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Henry David Thoreau and His View of Slavery

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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Permission

Souhlasím se zapůjčením bakalářské práce ke studijním účelům.

I have no objections to the BA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

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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.

Key Words: Henry David Thoreau, Slavery, Abolitionism, Freedom, Individualism

Anotace

Tato bakalářská práce pojednává o názorech Henryho Davida Thoreaua na otroctví. Úvodní část je zaměřena na vývoj abolicionistického hnutí v první polovině devatenáctého století a na protitrokářské tendence a organizace. Pozornost je věnována důležitým osobnostem abolicionistického hnutí, mezi které patří Benjamin Lundy, William Lloyd Garrison, Theodore Dwight Weld, David Walker nebo Frederick Douglass, všímá si Prohlášení o osvobození otroků z roku 1863 a třináctého dodatku Ústavy Spojených států amerických z roku 1865.

Následuje analýza Thoreauových esejí *Občanská neposlušnost*, *Otroctví v Massachusetts* a *Obrana kapitána Johna Browna*. V *Občanské neposlušnosti* autor kritizuje vládu za to, že americké občany, kteří ji zvolili a umožnili tak její fungování, spíše zneužívá, než aby je chránila. Thoreau vládě dále vyčítá podporu otroctví a vedení války s Mexikem. Každý člověk má podle něj nezczizitelné právo na svobodu, a jelikož vláda lidem toto právo upírá, reaguje na to autor občanskou neposlušností.

V esejí *Otroctví v Massachusetts* vytyká Thoreau svým spoluobčanům jejich nezájem o zotročené lidi. Je zklamán tím, že právo, místo aby lidi chránilo, je omezuje. Všímá si také nespolehlivosti tisku.

V *Obraně kapitána Johna Browna* se spisovatel zabývá osobností Johna Browna. Ospravedlňuje Brownův čin a použití násilí, neboť se tak stalo ve jménu svobody a lidských práv. Podle Thoreaua je John Brown postava podobná Kristu, jež si zaslouží zůstat v paměti lidí.

Thoreauovy názory na otroctví se v průběhu jeho života vyvíjely. V *Občanské neposlušnosti* se tímto jevem zabýval spíše v obecnější rovině, zatímco v obou pozdějších esejích se už zaměřuje na jeho konkrétní podobu. Autorovy postoje se zde také radikalizovaly.

Aby bylo možné zasadit Thoreauovy názory na otroctví do širšího kontextu jeho díla, věnuje následující část této bakalářské práce pozornost rozboru jeho děl *Walden* a *Život bez zásad*. V těchto pracích se Thoreau zaměřuje na důležitost zachování si vlastní individuality a svobody, jež jsou zásadní podmínkou plnohodnotného života každé osobnosti. Domnívá se, že každý by se měl oprostít od materiálního bohatství, protože to představuje překážku v hledání osobní svobody.

Závěrečná část mé práce se zabývá rozsahem Thoreauova vlivu na některé známé osobnosti. Thoreau silně zapůsobil na Mahátmu Gándhího, Martina Luthera

Kinga nebo Václava Havla. Nepřispěl k žádné konkrétní politické změně, význam jeho odkazu však spočívá ve vlivu na ostatní lidi.

Klíčová slova: Henry David Thoreau, otroctví, abolicionismus, svoboda, individualismus

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Introduction

Henry David Thoreau belongs among the most important and influential American authors of the nineteenth century. Even though he is mainly known for his harsh criticism of the government and of the political situation and as an advocate of life in concord with nature, his negative approach towards slavery is a significant part of his work as well. Slavery was a frequently discussed topic during Thoreau's life and it is, therefore, logical that he, a person for whom individual freedom was fundamental, expressed his opinions on it. The theme of slavery permeates a great part of Thoreau's work; even his literary pieces which do not deal with it per se have something to do with liberty.

Although Thoreau's involvement in the problem of slavery is not considered to be pivotal in his work, it is not ignored by critics, who have engaged in commenting on it to a great extent. There are several journal articles which have been used for or quoted in this thesis, including works by Philip Abbott, Jack Turner, Charles A. Madison or William A. Herr, as well as books, such as *A Historical Guide to Henry David Thoreau* by William E. Cain or *The Intellectual Development of Henry David Thoreau* by Claude Gayet.

The main concern of this thesis is Henry David Thoreau's views of slavery as expressed in his essays *Civil Disobedience*, *Slavery in Massachusetts* and *A Plea for Captain John Brown*. Thoreau holds a very negative view of slavery; his opinions became more radical and deprecatory during his lifetime. In his *Civil Disobedience*, he deals with slavery as with a general problem; as with something which is condemnable, but it is only in his later essay *A Plea for Captain John Brown* that he comments on the topic very harshly and approves of the use of violence. Some other literary pieces of Thoreau's, specifically *Walden* and *Life Without Principle*, are discussed in the thesis in order to show the author's general beliefs and convictions and to integrate his opinions on slavery into a broader context. Furthermore, an overview of the situation in the United States of America in the time of the culmination of the slavery problem, containing the development of the abolitionist movement, is provided. The thesis also deals with Thoreau's influence upon other important people and with the extent to which the author contributed to political change.

The thesis contains four chapters. The first chapter outlines antislavery tendencies and sentiments and the development of the abolitionist movement in the first

half of the nineteenth century. The second chapter is concerned with Thoreau's essays and deals with the way of how these discuss the topic of slavery. It focuses on the essay *Civil Disobedience*, particularly on the writer's criticism of government, on his opinion on slavery and on his view of freedom and of individuality in general. The author's strong devotion to certain principles, such as the belief that freedom and individuality should be basic and inalienable merits and that American citizens should be esteemed, rather than abused, by the government, as well as his breaking of the law, is analyzed in the chapter. It also deals with Thoreau's essay *Slavery in Massachusetts* and with his criticism of his fellow citizens and of their lack of interest in those who are affected by slavery, as well as of the government and of the press. The writer's opinions on the role of law and of religion are discussed and his optimistic beliefs are presented. Another concern of the second chapter is Thoreau's essay *A Plea for Captain John Brown*, which, apart from the character of John Brown, focuses on the writer's approach towards violence; once again, Thoreau's disapproval of the government and of the press is focused on.

A broader context that helps one grasp Thoreau's view of slavery is to be found in the third chapter. It deals with *Walden* and Thoreau's interpretation of and emphasis on nature and freedom in general and with the essay *Life Without Principle*, which stresses the importance of living a free life not influenced by any negative aspects. In the last chapter of the thesis called *Henry David Thoreau's Influence*, Thoreau's impact upon certain famous people and his contribution to the contemporary political and social situation are elaborated.

1. Abolitionist Movement

In order to properly determine Henry David Thoreau's position in the abolitionist movement and to correctly analyze his essays concerned with the question of slavery, which is the main objective of this thesis, the history and development of the antislavery movement in the United States of America, as well as its most important and most significant branches, will be described in this chapter. The American abolitionist movement followed the British antislavery movement, which culminated in the 1780s, and it dates back to the eighteenth century,¹ in other words, much further than to the 1830s, which are connected with the establishment of the American Anti-Slavery Society. The first dissatisfied voices were, naturally, heard from those to whom the greatest harm was being done – from the slaves. “In 1773, a group of Massachusetts slaves petitioned the legislature, appealing not only for their natural right to liberty but for an opportunity to ‘procure money to transport [themselves] to some part of the Coast of *Africa*, where [they proposed] a settlement.’”² Whereas slavery was excluded from the Northwest Territory in 1787,³ the situation in the South happened to be much more pessimistic. Slavery was still present there and the fact that from the economic point of view it was in great demand⁴ did not signal any bright prospects:

There were strong economic reasons for the broad national reach of American slavery. Southern slave-grown cotton was by far the nation's leading export. It powered textile-manufacturing revolutions in both New England and England, and it paid for American imports of everything from steel to investment capital.⁵

Apart from the oppression in form of slavery, the African Americans in the United States had to confront racism in general. Historian David Brion Davis states that there were an enormous number of white people whose hostile attitude toward their African American fellow citizens was caused by the former ones' inability to tolerate living together with the latter ones and by their fear of intermixture and consequent

¹ David Burner, et al., *An American Portrait: A History of the United States – Volume 1* (New York: Charles Scriber's Sons, 1985) 304.

² David Brion Davis, *Challenging the Boundaries of Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003) 64-65.

³ Burner 304.

⁴ Davis 76.

⁵ Davis 76.

disappearance of the white race.⁶ This situation led to new colonial laws which, for example, banned interracial marriages or ordered removal of manumitted slaves from the particular colony.⁷ The African Americans, especially the slaves themselves, were, unequivocally, the most involved in the problem of slaveholding and therefore formed groups demanding the abolition of it. Their role in the antislavery movement will be dealt with later in this chapter.

Benjamin Lundy, born into a New Jersey Quaker family, is considered to be instrumental in the establishment of the abolitionist movement.⁸ After moving to Virginia, he became aware of the terrible treatment of the slaves and began to seek a way of helping them.⁹ In 1815, Lundy founded the Union Humane Society, an antislavery association, and he also supported the organization of other abolitionist societies.¹⁰ He started printing his own newspapers called *The Genius of Universal Emancipation* and the *National Enquirer*, traveled through the South in order to lecture on the abolition of slavery and collaborated with other members of the Quaker religious movement, for instance with Charles Osborne.¹¹ Lundy also tried to cooperate with William Lloyd Garrison with whom he shared the experience of mob violence and hatred by many people but their different religious backgrounds and opinions did not make the collaboration possible.¹²

William Lloyd Garrison was a significant figure of the abolitionist movement in the United States. It is argued by critics that “Garrison was the first white abolitionist who spoke adamantly about turning abolitionism into a forceful public movement.”¹³ He was a part of a small group of activists who called for an immediate abolition of slavery.¹⁴ He closely linked his persuasion with his religious belief and was, at first, regarded as a fanatic.¹⁵ The abolitionists believed that slavery was “both a national and an individual sin”¹⁶ and that something had to be done in order to prevent this evil.¹⁷

⁶ Davis 66.

⁷ Davis 66.

⁸ Suzanne R. Wicks, “Benjamin Lundy: Pioneer Quaker Abolitionist, 1789-1839,” *Friends Journal*, June 2002, 16 May 2012 < http://www2.gol.com/users/quakers/Benjamin_Lundy.htm>.

⁹ Wicks.

¹⁰ Wicks.

¹¹ Wicks.

¹² Wicks.

¹³ Richard S. Newman, *Transformation of American Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002) 132.

¹⁴ Burner 304.

¹⁵ Burner 306.

¹⁶ Burner 304.

¹⁷ Burner 304.

