

CLOSE READING EXERCISE: “Civil Disobedience” by Henry David Thoreau

Published in 1849 in the *Aesthetic Papers* as “Resistance to Civil Government.” Re-published as “Civil Disobedience” in *Yankee in Canada, with Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers* in 1866 (after Thoreau’s death).



[Henry David Thoreau, head-and-shoulders portrait, facing slightly right](#) [1879]. *Note:* This photograph was copyrighted, not taken, in 1879, as Thoreau died in 1862.

BACKGROUND

Henry David Thoreau is remembered as one of the most famous American writers of the [Transcendentalist](#) movement, which glorified nature, self-reliance, and intuition. His most well-known work, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, based on his “[experiment](#)” of living a simplified lifestyle in a small house in the woods on [Walden Pond](#) for two years in the mid-1850s, is famous for its philosophical, poetic, and ecological merit and its critique of American society during the Industrial Revolution.

While Thoreau was at Walden Pond, he was arrested for not paying his poll taxes. He stated that he did not pay it on purpose out of protest against the Mexican American War, which was fought from 1846 to 1848, as well as against slavery. Thoreau was [vehemently abolitionist](#), and later in life would [support the actions](#) of John Brown on the eve of the Civil War. He spent only one night in jail, though, since a relative bailed him out (apparently against his wishes). After his return to Concord, Massachusetts, Thoreau expanded his protest in the famous essay “[Civil Disobedience](#),” a name given to this work in an edition released after his death. This essay later inspired such leaders as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., in their conceptions of non-violence as a strategy of protest against unjust government policies.

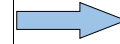
NOTE ON THE TEXT

The same excerpt from “Civil Disobedience” can be found on p. 2 and p. 3, on the left-hand side. On p. 2, the right-hand notes are to paraphrase/explain the text. On p. 3, the right-hand notes are to provide context for better understanding.

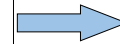
RESOURCES

- ⇒ [Introductory video](#) (watch from 11 min 26 sec to 14 min 17 sec)
- ⇒ For 4th grade: [Henry David Thoreau from America’s Story](#)
- ⇒ For 8th grade: [Henry David Thoreau from Today in History](#)
- ⇒ For 4th & 8th grades: [Transcendentalism from History.com](#)
- ⇒ For teachers: [additional links and context](#) and [full text with contextual footnotes](#)

Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison. The proper place today, the only place which Massachusetts has provided for her freer and less desponding spirits, is in her prisons, to be put out and locked out of the State by her own act, as they have already put themselves out by their principles. It is there that the fugitive slave, and the Mexican prisoner on parole, and the Indian come to plead the wrongs of his race should find them; on that separate, but more free and honorable, ground, where the State places those who are not with her, but against her—the only house in a slave State in which a free man can abide with honor. If any think that their influence would be lost there, and their voices no longer afflict the ear of the State, that they would not be as an enemy within its walls, they do not know by how much truth is stronger than error, nor how much more eloquently and effectively he can combat injustice who has experienced a little in his own person. Cast your whole vote, not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence. 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. If the alternative is to keep all just men in prison, or give up war and slavery, the State will not hesitate which to choose. If a thousand men were not to pay their tax-bills this year, that would not be a violent and bloody measure, as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to commit violence and shed innocent blood. This is, in fact, the definition of a peaceable revolution, if any such is possible. If the tax-gatherer, or any other public officer, asks me, as one has done, “But what shall I do?” my answer is, “If you really wish to do anything, resign your office.” When the subject has refused allegiance, and the officer has resigned his office, then the revolution is accomplished. But even suppose blood should flow. Is there not a sort of blood shed when the conscience is wounded? Through this wound a man’s real manhood and immortality flow out, and he bleeds to an everlasting death. I see this blood flowing now.



If the government is imprisoning people for reasons that are morally wrong, then it stands to reason that the “true place” for morally right people is prison. This means there is a higher authority determining what is “right” and “wrong” than the government and laws.



He says prison is the “proper” and “only” place for people who put their principles above the law of the State. To be free from prison is to live according to the State and its unjust laws. So, unless you’re in prison, you’re contributing to the problem.



