in *Civil Disobedience*, notably that of agency. Referring to government, Thoreau writes in the second paragraph: "It does not keep the country free. It does not settle the West. It does not educate." The colloquial use of pronouns in this way conflates the distinction[<] central to Thoreau's thought[<] between the individual and the State. A common tendency is to attribute the positive virtues and actions of individuals to an impersonal collectivity known as the State. To use "it" as the subject of the sentence confers an agency to the government that it does not intrinsically have. For Thoreau, government is an inanimate entity that draws its vitality and authority only from the people it represents.