Shocked by anti-abolition mob violence, Garrisonians concluded that American society was sick. Slavery was one of the symptoms of moral decay, but there were others – militarism, expansionism, the oppression of women and the poor. Only a total reformation of the nation’s ethical values would suffice. Abolitionist, Garrison maintained, must ‘revolutionize the public sentiment’ by an expanded campaign of moral suasion; having done this, they would accomplish the overthrow of slavery.¹⁸

The mob violence mentioned in the quotation refers to the physical attacks which the abolitionists had to face. Historical books give examples of the mob riot in 1835 during which Garrison was dragged through the streets of Boston with a rope around his neck or of the one in which abolitionist editor Elijah Lovejoy was killed.¹⁹

To return to and to explain Garrison’s religious persuasion, the term perfectionism has to be explained. Perfectionists claim that “all people, through an act of conversion, could cleanse themselves of sin (defined as voluntary selfishness) and live in harmony with divine law”²⁰. The fact that Garrison was a perfectionist helps understand why he was so obsessed with the abolition of slavery - he believed that slavery was evil but that the idea to enslave a human being was only a display of the spoilt American society.

William Lloyd Garrison was a prominent abolitionist, which can be demonstrated by the great number of readers of his newspaper, called the *Liberator*, which was established in Boston in 1831²¹. Many other abolitionists, for instance James Forten, contributed with their critical articles to the periodical²² and, by doing so, they expressed their deprecatory opinion on slavery. Garrison, together with Theodore Dwight Weld, with the Tappan brothers, and with the Grimké sisters, belonged to the American Anti-Slavery Society, which was founded in 1833.²³ This organization was

¹⁸ Burner 308.

¹⁹ Burner 307.

²⁰ Burner 306.

²¹ Burner 306.

²² Davis 73.

²³ Burner 308.

known for petitioning against slavery²⁴ as well as for “urging an end to the interstate slave trade”²⁵.

Another important figure of the antislavery movement was the before mentioned Theodore Dwight Weld, Garrison’s contemporary and a member of the American Anti-Slavery Society.²⁶ “Like Garrison, Weld had entered the movement because of intense religious convictions about the evil of slavery.”²⁷ Apart from his significant role among the opponents of slavery, Weld was also known for marrying Angelina Grimké, a female abolitionist, who was criticized by many for deliberately mistaking the fight for the end of slavery for the fight for women’s emancipation²⁸.

The abolitionists ran into difficulties because of the great postal campaign that took place in 1835.²⁹ Their goal was “to send hundreds of thousands of antislavery pamphlets to all parts of the country”³⁰. Unfortunately, their plan did not meet with success:

A mob of South Carolinians seized the materials from the Charleston post office and in a huge bonfire burned them, along with effigies of Arthur Tappan and Garrison. Afterward, postmaster General Amos Kendall, with President Jackson’s approval, authorized Southern postmasters to censor the mails and stop the flow of antislavery material into the South.³¹

After this, the Southern politicians expected many angry petitions which would require the abolition of slavery and therefore demanded the House of Representatives not to receive such petitions in the states; this led to angry debates which ended up in an adoption of a “gag” rule³²; a rule that the House “would receive antislavery petitions but automatically table them without formal consideration”³³. The “gag” rule had many opponents; one of them, the former President John Quincy Adams, endeavored to

²⁴ Burner 308.

²⁵ Burner 308.

²⁶ Burner 307.

²⁷ Burner 306-307.

²⁸ Gilbert Hobbs Barnes, *The Antislavery Impulse, 1830 – 1844* (New York: Harbinger Book, 1964) 157-158.

²⁹ Burner 307.

³⁰ Burner 307.

³¹ Burner 307.

³² Burner 307-308.

³³ Burner 308.

vindicate the right of petition and succeeded in 1844³⁴ when he “finally secured repeal of the ‘gag’ rule”³⁵. An important turn of events for the abolitionists came in 1850 with the Fugitive Slave Law.³⁶ This law was adopted after complaints about the ineffectuality and weakness of the original law from 1793.³⁷ The white objectors of slavery “found that they had to take a position on a question that, for the first time, directly involved them”³⁸.

Writers and philosophers of that time also expressed their thoughts on the situation. Besides Henry David Thoreau, whose opinions are the subject of this thesis, Ralph Waldo Emerson gave his opinion on slavery.

Ralph Waldo Emerson explained in speeches on the 1850 law that he had ‘lived all [his] life without suffering any known inconvenience from American slavery’ – in fact, ‘it was like slavery in Africa or in Japan for [him].’ This law, however, forced him to ‘hunt slaves’ and made ‘citizens in Massachusetts willing to act as judges and captors.’ Slavery had become more ‘aggressive and dangerous,’ Emerson protested, making it his ‘duty’ – and not an ‘option’ – to exhort abolitionists to ‘defend the weak, and redress the injured.’³⁹

Emerson was convinced about the immoral nature of slavery and he stuck to this view from his early years throughout his whole life.⁴⁰ He felt that the Southerners who defended slavery acted ingeniously and calculatingly, rather than reasonably, since they only saw their own interest and after slavery had become a national issue and partly caused the Civil War, his antipathy towards it started to include the whole region which practiced it.⁴¹

The abolitionist group which formed around Garrison was not the only antislavery group in the United States. Historian David Burner and his colleagues

³⁴ Burner 308.

³⁵ Burner 308.

³⁶ Jacqueline Bacon, *The Humblest May Stand Forth: Rhetoric, Empowerment, and Abolition* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002) 18.

³⁷ Burner 329.

³⁸ Bacon 19.

³⁹ Bacon 18-19.

⁴⁰ Philip Butcher, “Emerson and the South,” *Phylon* 17.3 3rd Qtr. 1956: 279.

⁴¹ Butcher 279.

describe the “antislavery disunity”⁴² based not only on the split over strategy and tactics⁴³ but also on the different preferences concerning the goals of the movement. Against the Garrisonians stood their opponents, whose opinions on the American society were not as radical as the religious ones of Garrison.⁴⁴ They “possessed a broader faith in the possibilities of American society and a narrower vision of reform. [...] ‘Garrisonian fanaticism,’ so they feared, only endangered the future of abolitionism”⁴⁵. Another group of abolitionists decided to form the Liberal Party in 1840, which happened to be harshly criticized by Garrison for its lack of demand of the overall transformation of the society; the leader of the American Anti-Slavery Society believed in perfectionism and the Liberal Party, in the lead with James G. Birney, simply did not share his conviction.⁴⁶

It was already mentioned that African Americans formed an important branch of the abolitionist movement; there were two main groups in the United States – free black citizens and fugitive slaves. Since the latter ones were the most desperate group because of and the most affected by slavery, history provides us with many radical attempts of theirs to change the hopeless situation. As an example of such an attempt, Nat Turner’s rebellion can be mentioned. “Nat Turner, a slave preacher, led a band of armed followers on a bloody rampage through Southampton County, Virginia, in 1831, killing sixty men, women, and children, terrified whites retaliated by slaughtering at least one hundred blacks.”⁴⁷

The African American abolitionists had their own periodical, via which they informed the public about their struggle. Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm emphasized “that *Freedom’s Journal* [would] not only educate African Americans, but [would] also provide their ‘friends’ with information about their ‘actual condition’ and their ‘efforts and feelings’”⁴⁸. They also stressed the importance of the opportunity to speak for themselves, which was absolutely new to the black population.⁴⁹ The African Americans wrote for many other periodicals; William Watkins, using the pseudonym

⁴² Burner 308.

⁴³ Burner 308.

⁴⁴ Burner 308.

⁴⁵ Burner 308.

⁴⁶ Burner 308.

⁴⁷ Burner 273.

⁴⁸ Bacon 51.

⁴⁹ Bacon 51.

“A Colored Baltimorean”, contributed with his essays to the *Liberator*, to the *Freedom’s Journal* and to the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*.⁵⁰

Another influential activist of the 1820s was David Walker, the leader of the Massachusetts General Colored Association.⁵¹ Walker was born free in North Carolina and after traveling through the South he published his famous *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (which later appeared in two more editions) in which he strongly opposed slavery and suggested the use of violence in order to prevent it if necessary.⁵² Walker’s plan was to spread the message of his pamphlet among the African Americans in the South that slavery is a terrible thing and that there has to be, immediately, put an end to it.⁵³ He uses a very captivating tone in his literary work since from the very beginning, he lets his readers know that he is one of them and that they have to unite and fight together against the injustice that has been done to them. Another powerful feature of the pamphlet is the use of “Old Testament theology and the natural rights philosophy of the Declaration of Independence [in order to] describe the plight of African-Americans, both slave and free”⁵⁴. Because of this controversial pamphlet of his and because of the militant opinions expressed in it, Walker had made many enemies and haters, especially among the Southerners, and his endeavors were precluded by his death under unexplained circumstances in 1830, which led to speculations about the possibility of him having been murdered.⁵⁵

The African American abolitionists established the American Moral Reform Society, founded in 1835 and functioning until 1841, with James Forten as the president; other names that are connected with this project are, for example, Reuben Ruby, Samuel E. Cornish, William Whipper or James Forten, Jr.⁵⁶ The American Moral Reform Society published its own periodical, the *National Reformer*.⁵⁷ The members, influenced by the Garrisonians, focused on education, on economy, on universal liberty and temperance and on the Christian principles, which served as means of reaching the

⁵⁰ Bacon 52.

⁵¹ Bacon 51.

⁵² Bacon 52.

⁵³ “David Walker’s Appeal: Anti-slavery Literature in the Executive Communications,” *Virginiamemory*, 9 Feb 2011, 16 May 2012 <http://www.virginiamemory.com/blogs/out_of_the_box/2011/02/09/david-walkers-appeal-anti-slavery-literature-in-the-executive-communications/>.

⁵⁴ “David Walker’s Appeal: Anti-slavery Literature in the Executive Communications.”

⁵⁵ Bacon 52.

⁵⁶ Howard H. Bell, “The American Moral Reform Society, 1836-1841,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 27.1 Winter 1958: 34.

⁵⁷ Bell 38.

elevation of the human race.⁵⁸ “Vice, greed, corruption, slavery, and war were all elements to be erased from human relations as soon as possible.”⁵⁹

One of the most significant and known African American antislavery activists was Frederick Douglass. He was born a slave in Maryland but in 1838 he managed to escape to New York.⁶⁰ Later, he began to subscribe to the *Liberator* and to edit other antislavery periodicals; the *North Star*, the *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, and the *Douglass’s Monthly*.⁶¹ What charmed the other abolitionists most about Douglass were his captivating speeches, which power was based on the authenticity caused by the orator’s own experience. William Lloyd Garrison described his fascination by Douglass’ rhetorical abilities:

I shall never forget his speech at the convention – the extraordinary emotion it excited in my own mind – the powerful impression it created upon a crowded auditory, completely taken by surprise – the applause which followed from the beginning to the end of his felicitous remarks. I think I never hated slavery so intensely as at that moment; certainly, my perception of the enormous outrage which is inflicted by it, on the godlike nature of its victims, was rendered far more than ever.⁶²

In his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, the author described the horror of slavery from a slave’s point of view, which provided the United States’ citizens with a completely different testimony from those of the white abolitionists or of the African American free people. Douglass’ narration is based on his true experience and is, therefore, very authentic. The author minutely described life in slavery and the brutal behavior towards the slaves; he provided information not only on the relationships between the masters and the slaves but also on the latter ones’ bad physical condition caused both by the violence committed by the slaveholders and by the lack of nourishment and clothing rendered by these.