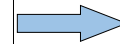
Prison is “the only house in a slave State” in which free men can live according to their principles. To be against slavery but to live in a nation that condones slavery is a hard place for a person of principle to live according to their conscience.



Here Thoreau insists that people can speak out better against injustice when they have stood up against it and been imprisoned for their actions. This is probably to encourage the vast majority of people who think it would be worse for themselves and for the cause of truth if they went to jail.



A minority that conforms to the majority has lost its ability to stand out. Only when it goes against the majority can it have the most influence to change society.



So, if people refused to pay their taxes, thus breaking the law, it would still be a better thing than if they contributed their tax money to a government that was using that money to “commit violence.”



This is like when people say they’re just “doing their jobs” or “following orders,” who don’t consider how their jobs/orders violate their own sense of right and wrong. Thoreau believes losing your job is less important than losing your conscience.



Here, Thoreau is saying that wounds to your conscience are just as bad as physical wounds received by people who are fighting a revolution. It is just as life-threatening to have your “manhood and immortality” bleed out as it is real blood. How can the conscience be “immortal” in the first place?

Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison. The proper place today, the only place which Massachusetts has provided for her freer and less desponding spirits, is in her prisons, to be put out and locked out of the State by her own act, as they have already put themselves out by their principles. It is there that the fugitive slave, and the Mexican prisoner on parole, and the Indian come to plead the wrongs of his race should find them; on that separate, but more free and honorable, ground, where the State places those who are not with her, but against her—the only house in a slave State in which a free man can abide with honor. If any think that their influence would be lost there, and their voices no longer afflict the ear of the State, that they would not be as an enemy within its walls, they do not know by how much truth is stronger than error, nor how much more eloquently and effectively he can combat injustice who has experienced a little in his own person. Cast your whole vote, not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence. 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. If the alternative is to keep all just men in prison, or give up war and slavery, the State will not hesitate which to choose. If a thousand men were not to pay their tax-bills this year, that would not be a violent and bloody measure, as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to commit violence and shed innocent blood. This is, in fact, the definition of a peaceable revolution, if any such is possible. If the tax-gatherer, or any other public officer, asks me, as one has done, “But what shall I do?” my answer is, “If you really wish to do anything, resign your office.” When the subject has refused allegiance, and the officer has resigned his office, then the revolution is accomplished. But even suppose blood should flow. Is there not a sort of blood shed when the conscience is wounded? Through this wound a man’s real manhood and immortality flow out, and he bleeds to an everlasting death. I see this blood flowing now.

Compare this to when Martin Luther King says, “One has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws,” in the [first excerpt](#) from Letter from Birmingham Jail.

While he is clearly talking about Massachusetts here, by “the State” he also refers to any body of government, whether of a state or a nation.

The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 was passed a year after this essay was released. Unsurprisingly, Thoreau was strongly opposed to it and gave lectures against it.

Remember, Thoreau was an abolitionist, and he spent a night in jail basically as a protest against slavery and the Mexican War. The war, conducted during the presidency of Tennessee slaveholder James K. Polk, brought Texas into the Union as a slaveholding state, thereby upsetting the balance between slave and free states.

People voted by paper ballots that were printed and distributed by political parties.

The idea of change being brought about by minority protest will be proven right by later movements, from labor to women’s suffrage to Civil Rights to LGBTQ rights.

Thoreau did not want his tax money to pay for the Mexican-American War. A believer in limited government, he disapproved of U.S. aggression in another country, especially when it was so closely linked to the expansion of slavery. The first sentence of this very essay declares, “That government is best which governs least.”

Thoreau could believe in limited government because he also believed in self-reliance and individualism, which held each person responsible for deciding what was right using their own intuition (a Transcendentalist belief). If what is “right” here is to protest unjust government policies such as slavery and aggressive war, then is the “revolution” meant to achieve a government that makes the right choices, or a nation of people who themselves make the right choices and therefore don’t need government? This reminds me of a line from [Federalist No. 51](#) (by either James Madison or Alexander Hamilton), “If men were angels, no government would be necessary.”