

Abstract

This BA thesis is concerned with Henry David Thoreau's opinions on slavery. The first part of the thesis focuses on the development of the abolitionist movement in the first half of the nineteenth century and of antislavery tendencies and organizations. The most important figures of the abolitionist movement, such as Benjamin Lundy, William Lloyd Garrison, Theodore Dwight Weld, David Walker or Frederick Douglass, as well as the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation and the 1865 adoption of the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, are paid attention to.

Thoreau's essays *Civil Disobedience*, *Slavery in Massachusetts* and *A Plea for Captain John Brown* are analyzed in the thesis. In his *Civil Disobedience*, the author criticizes the government for abusing, rather than protecting, American citizens, who have elected it and enabled its functioning. Thoreau scorns the government for supporting slavery and for waging the Mexican-American War. He believes that every man has an inalienable right to be free and since the government takes this right away from people, he responds to it with civil disobedience.

One comes across Thoreau's critique of his fellow citizens and of their lack of interest in enslaved people in his *Slavery in Massachusetts*. The writer is disappointed with the fact that law, instead of protecting men, restricts them. He also notices the unreliability of the press.

The character of John Brown is dealt with in Thoreau's essay *A Plea for Captain John Brown*. The writer justifies the former's action and his use of violence because it was performed in the name of freedom and human rights. According to Thoreau, Brown is a Christ-like figure and deserves to be remembered by others.

Thoreau's opinions on slavery developed during his lifetime. In *Civil Disobedience*, the focus of interest is much broader than in *Slavery in Massachusetts* and in *A Plea for Captain John Brown* where he deals with slavery in particular. Thoreau's radicalism deepened in the later essays.

Thoreau's *Walden* and *Life Without Principle* are discussed in order to put the author's view of slavery into a broader context of his work. In these literary pieces, he focuses on the importance of keeping one's individuality and freedom because these are crucial in living a valuable life. Thoreau feels that each person needs to free themselves of material wealth because it poses an obstruction in finding one's liberty.

The extent to which Thoreau influenced other people is also dealt with. He had a great impact on Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King or Václav Havel. Thoreau did not contribute to any particular political change but his legacy lies in his influence on others, both famous and ordinary people.