Since it is one of the most significant points of the narration, as well as a partial reason for it having been written, Douglass focuses on the way of how he has learned to

⁵⁸ Bell 34.

⁵⁹ Bell 34.

⁶⁰ Bacon 52.

⁶¹ Bacon 52-53.

⁶² Qtd. in Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1995) vii-viii.

write and read and he emphasizes the importance of literacy for expressing one's opinions, demands and wishes. On the contrary, his escape or information on his fiancée are mentioned only vaguely. There is a simple explanation for this; Douglass, anxiously afraid of being given back to his slaveholder, could not believe anyone and did not want to give away information that would lead to his disclosure. His literacy as well as his rhetoric abilities made many people question his identity; they became incredulous and found it impossible that a former slave could be so intelligent and talented so Douglass had to, in contrast to other authors of slave narratives, write his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* in order to prove his identity.⁶³

Women did not stay behind and fought equally energetically as men for the end of slavery. In the time of women's emancipation, "The first women who dared to speak in public for the slave were two timid, diffident daughters of an aristocratic slaveholding family, Sarah and Angelina Grimké"⁶⁴. After converting to the Quaker creed, the sisters left their home in Charleston and headed for Philadelphia in order to become a part of the antislavery movement and of the American Anti-Slavery Society.⁶⁵ Since the Garrisonians supported equality in every way and proclaimed that the whole society needs to be transformed,⁶⁶ they also, logically, backed up the women's attempts for equality between sexes: "Weld took them [the Grimké sisters] in hand. For months he tutored Angelina in the elements of public speaking and trained them both in antislavery lore."⁶⁷ Such an approach upset many other abolitionist activists, who claimed that feminism would divert the public's attention of the fight against slavery.⁶⁸ Not taking notice of this fact, Garrison wrote to the sisters: "[...] the best advocacy you can make is just what you are making day by day. Thousands hear you every week who have all their lives held that a woman must not speak in public. Such a practical refutation of the dogma as your speaking furnishes!"⁶⁹ After granting suffrage to women, the relationship between the American Anti-Slavery Society (until 1839, an

⁶³ "Douglass' Narrative," *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture*, 11 May 2012 <<http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/abolitn/dougnarrhp.html>>.

⁶⁴ Barnes 153.

⁶⁵ Barnes 154.

⁶⁶ Burner 308.

⁶⁷ Barnes 154-155.

⁶⁸ Burner 308.

⁶⁹ Barnes 157.

exclusively men's organization⁷⁰) and the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women became stronger and in 1840 these two met as one.⁷¹

Similarly to the Grimké sisters, the activist Abby Kelley felt fear while speaking publicly; she compared this fear of hers to that of African American men.⁷² The fact is that both women and African Americans were oppressed, however, there was a great difference in the obstacles of public speaking that they had to overcome – the fugitive slaves had to face the threat of return to their slaveholders.⁷³ Lucretia Mott and Lydia Maria Child represent women who were actively involved in the crusade against slavery.⁷⁴ Both Mott and Child were influenced by Garrison and were not afraid of expressing their opinions publicly.⁷⁵ The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 inspired Harriet Beecher Stowe, another activist, to write one of the most iconic antislavery books, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.⁷⁶ Female abolitionists felt that they had a special bond with all other women based simply on femininity.⁷⁷

[...] antebellum women were presumed to have instinctive sympathy toward other women, particularly based on their shared status as mothers. This feature of "True Womanhood" could be a particular advantage for white women abolitionists appealing to skeptical audiences. Ostensibly, the bonds of womanhood transcended race, linking white female abolitionists to African American as well as to other white women.⁷⁸

This quotation suggests that female antislavery activists were, even though they rejected slavery in general, more concerned with the question of women slaves, from which later developed their attempts to fight for their own emancipation.

African American female abolitionists had to, according to historian Jacqueline Bacon, face dual forces of racism and sexism and the marginalization of their problem in discussions concerned with African Americans.⁷⁹ Sarah Remond, who pointed out the

⁷⁰ Bacon 110.

⁷¹ Barnes 159.

⁷² Bacon 109.

⁷³ Bacon 109.

⁷⁴ Bacon 110.

⁷⁵ Bacon 110.

⁷⁶ Burner 327.

⁷⁷ Bacon 120.

⁷⁸ Bacon 120.

⁷⁹ Bacon 165.

neglect by her white female colleagues in the antislavery movement, perceived it as an important step towards equality when she was referred to as a ‘sister’ of white women.⁸⁰ African American activists tried, as well as white female abolitionists, to free themselves from the traditional antebellum gender roles and saw the antislavery movement as a way to emancipation. Garrison and his sympathizers supported their plan but others criticized it, arguing that it only detracts the initial goal of the abolitionist movement – the end of slavery. Maria Stewart’s “September 1832 speech at Franklin Hall in Boston [was] the first recorded instance of an American-born woman of any race addressing a ‘promiscuous audience’”⁸¹. Sarah Douglass, known as “Zillah”, and Frances Ellen Watkins were actively involved in contributing to abolitionist periodicals and in lecturing on the topic of slavery.⁸²

Fugitive slave Sojourner Truth, born as Isabella Van Wagner into slavery in New York State,⁸³ who ran away from her master in 1826, also dedicated her life to the abolitionist movement, to women’s rights and to women’s suffrage.⁸⁴ Her resolution to reach the equality between genders and races is obvious from her famous 1851 speech “Ar’n’t I a Woman?” as well as from other frequent public speeches of hers opposing slavery given during her travels.⁸⁵ Harriet Ann Jacobs, a woman with a destiny similar to that of Truth’s, became known for her autobiographical narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, published in 1861 under the pseudonym Linda Brent.⁸⁶ The author deals with the complicated relationship between black and white women and mentions the fact that instead of creating alliance of all women the latter ones have chosen to fight against all black people.⁸⁷ Since Jacobs worked as a domestic servant at the time of writing of the *Incidents*, she realized that her situation is completely different from and much more difficult than the one of other female writers, however, her voice can be interpreted as an appeal to the sisterhood of all women.⁸⁸ Hazel V. Carby, on the other hand, suggests that “Jacobs’ appeal was to a potential

⁸⁰ Bacon 165.

⁸¹ Bacon 166.

⁸² Bacon 166-167.

⁸³ Nell Irvin Painter, “Representing Truth: Sojourner Truth’s Knowing and Becoming Known,” *The Journal of American History* 81.2 Sep. 1994: 461.

⁸⁴ Bacon 167.

⁸⁵ Jone Johnson Lewis, “Sojourner Truth,” *Women’s History*, 11 May 2012

<http://womenshistory.about.com/od/sojournertruth/a/sojourner_truth_bio.htm>.

⁸⁶ Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

⁸⁷ Carby 6.

⁸⁸ Carby 50.

rather than an actual bonding between white and black women.”⁸⁹ Jacobs also focuses on the sexual oppression to which the female slaves were exposed and connects it with the major motive for her escape – she wanted to protect her daughter from sexual exploitation.

The abolitionist movement, undoubtedly, contributed to the fact that on January 1, 1863 President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which guaranteed that all slaves from regions still in rebellion would be free,⁹⁰ and to the 1865 adoption of the Thirteenth Amendment, which outlawed slavery.⁹¹ Michael Vorenberg points out that Abraham Lincoln did not intend to suggest an amendment abolishing slavery and that the Congressional Republicans, therefore, had to add it.⁹²

The president worried that an abolition amendment might foul the political waters. The amendments he had recommended in December 1862 had gone nowhere [...] Moreover, Lincoln knew that he did not have to propose amendments because others more devoted to abolition would, especially if he pointed out the vulnerability of existing emancipation legislation. He was also concerned about negative reactions from conservatives, particularly potential new recruits from the Democrats.⁹³

John Quincy Adams was, in fact, the only one who offered the antislavery amendment before its adoption; others seemed to be very careful with such suggestions.⁹⁴ This fact may have been caused by the widespread belief among Americans that the Constitution should remain static; such persuasion was also shared by Lincoln.⁹⁵ Another problem occurred with the different interpretations of the original text of the Declaration of Independence; supporters of slavery proclaimed that the equality between men does not apply to African Americans:⁹⁶ “Mr. Jefferson never meant to say that negroes were equal to white men; but that white men, whether born in England or America were

⁸⁹ Carby 51.

⁹⁰ Burner 367.

⁹¹ Burner 368.

⁹² Michael Vorenberg, *Final Freedom: The Civil War, the Abolition of Slavery, and the Thirteenth Amendment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 48-49.

⁹³ Vorenberg 48.

⁹⁴ Vorenberg 14-15.

⁹⁵ Vorenberg 15.

⁹⁶ Bacon 85.

equal to one another.”⁹⁷ The abolitionists, on the other hand, understood the text as a clearly antislavery one and asserted: “See your Declaration Americans!!! Do you understand your own language? ... ‘We hold these truths to be self evident – that ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL!! that they *are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights*; that among these are life, *liberty*, and the pursuit of happiness!’”⁹⁸ The latter ones were, eventually, heard and the abolitionist movement managed to reach its aim.

⁹⁷ Bacon 85.

⁹⁸ Bacon 87-88.

2. Henry David Thoreau's Opinions on Slavery Expressed in his Essays

2.1 Civil Disobedience

After describing the period in which Henry David Thoreau wrote his literary works, I will move on to the analysis of his essays which deal with the topic of slavery. The essays *Civil Disobedience*, *Slavery in Massachusetts* and *A Plea for Captain John Brown* will be discussed, respectively. Thoreau's essay *Civil Disobedience* originally appeared under the title *The Rights and Duties of the Individual in Relation to Government*⁹⁹ in a form of a lecture, which was delivered at the Concord Lyceum in 1848.¹⁰⁰ After its publication in Elizabeth Peabody's *Aesthetic Papers*, the text became known as *Resistance to Civil Government*.¹⁰¹ Despite the fact that today's readers are chiefly acquainted with the title *Civil Disobedience* and that the term "civil disobedience" is strongly connected with Thoreau, there is no evidence at all that the author himself ever used the expression¹⁰². In his essay, Thoreau is not primarily concerned with slavery but uses the criticism of it in order to explain his resistant behavior and negative approach towards the government of the United States. There are two situations that matter to him the most: the Mexican-American War and the officially approved existence of slavery.

Even though the author deals with problems that affect the whole country, he finds space for his personal views of society and politics, which has been, sometimes harshly, commented on: Civil Disobedience is one of the "pilgrimages in which America's social and political problems are treated as secondary, even epiphenomenal concerns compared to Thoreau's egoistic obsession with self-discovery."¹⁰³ It is true that Thoreau describes his own experience and his own opinions but it is the welfare of the whole country that matters to him the most. His good intentions can be demonstrated on the fact that although he takes a well-known American motto "That government is best which governs least"¹⁰⁴ and famously transforms it into an almost

⁹⁹ Lawrence Rosenwald, "The Theory, Practice and Influence of Thoreau's Civil Disobedience," *The Thoreau Reader*, 22 Oct. 2012 <<http://thoreau.eserver.org/theory.html>>.

¹⁰⁰ "Civil Disobedience," *Merriam Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature*, 1995 ed.

¹⁰¹ Rosenwald.

¹⁰² William A. Herr, "Thoreau: A Civil Disobedient?," *Ethics* 85.1 Oct. 1974: 87.

¹⁰³ Philip Abbott, "Henry David Thoreau, the State of Nature, and the Redemption of Liberalism," *The Journal of Politics* 47.1 Feb. 1985: 184.

¹⁰⁴ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1966) 224.

anarchistic “That government is best which governs not at all”,¹⁰⁵ he in fact requires a better government; he insists on an immediate improvement from which all citizens would benefit. *Civil Disobedience* should therefore not be considered a merely egoistic essay.

Civil Disobedience belongs among the most influential American literary pieces and it affected many important and powerful people (this fact will be more closely dealt with later in the thesis).

It powerfully marked the mind of Tolstoy, and changed the direction of his movement. It was the solitary source book on which Gandhi based his campaign of Civil Resistance in India, and Thoreau’s ideas multiplied by millions of Indians came fairly close to shattering the power of the British Empire. It has been the bible of countless thousands in totalitarian concentrations camps and democratic jails, of partisans and fighters in resistance movements, of men wherever they have found no weapon but principle with which to oppose tyranny.¹⁰⁶

The reason for the significant influence of the essay may be grounded in the way of how it treats the individual and in the way of how it bestows an unlimited power to them. As well as a single person can help form a better world they can also contribute to its decay. Thoreau criticizes those who seem to be dissatisfied with the government and its actions but who, nevertheless, do nothing to change it; this can be applied to the problem of slavery: “There are thousands who are in opinion opposed to slavery and to the war, who yet in effect do nothing to put an end to them; who [...] sit down with their hands in their pockets, and say that they know not what to do”¹⁰⁷. The author demands some kind of action and is disgusted with people who wait for others to make a change: “They hesitate, and they regret, and sometimes they petition; but they do nothing in earnest and with effect. They will wait, well disposed, for others to remedy the evil, that they may no longer have it to regret.”¹⁰⁸ Thoreau declares that it would definitely be appreciable if at least one man would make a change because “it matters

¹⁰⁵ Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* 224.

¹⁰⁶ Stanley Edgar Hyman, “Henry Thoreau in Our Time,” *Walden and Civil Disobedience – Authoritative Texts, Background, Review and Essays in Criticism*, ed. Owen Thomas (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1966) 315.

¹⁰⁷ Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* 228.

¹⁰⁸ Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* 228.

not how small the beginning may seem to be: what is once well done is done for ever”¹⁰⁹. Undoubtedly, the writer considers himself one of the few people who actively aspire to make the world a more pleasant place to live. It is a great paradox that he protests against the political situation by not paying taxes, which, in a sense, is also doing nothing.

It was mentioned above that there exists a relationship between the influence of *Civil Disobedience* and the individualism expressed in it. Throughout the whole essay, the reader comes across comments on the strength of an individual and on the need of expressing this strength. Henry David Thoreau suggests that each person should rise up and confront their oppressors and fight for their rights:

Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience, then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterwards. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, as much as for the right.¹¹⁰

The reason for the inspiring impression of the essay is the position in which the author places himself – he serves as an example for people; he tries to practice what he preaches. “He [Thoreau] seems to stand for private rebellion. He is a solitary man against society”¹¹¹. On the other hand, since Thoreau’s *Civil Disobedience* is considered individualist, anarchist, secular and anti-democratic by critics, it is seen as a paradox that it affected so many men of great religious devotion or leaders of collective campaigns.¹¹²

Thoreau also deprecates the government because of the way of how it treats American citizens, who have elected it. The author infers that people who believe in the authorities for whom they voted and who boundlessly respect the government’s law end up as “agents of injustice”:¹¹³ “you may see a file of soldiers [...] marching in admirable order over hill and dale to the wars, against their wills, aye, against their common sense and consciences [...]. They have no doubt that it is a damnable business in which they

¹⁰⁹ Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* 233.

¹¹⁰ Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* 225.

¹¹¹ Theodore Baird, “Henry Thoreau in Our Time,” *Walden and Civil Disobedience – Authoritative Texts, Background, Review and Essays in Criticism*, ed. Owen Thomas (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1966) 400.

¹¹² Rosenwald.

¹¹³ Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* 225.

are concerned”¹¹⁴. In order to ensure its own existence, the government abuses its citizens and ceases to treat them humanly; rather, it views them as mere machines:

The mass of men serve the State thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies. They are the standing army, and the militia, jailers, constables, *posse comitatus*, &c. In most cases there is no free exercise whatever of the judgment or of the moral sense; but they put themselves on a level with wood and earth and stones; and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose as well. Such command no more respect than men of straw, or a lump of dirt. They have the same sort of worth only as horses and dogs.”¹¹⁵

Thoreau is disappointed with the fact that the government is ungrateful to and forgets to be responsible for those who have enabled its functioning.

The involvement in the Mexican-American War and the legal approval of slavery make Thoreau have no respect for the American government whatsoever. Instead of protesting or publicly revolting, he chooses to act in concord with the so-called passive resistant principle. This makes his resistance slightly unusual and reverse: he does not do anything that he should not do but he does not do what he should do. Through this way Thoreau expresses his opposition against the contemporary political state. This does not mean that he is an absolute pacifist;¹¹⁶ critics demonstrate his view of violence on the following lines: “But even suppose blood should flow. Is there not a sort of blood shed when the conscience is wounded?”¹¹⁷

This is somewhat evasive — Thoreau does not make clear, though he could have, whether the blood that might flow belongs to resisters or slaveholders. What is clear is that Thoreau is willing to have *someone's* real blood flow, because, in his view, metaphorical blood is flowing already.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* 225-226.

¹¹⁵ Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* 226.

¹¹⁶ Howard Zinn, “Introduction,” *The Higher Law: Thoreau on Civil Disobedience and Reform*, 22 Oct. 2012 <<http://press.princeton.edu/chapters/i7719.html>>.

¹¹⁷ Zinn.

¹¹⁸ Rosenwald.

Thoreau does not reject violence per se; he does not see nonviolence as a first principle but as a practical preference.¹¹⁹ “He [Thoreau] criticizes the Mexican War not as a war but as an unjust war; he criticizes not prisons, but unjust imprisonments.”¹²⁰ It seems that Thoreau has a definite opinion on all the subjects which he explores and holds on to his principles under any circumstances; he adheres uncompromisingly to his rules. This is definitely considered a virtue but some can find a flaw in this conduct of his: “Nothing in American literature is more admirable than Henry Thoreau’s devotion to his principles, but the principles are, unfortunately, less significant than the devotion.”¹²¹

Henry David Thoreau expressed his disapprobation of slavery in many essays, for example in *Slavery in Massachusetts* or in *A Plea for Captain John Brown* (both essays will be elaborated in the following chapters) but *Civil Disobedience* remains the most significant and popular one. The writer cannot bear being governed by those who approve of slavery and feels a need to defy: “I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as *my* government which is the *slave’s* government also.”¹²² Thoreau claims that people have to be just and in case they behave unjustly they have to restore the damage that they have caused, no matter what the cost for it may be. He calls the law of the government of the United States of America unjust and criticizes it harshly:

No man with a genius for legislation has appeared in America. [...] There are orators, politicians, and eloquent men, by the thousand; but the speaker has not yet opened his mouth to speak, who is capable of settling the much-vexed questions of the day. [...] Our legislators have not yet learned the comparative value of free-trade and of freedom, of union, and of rectitude, to a nation. They have no genius or talent for comparatively humble questions of taxation and finance, commerce and manufacturers and agriculture.¹²³

Thoreau does not have a problem with breaking the law of which he does not approve. He suggests that:

¹¹⁹ Rosenwald.

¹²⁰ Rosenwald.

¹²¹ Hyman 317.

¹²² Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* 227.

¹²³ Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* 242.

If the injustice has a spring, or a pulley, or a rope, or a crank, exclusively for itself, then perhaps you may consider whether the remedy will not be worse than the evil; but if it is of such nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law.¹²⁴

It has been claimed that Thoreau deliberately violated the civil law three times. Firstly, and most famously, he refused to pay a tax to Massachusetts; secondly, he helped several escaped slaves avoid recapture and in doing so he violated the Fugitive Slave Law and finally, he spoke in defense of men who tried to free a recaptured slave.¹²⁵ Since Thoreau is convinced that slavery is an unacceptable and unrighteous institution, he feels no obligation towards the government which allows it. As he declares in his *Civil Disobedience*, this is in fact his way of waging war with the State.

Henry David Thoreau's negative view of slavery probably has its roots in the writer's background. Critics point out the fact that he grew up in a place full of ardent opponents of slavery, among whom were his mother and sisters, and that he was brought up in Concord, the centre of antislavery agitation.¹²⁶ Despite his activism and his strong endeavor to repeal bondage, Thoreau never officially belonged to any group of activists which fought for the abolition of slavery and he even criticized the abolitionists for their refusal to support John Brown's action.¹²⁷ Thoreau's unwillingness to be connected with any organization was caused by his negative approach to the leaders of these: "They are as bad – Garrison and Phillips, etc. – as the overseers and faculty of Harvard College. They require a man who will train well under them. Consequently they have not in their employ any but small men, - trainers."¹²⁸

Thoreau is concerned not only with the freedom of slaves but with liberty in general. He wishes for every person to be aware of the liberty which they are entitled to have; he wants them to realize it and to fight for it when it is taken away from them. Even when he is forced to stay in prison, he feels free because he is strongly aware of his individuality. Thoreau states: "I saw that, if there was a wall of stone between me and my townsmen, there was a still more difficult one to climb or break through, before they could get to be as free as I was. [...] As they could not reach me, they had resolved

¹²⁴ Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* 231.

¹²⁵ Herr 87-88.

¹²⁶ Zinn.

¹²⁷ Claude Gayet, *The Intellectual Development of Henry David Thoreau* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1981) 114, 117.

¹²⁸ Gayet 114.

to punish my body [...].”¹²⁹ It must be hardly comprehensible for a person with such opinions how people can support slavery, which is in a complete contradiction with freedom. The situation of African American slaves, who were both physically and mentally abused and who had not any choice to be free, was, therefore, much worse – Thoreau saw their condition as the most extreme form of a person’s alienation.¹³⁰

Thoreau’s approach to the political situation, including slavery, and his views in general developed during his lifetime, which is evident from his essays elaborated in this thesis. The renditions of the slaves Thomas Sims and Anthony Burns as well as the Fugitive Slave Law caused that Thoreau’s attitude towards the State became more uncompromising.¹³¹ In *Civil Disobedience*, the author criticizes what he does not like, makes the reader familiar with his opinions and suggests changes that are, according to him, necessary. Thoreau’s respond to the controversy surrounding John Brown’s raid is much more radical.¹³² In *A Plea for Captain John Brown*, he is concerned with a particular situation and his voice is rather harsh. It has been claimed that a change has already appeared before the writing of his *Civil Disobedience*:

On the question of slavery itself, it can be seen that Thoreau’s position in ‘Civil Disobedience’ differed from that he expressed in earlier writings, for example in the article ‘Herald of Freedom’ he wrote for the 1844 issue of *The Dial* [...]. Thoreau’s praise for Nathaniel P. Rodgers, the editor of the paper, was characteristic of the young Thoreau during the heyday of his ‘Transcendentalist’ phase; it focused more on the question of form than on the slavery issue itself, and there was none of the sharp criticism later directed against the State.¹³³

Thoreau emphasizes the fact that real freedom can be reached only after the Government accepts the rights of an individual and starts to respect its power and importance. He believes that if the State is capable of this it will reach glory. This, naturally, relates to the question of African American slaves as well; Thoreau rejects obedience to a state which permits slavery. Although this disobedience of his leads him

¹²⁹ Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* 236.

¹³⁰ Gayet 87.

¹³¹ Gayet 112.

¹³² Gayet 116.

¹³³ Gayet 107-108.

to prison, he does not change his mind and continues to fight the inequity which is committed to his fellow citizens.

2.2 Slavery in Massachusetts

Henry David Thoreau's essay *Slavery in Massachusetts* is based on his speech delivered at a Fourth of July gathering in Framingham, which took place in 1854.¹³⁴ Most of the speech was originally included in his Journal of April 1851 and from late May through mid June 1854.¹³⁵ The essay was later published in *The Liberator*, in the *New York Tribune* and in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* and it made many readers identify its author as an uncompromising abolitionist.¹³⁶

In the very beginning of the essay, Thoreau expresses his disappointment with the approach of the citizens of Concord towards the topic on which he focuses – towards slavery. The majority of his audience is principally interested in the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which was “passed by Congress on 30 May 1854 [and which] was designed to allow slavery in the territories west of Missouri.”¹³⁷ Thoreau is surprised at the fact that the participants of the meeting are more concerned with the territory than with the condition of their fellow citizens. He states: “[...] though several of the citizens of Massachusetts are now in prison for attempting to rescue a slave from her own clutches, not one of the speakers at that meeting expressed regret for it, not one even referred to it.”¹³⁸ Later in the essay, Thoreau tries to motivate his readers to act by statements such as: “it is not an era of repose. We have used up all our inherited freedom. If we would save our lives, we must fight for them.”¹³⁹ That the problem of slavery more or less touches all of the inhabitants of Massachusetts is pointed out in the passage where Thoreau mentions that there are a million slaves in the state; one million being the whole population of Massachusetts at that time.

It is not only the citizenry but also the government which is the subject of Thoreau's criticism. The author of *Slavery in Massachusetts* completely disrespects the

¹³⁴ Sandra Harbert Petrulionis, “Thoreau Transforms His Journal into ‘Slavery in Massachusetts’,” *The Thoreau Reader*, 9 Nov. 2012 <<http://thoreau.eserver.org/edsav1.html>>.

¹³⁵ Petrulionis.

¹³⁶ William E. Cain, *A Historical Guide to Henry David Thoreau* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2000) 44.

¹³⁷ Paul Finkelman, “Kansas-Nebraska Act,” *Encyclopedia of African American History: 1816-1895*, Volume 2, 2006 ed.

¹³⁸ Henry David Thoreau, “Slavery in Massachusetts,” *The Thoreau Reader*, 10 Nov. 2012 <<http://thoreau.eserver.org/slavery.html>>.

¹³⁹ Thoreau, *Slavery in Massachusetts*.

Court since it causes wrong by allowing incompetent people to determine fates of others:

Again it happens that the Boston Court-House is full of armed men, holding prisoner and trying a MAN, to find out if he is not really a SLAVE. Does any one think that justice or God awaits Mr. Loring's decision? [...] We may be tempted to ask from whom he received his commission, and who he is that received it; what novel statutes he obeys, and what precedents are to him of authority. Such an arbiter's very existence is an impertinence.¹⁴⁰

Thoreau does not approve of political authorities who have the power to decide about other people's lives and he questions their right to do so. Since it committed the crime of permitting Edward G. Loring work as a judge responsible for other people's destinies, the writer accuses the state of Massachusetts for its current disturbing situation.

Another person that Thoreau scorns is the Governor of Massachusetts. This man, in the author's opinion, completely fails to do justice and to act in order to protect his citizens' humanity; on the contrary, he assists in hurting their basic human rights concerning freedom. Thoreau particularly reproaches the Governor for his role in Thomas Sims' plight and comments on his actions in the following way: "What I am concerned to know is that that man's influence and authority were on the side of the slaveholder, and not of the slave – of the guilty, and not of the innocent – of injustice, and not of the justice."¹⁴¹ Thoreau contrasts religious people with politicians ("We are not a religious people, but we are a nation of politicians"¹⁴²) and points out the main difference between these two groups of people. The first group has a social function because it obeys the basic social law, which has been formed for it by its religion; the second one is incapable of even creating such law.

Apart from particular political authorities, Thoreau is also concerned with the role of law itself. The law is not supposed to restrict people and to tell them what to do, which is, according to politicians, its function. On the contrary, it should ensure one's freedom and be a product of a democratic society. Thoreau claims that "The law will

¹⁴⁰ Thoreau, Slavery in Massachusetts.

¹⁴¹ Thoreau, Slavery in Massachusetts.

¹⁴² Thoreau, Slavery in Massachusetts.

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.”¹⁴³ The law must be made into something that secures and frees people rather than something that ties them down. The urgent need for the recognition of and for respect for an individual and its liberty can, similarly, be noticed in Thoreau’s *Civil Disobedience*. The author questions the future of democracy and wishes for a world where the individual, rather than the majority, is seen as the highest and the most independent power.

It was indicated above that Thoreau deals with a few particular names in his essay. Among these is the slave Thomas Sims, who was arrested in Boston for escaping to the North and to whom did even the efforts which aimed at his liberation exerted by the Abolitionists not help.¹⁴⁴ Thoreau’s sympathy for Sims and his devotion to the whole matter is expressed in the passage of the essay in which he refers to it as “the Sims tragedy”¹⁴⁵. Another slave mentioned in the literary work is Anthony Burns, whose arrest and imprisonment happened in accordance with a warrant issued by U. S. Slave Commissioner Edward Greeley Loring, who, at that time, served as a Massachusetts judge¹⁴⁶.

The author of *Slavery in Massachusetts* stresses the negative influence of the press. He is convinced that it is corrupt and thus warns of the danger of believing everything one reads in the newspaper. He sees that there is an influence of the politicians of whom he despises in the press and that, therefore, one cannot trust it. Thoreau compares the press to the church and believes that the former’s influence has replaced that of the latter’s and that it has caused even more damage:

We are not a religious people, but we are a nation of politicians. We do not care for the Bible, but we do care for the newspaper. [...] The newspaper is a Bible which we read every morning and every afternoon, standing and sitting, riding and walking. [...] The editor is a preacher whom you voluntarily support. [...] But how many of these preachers preach the truth?¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ Thoreau, *Slavery in Massachusetts*.

¹⁴⁴ Finkelman.

¹⁴⁵ Thoreau, *Slavery in Massachusetts*.

¹⁴⁶ Petrulionis.

¹⁴⁷ Thoreau, *Slavery in Massachusetts*.

Thoreau, in a sense, shares his view of the press with Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who held the opinion that newspapers had substituted morning prayers.¹⁴⁸ This assertion is seen as paradoxical because even though the reading is performed privately and in silence, it cannot be considered an intimate and a personal matter, which is caused by the fact that, at the same moment, the act of newspaper reading is being performed by millions of others, who are completely unknown to one.¹⁴⁹

Henry David Thoreau's *Slavery in Massachusetts* contains many ideas similar to those in his *Civil Disobedience*. The author assumes that "neither an individual nor a nation can ever commit the least act of injustice against the obscurest individual without having to pay the penalty for it."¹⁵⁰ In his 1849 essay, he, similarly, stresses the need to restore the damage that one has caused even at the cost of losing one's own existence. Thoreau reminds people of the importance of being men first and Americans only after that because what matters the most it to be aware of and to stay true to one's humanity. It is additional to take care of other parts of one's life and it should happen only after one has managed to become a person fully realizing their human identity and responsibility. In *Civil Disobedience*, the reader comes across the statement that people should be mainly men and subjects afterwards. Once again, the author emphasizes the humanity, which is supposed to be inalienable, in every person and the need to cherish and develop it.

In *Slavery in Massachusetts*, Thoreau harshly criticizes the political system in which innocent citizens end up in prison and in which those who send them there are free: "While the Governor, and the Mayor, and countless officers of the Commonwealth are at large, the champions of liberty are imprisoned."¹⁵¹ Considering the main theme of the essay, it is evident that those imprisoned people represent the African American slaves but Thoreau is also likely to refer to his own time spent in jail as described in his *Civil Disobedience*. He expresses his approval of people who try to rebel against the political and judicial system: "Only they are guiltless who commit the crime of contempt of such a court. My sympathies in this case are wholly with the accused, and wholly against their accusers and judges."¹⁵² As in his *Civil Disobedience*, the writer

¹⁴⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 2000) 35.

¹⁴⁹ Anderson 35.

¹⁵⁰ Thoreau, *Slavery in Massachusetts*.

¹⁵¹ Thoreau, *Slavery in Massachusetts*.

¹⁵² Thoreau, *Slavery in Massachusetts*.

reminds in *Slavery in Massachusetts* that he is not a mere anarchist but that he requires the institutions which govern the United States of America to improve:

I do not wish to believe that the courts were made for fair weather, and for very civil cases merely; but think of leaving it to any court in the land to decide whether more than three millions of people, in this case a sixth part of a nation, have a right to be freemen or not! But it has been left to the courts of *justice*, so called – to the Supreme Court of the land – and, as you all know, recognizing no authority but the Constitution, it has decided that the three millions are and shall continue to be slaves.¹⁵³

Thoreau believes in courts and justice but does not sanction the current state of these and feels that they impeach their authority to make wrong decisions.

The return to slavery of two fugitive slaves Anthony Burns and Thomas Sims as well as the Kansas-Nebraska Act increased the efforts to abolish slavery completely and immediately; Thoreau was one the people with such an aspiration – compared to *Civil Disobedience*, the author uses a much more bitter and fiery tone in *Slavery in Massachusetts*.¹⁵⁴ One of the main differences between the two literary pieces is the main theme: in *Civil Disobedience*, Thoreau pays attention to the criticism of the Government in the first place and adds his view of slavery because it is connected to it. The situation in *Slavery in Massachusetts* is different. Even though Thoreau also expresses his frustration with the way of how his country is governed, he is primarily concerned with the topic of slavery in the essay and he uses the former one to explain and to demonstrate the miserable state of the country which allows slavery to exist.

In addition to that, the latter essay contains many sarcastic and harsh comments. Thoreau, for instance, suggests that making mankind into sausages would be equally inappropriate as making them into slaves but that the Congress is, unfortunately, too blind to see it and would consider such a suggestion inadmissible while the author regards the two transformations as a distinction without a difference. In another passage in the text where the political authorities are faulted, Thoreau, in order to make his point, claims: “A distinguished clergyman told me that he chose the profession of a

¹⁵³ Thoreau, *Slavery in Massachusetts*.

¹⁵⁴ Cain 44-45.

clergyman because it afforded the most leisure for literary pursuits, I would recommend to him the profession of a Governor.”¹⁵⁵

Thoreau’s voice at the end of the essay becomes more melancholic and pitiful. Because of the occurrences that happen in his country, he feels like losing home. He does not only misunderstand the inhabitants of his state and their disregard for the bleak situation of those affected by slavery but, mostly, he does also despise of the government and its actions. It is evident from his words:

I have lived for the last month – and I think that every man in Massachusetts capable of the sentiment of patriotism must have had a similar experience – with the sense of having suffered a vast and indefinite loss. I did not know at first what ailed me. At last it occurred to me that what I had lost was a country¹⁵⁶

that it is hard for him to cope with the changes of which he is a witness. He is no longer interested in being loyal to Massachusetts and he does not have the zeal to fight for it anymore. In the very ending of his *Slavery in Massachusetts*, Thoreau uses a metaphor in order to sum up what he has been concerned with throughout the essay. He is excited about the change of seasons and about the awakening of nature. The water-lily is a symbol for better times, particularly for freedom, which are believed to come, and the dirt from which the flower grows and which is no longer relevant stands for the limiting law and for fat-witted politicians. “The uplifting tone of this passage contrasts sharply with the damning rhetoric of the entire speech that comes before.”¹⁵⁷ The fact that he concludes with a philosophical ending referring to nature is an opportune move for an advocate of Transcendentalism.¹⁵⁸

2.3 A Plea for Captain John Brown

In his *A Plea for Captain John Brown*, Henry David Thoreau aims to correct the negative impression that the newspapers as well as some people have made others have about the hero of his essay, John Brown. *A Plea for Captain John Brown*, originally performed as a speech, was first delivered at a meeting in Concord Town Hall in

¹⁵⁵ Thoreau, *Slavery in Massachusetts*.

¹⁵⁶ Thoreau, *Slavery in Massachusetts*.

¹⁵⁷ Petrulionis.

¹⁵⁸ Petrulionis.

October of 1859¹⁵⁹. Thoreau intends to express his sympathy for and to justify John Brown's action and, being sure that his arguments are valid, he claims: "It costs us nothing to be just."¹⁶⁰ Thoreau deals mainly with the character and with the background of John Brown throughout the whole essay and with help of these he explains and vindicates his deed. It has been suggested by critics that Thoreau's plea is not for Brown's life but for his memory.¹⁶¹ He even, despite the fact that his hero is still alive at the time of the formation of the speech, uses the past tense when referring to him. The writer admits that since Brown is already in the hands of his foes, he thinks of him as dead; he does not hope for his release anymore. Thoreau wants the citizens to realize the reasons for Brown's action and the aim that he endeavored to reach. The misdoing that John Brown committed and with which Henry David Thoreau is concerned is a raid which started with the seizure of the United States arsenal at Harpers Ferry in Virginia on October 16, 1859 and which continued with capturing a number of slave owners, including George Washington's great-grand nephew, and killing several townsmen, among others the mayor¹⁶².

Thoreau seems to admire Brown for his unconditional dedication to the principles that he considered just and for his strength to fight for what he believed was right even though he did not have many supporters. The author points out Brown's faith and emphasis on the importance of respecting certain moral principles:

[...] he [Brown] permitted no profanity; no man of loose morals was suffered to remain there, unless, indeed, as a prisoner of war. 'I would rather,' said he, 'have the small-pox, yellow-fever, and cholera, all together in my camp, than a man without a principle...'.¹⁶³

Since Thoreau himself lived in concord with certain principles and never violated them, it is not surprising that he appreciated this behavior of Brown's. Thoreau, for instance, did not pay the tax out of principle; he did not agree with the government's functioning and therefore refused to obey rules of such an institution. The writer considers Brown

¹⁵⁹ Jack Turner, "Performing Conscience: Thoreau, Political Action, and the Plea for John Brown," *Political Theory* 33.4 Aug. 2005: 450.

¹⁶⁰ Henry David Thoreau, "A Plea for Captain John Brown," *The Avalon Project*, 4 Dec. 2012 <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/thoreau_001.asp>.

¹⁶¹ Turner 451.

¹⁶² Paul Finkelman, "John Brown: America's First Terrorist?," *Prologue Magazine*, 2011, 3 Dec. 2012 <<http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2011/spring/brown.html>>.

¹⁶³ Thoreau, A Plea for Captain John Brown.

the representative of the North because he is ready to give up his life for his ideals and for the liberation of thousands of people. Thoreau claims:

He [Brown] was a superior man. [...] No man in America has ever stood up so persistently and effectively for the dignity of human nature, knowing himself for a man, and the equal of any and all governments. In that sense he was the most American of us all. He needed no babbling lawyer, making false issues, to defend him. He was more than a match for all the judges that American voters, or office-holders of whatever grade, can create.¹⁶⁴

The fact that Thoreau worships Brown is evident from many other passages from the essay, for example from the one where the author calls him “A man of rare common-sense and directness of speech, as of action; a transcendentalist above all, a man of ideas and principles”¹⁶⁵. John Brown is seen as a human whose moral principles are much nobler than those of ordinary people. Self-critically, Thoreau places Brown higher than other people: “A hero in the midst of us cowards is always so dreaded. [...] He [Brown] shows himself superior to nature. He has a spark of divinity in him.”¹⁶⁶ In another essay of his, in *The Last Days of John Brown*, Thoreau comes back to this subject and once again states that there is “no greater or wiser or better man with whom to contrast him [Brown], for he [Brown], then and there, was above them all”¹⁶⁷ and refers to a great paradox when he states that “the man this country [is] about to hang [appears] the greatest and best in it”¹⁶⁸.

Brown’s determination and bravery is exalted in *A Plea for Captain John Brown*. Thoreau mentions that both Brown and his armor were willing to lay down their lives in order to defend what they regarded as evil and injustice. The author argues that “the fight against slavery is the act done ‘in obedience of a much higher command’ than the orders given in battle”¹⁶⁹ and that “it establishes the superiority of man over a military or state machine.”¹⁷⁰ This suggests that Brown’s heroism is viewed as greater than that present in war. Since the fight for abolition of slavery creates a unity of new

¹⁶⁴ Thoreau, *A Plea for Captain John Brown*.

¹⁶⁵ Thoreau, *A Plea for Captain John Brown*.

¹⁶⁶ Thoreau, *A Plea for Captain John Brown*.

¹⁶⁷ Henry David Thoreau, “The Last Days of John Brown,” *Thoreau on John Brown*, 6 Dec 2012 <<http://sniggle.net/Experiment/index5.php?entry=johnbrown#lastdays>>.

¹⁶⁸ Thoreau, *The Last Days of John Brown*.

¹⁶⁹ Justin Quinn, et al., *Lectures on American Literature* (Praha: Karolinum, 2011) 150.

¹⁷⁰ Quinn 150.

heroes, including John Brown, the slave problem is not claimed to divide but to unite.¹⁷¹ By pointing out Brown's heroism, Thoreau suggests that some people, unlike his hero and his adherents, who fought for their lives, do not realize the fact that they have never lived.¹⁷²

[...] in order to die you must first have lived. I don't believe in the hearses, and the palls and the funerals that they have had. There was no death in the case, because there had been no life; they merely rotted or sloughed off, pretty much as they had rotted or sloughed along. [...] Let the dead bury their dead.¹⁷³

These people are not aware of the value of life because they have never had to wage war in order to save theirs and therefore are, in a sense, dead. John Brown, in contrast to these, sacrificed everything because he knew exactly what freedom and life was worth.

Thoreau compares John Brown's execution to Christ's crucifixion. The reasons for this parallel are, firstly, the fact that Brown longed to save other people, fought for them and sacrificed his own life for the lives of the slaves whom he wanted to make free and save and, secondly, the inability of many people to fully understand his good intentions and their consequent inability to adore and cherish him as well as their interest in killing him. Some critics think that Brown himself helped to create his image of a Christ-like martyr by writing brilliant letters during the month between his sentencing and his execution.¹⁷⁴ On the other hand, it has been claimed that placing Brown on the level of Christ is a notable misreading because of the former's violent excesses.¹⁷⁵ Thoreau also compares Brown to American patriots Ethan Allen and John Stark but he feels that these cannot equal Brown in his bravery and courage because they only fought their country's foes whereas Brown faced his country herself when he felt that she was in the wrong.

John Brown's action at Harper's Ferry met with different perceptions. Some considered it a fecund and necessary deed and considered Brown a hero and a savior; others thought that what he did was insane and senseless. Brown had many

¹⁷¹ Quinn 150.

¹⁷² Quinn 150.

¹⁷³ Thoreau, A Plea for Captain John Brown.

¹⁷⁴ Finkelman.

¹⁷⁵ David Reynolds, "John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights," *Kansas History Web Site*, 5 Feb. 2009, 7 Dec. 2012 <<http://www.kansashistory.us/johnbrown.html>>.

sympathizers, among others the fugitive slave Frederick Douglass, who shared Brown's view of the necessity of the abolition of slavery but who also thought that his plan was suicidal.¹⁷⁶ Thoreau asserts that Brown is one of the first Northerners respected by a slaveholder and presents what Governor Wise said about him: "They are themselves mistaken who take him to be madman.... He is cool, collected, and indomitable, and it is but just to him to say, that he was humane to his prisoners.... And he inspired me with great trust in his integrity as a man of truth."¹⁷⁷ Similarly, the politician Mr. Vallandigham uttered that "it is vain to underrate either the man or his conspiracy.... He is the farthest possible removed from the ordinary ruffian, fanatic, or madman."¹⁷⁸ In *The Last Days of John Brown*, Thoreau deals with the way of how Brown was perceived by other American citizens:

Most Northern men, and a few Southern ones, were wonderfully stirred by Brown's behavior and words. They saw and felt that they were heroic and noble, and that there had been nothing quite equal to them in their kind in this country, or in the recent history of the world. But the minority were unmoved by them. [...] Not being accustomed to make fine distinctions, or to appreciate magnanimity, they read his letters and speeches as if they read them not. They were not aware when they approached a heroic statement, — they did not know when they *burned*. They did not feel that he spoke with authority, and hence they only remembered that the *law* must be executed.¹⁷⁹

The controversy about the Harpers Ferry raid is caused mainly because of the extensive use of violence. Many people accused John Brown of terrorism. Paul Finkelman tries to answer the question whether Brown was, in fact, a terrorist and claims that terrorists view the act of violence not as a means to an end but as the goal. Another sign of theirs is indiscriminate killing. They are known for attacking nonmilitary targets and people without the possibility to defend themselves and they try to hide their identity.¹⁸⁰ Out of many reasons, for example that Brown's victims were

¹⁷⁶ Finkelman.

¹⁷⁷ Thoreau, A Plea for Captain John Brown.

¹⁷⁸ Thoreau, A Plea for Captain John Brown.

¹⁷⁹ Thoreau, The Last Days of John Brown.

¹⁸⁰ Finkelman.

not people whom he considered innocent or that he raided an arsenal full of weapons, the author does not liken him to a terrorist.¹⁸¹

It is interesting that Thoreau, an advocate of the passive-resistance principle, supported Brown's extremely bruising action. Thoreau is believed to have reappraised his view in response to the bleak situation in the country and to start thinking passive resistance inadequate to the evil of slavery.¹⁸² Taken from another point of view, it has been suggested that Thoreau's knowledge of Brown's life was imperfect and that had he known about or believed Brown's supervision of the 1856 Kansas massacre, he would not have endorsed him to the extent to which he did.¹⁸³ In the beginning of the essay, Thoreau himself mentions that he knows little of Brown but this statement seems to represent a polite and humble way of expressing himself rather than to admit an actual lack of knowledge.

Even though John Brown had the same aim as the members of the abolitionist movement, he was criticized by these. The abolitionists did not in principle reject violence but they believed that concerned political action was more effective and Brown, in their eyes, crossed the line with his raid on Harpers Ferry Arsenal.¹⁸⁴ The question is whether it is right to respond to violence by violence. Brown and his supporters probably felt that since the treatment of the slaves was intolerably cruel, the reaction to it had to be very radical. When it comes to killing people, nonetheless, any kind of radicalism and of violence seems exorbitant.

It was mentioned in this thesis that many people held the opinion that John Brown was insane. Thoreau is upset about hearing people talk derisively about the hero of his essay. Comments such as "he died as the fool dieth"¹⁸⁵ or "What will he gain by it?"¹⁸⁶ make him aware of human hypocrisy and of the fact that some people failed completely to understand Brown's reasons and beliefs. According to Thoreau, those who speak of Brown in a similar manner are ignorant of his personality; they do not grasp his faith and religious principles. Thoreau points out that had the whole Harpers Ferry raid occurred under different circumstances the general view of Brown would have been distinct.

¹⁸¹ Finkelman.

¹⁸² Turner 458.

¹⁸³ Turner 452.

¹⁸⁴ Gayet 117.

¹⁸⁵ Thoreau, A Plea for Captain John Brown.

¹⁸⁶ Thoreau, A Plea for Captain John Brown.

I have no doubt that if he had gone with five thousand men, liberated a thousand slaves, killed a hundred or two slaveholders, and had as many more killed on his own side, but not lost his own life, these same editors [saying that Brown was crazy] would have called it by a more respectable name. Yet he has been far more successful than that. He has liberated many thousands of slaves, both North and South. They seem to have known nothing about living or dying for a principle. They all called him crazy then; who calls him crazy now?¹⁸⁷

Henry David Thoreau does not approve of the way of how the newspapers write about the raid. He emphasizes the editors' unconcern about Brown's situation caused by their fear of losing their readers. Instead of informing the citizens on important things which are going on in their country, they fill the press with political and religious affairs. Thoreau laments: "To turn from the voices and deeds of earnest men to the cackling of political conventions!"¹⁸⁸ and exhorts the publishers: "Exclude the reports of religious and political conventions, and publish the words of a living man."¹⁸⁹

Considering Thoreau's opinions on the government expressed in his earlier essays, it is not surprising that he is concerned with the same topic in *A Plea for Captain John Brown* as well. Thoreau accuses the government of oppressing mankind because he feels that "there sits a tyrant holding fettered four millions of slaves"¹⁹⁰. He scathingly refers to John Brown's condemnation by indicating that the government can either make men slaves or hang them. The fact that the political authorities intend to put Brown to death assures Thoreau that they establish injustice: "What shall we think of a government to which all the truly brave and just men in the land are enemies, standing between it and those whom it oppresses? A government that pretends to be Christian and crucifies a million Christs every day!"¹⁹¹ The author is not contented with the situation in which all of the citizens have to obey unjust rules of those who govern their state. It has already been mentioned in this thesis that Thoreau's view of slavery developed within years. His reaction became more radical with the controversy over

¹⁸⁷ Thoreau, *The Last Days of John Brown*.

¹⁸⁸ Thoreau, *A Plea for Captain John Brown*.

¹⁸⁹ Thoreau, *A Plea for Captain John Brown*.

¹⁹⁰ Thoreau, *A Plea for Captain John Brown*.

¹⁹¹ Thoreau, *A Plea for Captain John Brown*.

John Brown's action.¹⁹² Most of Thoreau's opinions stayed, nevertheless, the same. There are similarities to be found in his *Resistance to Civil Government* and in *A Plea for Captain John Brown*. In the latter essay, Thoreau, once again, feels outraged because the government does, instead of ruling democratically, restrict those who have enabled it to govern the country. When the government becomes an abettor of injustice it does not deserve to be respected anymore.¹⁹³

The conclusion of the essay presents John Brown's prediction of the slavery issue resolution and refers to Thoreau's conviction that his hero represents the times that are about to come; that he is a prophet of the upcoming general conflict.¹⁹⁴ Thoreau's admiration for Brown is also evident from his belief in John Brown's immortality.

[...] I heard, to be sure, that he was *hung*, but I did not know what that meant; I felt no sorrow on that account; but not for a day or two did I even *hear* that he was *dead*, and not after any number of days shall I believe it. Of all the men who were said to be my contemporaries, it seemed to me that John Brown was the only one who *had not died*. [...] I meet him at every turn. He is more alive than he ever was. He has earned immortality.¹⁹⁵

Another thing that contributed to Brown's immortality was the emergence of the war song *John Brown's Body*, later adapted to *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* by Julia Ward Howe¹⁹⁶. Thoreau remarks that the very act of Brown's execution redounded to his advantage; firstly, he was not hanged at once but was reserved to preach to his executioners and secondly, his followers were not killed with him and his victory was therefore prolonged and completed.¹⁹⁷ Even though the author's view of the abolition of slavery was very radical and therefore similar to that of Brown's and even though the former approved of the latter's use of violence as the only possible way of how to defend oneself, Thoreau's boundless respect for John Brown is mainly grounded in his view of him as a savior of four million slaves.

¹⁹² Gayet 116.

¹⁹³ Turner 461.

¹⁹⁴ Gayet 118.

¹⁹⁵ Thoreau, *The Last Days of John Brown*.

¹⁹⁶ Reynolds.

¹⁹⁷ Thoreau, *The Last Days of John Brown*.

3. Broader Context of Henry David Thoreau's Opinions on Slavery

3.1 Walden

To fully understand Thoreau's opinions on slavery and to make sense of them, one has to be familiar with the writer's primary beliefs and convictions. These are, among others, covered in *Walden*, one of his most fundamental works. In *Walden*, which is "a record of Thoreau's experiment in simple living on the northern shore of Walden Pond in eastern Massachusetts,"¹⁹⁸ the author emphasizes the great importance of the self. Liberation from society and from outer influences is the best way to self-contentedness and self-realization. The author left his former residence in order to live in the woods surrounding Walden Pond where he was able to come to terms with his true identity and where he had a chance to free himself from all the material things that are unnecessary and, in addition to that, keep one down from experiencing a simple and therefore a happy life. In Thoreau's eyes, even heritage is evil:

I see young men, my townsmen, whose misfortune it is to have inherited farms, houses, barns, cattle, and farming tools; for these are more easily acquired than got rid of. Better if they had been born in the open pasture and suckled by a wolf, that they might have seen with clearer eyes what field they were called to labor in. Who made them serfs of the soil?¹⁹⁹

Thoreau believes that inheriting property and land restricts people in living freely; it predestinates them to be slaves, who have to work for others. Philip Cafaro suggests that it is evident from *Walden* that "his [Thoreau's] neighbors' work deforms their characters and lives rather than improving them."²⁰⁰

Henry David Thoreau criticizes exorbitant technological improvements and the way of how people rely on these. In order to demonstrate the absurdity of technological progress, he ironically comments on it: "We are eager to tunnel under the Atlantic and bring the old world some weeks nearer to the new; but perchance the first news that will leak through into the broad, flapping American ear will be that the Princess Adelaide has the whooping cough."²⁰¹ Thoreau also mentions the pointlessness of the railway: "[a

¹⁹⁸ "Walden," *Merriam Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature*, 1995 ed.

¹⁹⁹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1995) 2.

²⁰⁰ Philip Cafaro, *Thoreau's Living Ethics: Walden and the Pursuit of Virtue* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2006) 78.

²⁰¹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* 46.

million Irishmen exclaim:] is not this railroad which we have built a good thing? Yes, I answer [...] but I wish [...] that you could have spent your time better than digging in this dirt.”²⁰² Since people work in order to improve their social status and effect technological progress, their activities no longer pursue the original purpose of work, which was to provide subsistence for human life. Technology enslaves people; the railroad, for example, encourages people to travel by train and takes away the opportunity to walk freely. Thoreau states: “We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us. Did you ever think what those sleepers are that underlie the railroad? Each one is a man [...]. The rails are laid on them [...].”²⁰³

Things that are, according to Thoreau, necessary for life are food, clothing, shelter and fuel. Everything else means “positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind”²⁰⁴. Thanks to the awareness of the vanity of owning unnecessary possession people get the chance to understand themselves and nature as their natural environment much better, which leads to the fact that they are able to conceive themselves as unique individuals worth freedom. Together with this self-realization, faith in oneself is crucial for a person:

I think that we may safely trust a good deal more than we do.
We may waive just so much care of ourselves as we honestly
bestow elsewhere. Nature is as well adapted to our weakness
as to our strength. The incessant anxiety and strain of some is
a well nigh incurable form of disease.²⁰⁵

One of the ideas which permeate the whole book is that nature is the only unfaltering spot in the world to which one can always return and from which one can draw strength. Thoreau perceives nature as a stable and an invariable place which provides people with energy needed to realize their role in the world. The author views nature not as something against which one should fight or which one should conquer but as a partner to men, who ought to live as equals with it. Thoreau expresses his positive attitude towards nature in his claim “There can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of Nature, and has his sense still. [...] I was [...] sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature [...]”²⁰⁶.

²⁰² Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* 47-48.

²⁰³ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* 82.

²⁰⁴ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* 13.

²⁰⁵ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* 10.

²⁰⁶ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* 117.

Thoreau is deeply interested in the topic of individual freedom of men. In *Walden*, he describes his reasons for the decision to spend months by himself apart from the rest of society. Thoreau longs for finding the truth, rather than money, fame or love. This truth can be acquired after liberating oneself from negative features, such as hypocrisy or vanity. These two qualities are harshly criticized by the author: “[...] I am sure that there is greater anxiety, commonly, to have fashionable, or at least clean and unpatched clothes, than to have a sound conscience.”²⁰⁷ The writer emphasizes the importance of simplicity and states that he gave up the conventional way of living in order to face the essentials of life only and to live with minimal expenses. Thoreau clarifies his truth-seeking ideas through a metaphor in the text: “[I wished] to go before the mast and on the deck of the world, for there I could best see the moonlight amid the mountains.”²⁰⁸

Thoreau’s intention is to live “deliberately as Nature”²⁰⁹ and to see through the things to their very surface. He intended to cultivate his virtue.²¹⁰ “As we have seen, Henry Thoreau went to Walden Pond to become a better person, defining this broadly to include increased knowledge, an enriched experience, character development, creative achievement, and greater personal integrity.”²¹¹ It has been suggested that there is a connection between *Walden* and *Civil Disobedience*²¹² because, among others, “The ‘Walden’ experiment is [...] individual protest of quite the same order as the [...] refusal to pay the poll tax.”²¹³ However, some critics do not consider Thoreau’s retirement to his log cabin as particularly unique since a lot of both his American and British contemporaries moved to rural settlements in the 1840s.²¹⁴

There are many opinions expressed in *Walden* which clash with the principle of slavery. Thoreau believes in the individuality and freedom of a human being whereas slaveholders aim to stifle the natural and inborn liberty of people. One learns from the book that the author is strongly against any form of dehumanization. Thoreau is deeply convinced that, by nature, each person should be free. He claims:

²⁰⁷ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* 19.

²⁰⁸ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* 286.

²⁰⁹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* 86.

²¹⁰ Cafaro 45.

²¹¹ Cafaro 45.

²¹² Don W. Kleine, “Civil Disobedience: The Way to Walden,” *Modern Language Notes* 75.4 Apr. 1960: 297.

²¹³ Kleine 298.

²¹⁴ W. Barksdale Maynard, “Thoreau’s House at Walden,” *The Art Bulletin* 81.2 Jun. 1999: 303.

I sometimes wonder that we can be so frivolous, I may almost say, as to attend to the gross but somewhat foreign form of servitude called Negro Slavery, there are so many keen and subtle masters that enslave both north and south. It is hard to have a southern overseer; it is worse to have a northern one; but worst of all when you are the slave-driver of yourself.²¹⁵

The quotation refers to the fact that, although for different purposes in both parts of the country, slavery was widespread both in the South and in the North of the United States of America²¹⁶.

In *Walden*, Thoreau does not deal with particular concerns of slavery, such as degradation of humans into the category of chattel or the topic of racism, but views slavery as a general problem of humanity; as a problem of freedom of the American society as well as of an individual citizen. Thoreau grasps slavery in the broader context of society and individual and is interested in the freedom of people in general. The author feels that people need to liberate themselves from materialism because the superfluous money and possession poses a hindrance to the full realization of one's inner world and of the truth. Only individuals themselves can determine their fate: "[...] the man who goes alone can start to-day; but he who travels with another must wait till that other is ready, and it may be a long time before they get off."²¹⁷ Thoreau encourages people to listen only to their inner voice and to their own needs and recommends that everyone should get rid of influences which restrict their freedom:

Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed, and in such desperate enterprises? If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away. It is not important that he should mature as soon as an apple-tree or an oak.²¹⁸

Thoreau's conception of freedom and individualism predetermines his view of bondage and makes it easier for the reader to grasp the author's negative view of slavery and his consequent radical abolitionism discussed in the foregoing chapters of this thesis.

²¹⁵ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* 7.

²¹⁶ Quinn 146.

²¹⁷ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* 63.

²¹⁸ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* 288.

3.2 Life Without Principle

Henry David Thoreau focuses on the importance of one's inner well-being and self-contentedness in his essay *Life Without Principle*. He sees the source of happiness in things that are, unfortunately, regarded as non-significant by the majority of his contemporaries; in the good feeling that is caused by an action that leads to a person's liberation from outer factors which influence them in a negative way. Mainly, Thoreau deals with the vain desire for money: "The result [of working hard only in order to be rich] will be that he [a person] will perhaps get some more money to hoard, and leave for his [the person's] heirs to spend foolishly."²¹⁹ This quotation suggests that it is much more reasonable for a man to experience a quality and enjoyable life while they actually live it than to fear the future and to be put under pressure because of a situation that might occur in the future. One's job and earnings also determine the way in which one is viewed by others: "[...] if I choose to devote myself to certain labors which yield more real profit, though but little money, they [most] may be inclined to look on me as an idler."²²⁰ Thoreau's words: "Do not hire a man who does your work for money, but him who does it for love of it"²²¹ suggest that it is important for him to occupy himself with an activity that enriches him mentally, rather than financially.

One of Thoreau's main concerns and convictions, his negative and radical opinion on slavery, is rooted in his view of the very nature of an individual, which is based on their freedom and self-respect. Even though he does not, in contrast to some of his earlier works, deal with slavery per se in *Life Without Principle*, he notices that some features of slavery, such as slavish labor, persist even in the seemingly free society. According to him, no one should ever sell themselves out for money since such an action disrupts their value of a free citizen.

[...] I foresee, that, if my wants [to be serviceable] should be much increased, the labor required to supply them would become a drudgery. If I should sell both my forenoons and afternoons to society, as most appear to do, I am sure, that, for me, there would be nothing left worth living for. I trust that I shall never thus sell my birthright for a mess of pottage.

²¹⁹ Henry David Thoreau, "Life Without Principle," *American Transcendentalism Web*, 20 Apr. 2012 <<http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/thoreau/lifewithoutprinciple.html>>.

²²⁰ Thoreau, *Life Without Principle*.

²²¹ Thoreau, *Life Without Principle*.

[...] There is no more fatal blunderer than he who consumes the greater part of his life getting a living.²²²

Thoreau is known for the ability to live an economically undemanding life, which can be proved by his two-year stay in the woods. Material riches are not important to him and he despises of people who give up a part of their individuality in order to gain money. The quotation above shows what Thoreau sees as the rudiment of slavery – as long as people do what they like without thinking of future consequences and as long as they are able to take care of themselves without having to depend on other people, they are free but at the moment when they start to work for (and in a way serve) the society and are paid for it they become involved in drudgery, as Thoreau calls it. James A. Madison argues that “Having demonstrated to his own satisfaction that man can live on very little and be the happier for it, Thoreau spoke out firmly and frequently for the simple life. He abhorred the greediness of men, their zeal to accumulate wealth, their slavish devotion to things.”²²³

Thoreau focuses on the topic of fairness:

God gave the righteous man a certificate entitling him to food and raiment, but the unrighteous man found a *facsimile* of the same in God’s coffers, and appropriated it, and obtained food and raiment like the former. It is one of the most extensive systems of counterfeiting that the world has seen.²²⁴

The author clearly refers to the inequity between people on which grounds is based the concept of slavery. Thoreau does not directly argue that all people are equal but he indicates that each person should get what they deserve. In my opinion, this statement goes hand in hand with the refusal of slavery. Slaves cannot unequivocally be generally considered “unrighteous” and therefore be treated in a bad manner. It should be emphasized that Thoreau was a man who saw not only the fact but also the principle²²⁵. The eventual result (in this case the amount of earned money) means nothing to him in comparison with the freedom of an individual. Such an approach is demonstrated on his disappointment with his employer: “When I observe that there are different ways of surveying, my employer commonly asks which will give him the most land, not which

²²² Thoreau, *Life Without Principle*.

²²³ Charles A. Madison, “Henry David Thoreau: Transcendental Individualist,” *Ethics* [Chicago] 54.2 Jan. 1944: 113.

²²⁴ Thoreau, *Life Without Principle*.

²²⁵ Thoreau, *Life Without Principle*.

is most correct”²²⁶ or on his view of the inner value of a person: “A man had better starve at once than lose his innocence in the process of getting his bread.”²²⁷ Thoreau stresses the importance of one’s clear conscience; of the feeling which one has when they do not act against certain moral principles. He is, therefore, disillusioned by his countrymen because he witnesses their expediency and their desire for money which lead to cupidity and hypocrisy of the whole nation.

I would like to make a connection between the before mentioned statements and Thoreau’s opinions on slavery expressed in his *Civil Disobedience*, *Slavery in Massachusetts* and *A Plea for Captain John Brown*. Thoreau believes in individuality and freedom, which are inalienable and which should be cherished by each person who has the possibility to do so. Exchanging one’s free life for money is not understandable and acceptable for Thoreau not only because of the fact that by doing so one gives up a part of one’s personality but also because one becomes a slave of one’s employer and, consequently, of the whole society. Since such people let others use them in order to gain material things, they are harshly criticized by Thoreau, who does not approve of such expedient behavior at all. Such people, in a sense, enable the process of drudgery. It seems to me that Thoreau believes that this drudgery is dangerously closely connected to slavery, which is, naturally, wrong as it disrupts freedom of an individual. Even though Thoreau does not, similarly as in his *Walden*, deal with specific problems of slavery, he focuses on freedom of a person and on its broader context in his *Life Without Principle*. He believes that people need to keep their inner liberty, which is necessary for their worthy life.

²²⁶ Thoreau, *Life Without Principle*.

²²⁷ Thoreau, *Life Without Principle*.

4. Henry David Thoreau's Influence

Apart from the topic of nature, Henry David Thoreau's main interest is focused on social and political matters of his time. These concerns of his are dealt with in all of the essays analyzed in this thesis, with the closest attention paid to the problem of slavery. It was through these essays of his that he managed to significantly influence such personages as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Václav Havel and many others: "Americans know Thoreau primarily as the author of the book *Walden, or Life in the Woods* [...] but it is *Civil Disobedience* that established his reputation in the wider political world."²²⁸ Despite the frequent dissatisfaction expressed in his literary works and the reproachful tone of these, Thoreau himself does not seem to have actively contributed to any change in the field of politics. His prominence, however, is reflected in the actions of those influenced by him and in the opinions of those inspired by him through listening to his lectures or through reading his literary pieces.

Since "Thoreau's career as a writer coincided with a period of remarkable growth [...] in the [...] distribution, and consumption of literature in the United States,"²²⁹ the access to his books and essays was easier than it would have been had he lived earlier. During his life, Thoreau was criticized for the fact that, instead of being politically engaged enough, he spent his life scorning society and politics of his time.²³⁰ The truth is that in all of the essays discussed in this thesis one comes across harsh animadversion of the contemporary state of particular issues, of important political figures and of the conditions in the country in general. Thoreau himself tries to fight the state of things with which he disagrees in his own way, however, he does not provide any definite way out of it. He utters very clearly what he demands, be it the abolition of slavery or the end of the Mexican-American War, but a feasible solution is somehow missing in his work. Critics claim that Thoreau's mode of speaking is advice giving.²³¹

Thoreau says that he is concerned with showing 'the mass of men' how to 'improve' their lives and their times: 'I do not speak to those who are well employed, in whatever circumstances, and they know whether they are well

²²⁸ Wendy McElroy, "Henry Thoreau and 'Civil Disobedience'," *The Thoreau Reader*, 2005, 16 Apr. 2013 <<http://thoreau.eserver.org/wendy.html>>.

²²⁹ Steven Fink, "Thoreau and His Audience," *The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Joel Myerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 71.

²³⁰ Shannon L. Mariotti, *Thoreau's Democratic Withdrawal* (Madison, Wis: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2010) 85.

²³¹ Mariotti 119.

employed or not – but mainly to the mass of men who are discontented, and idly complaining of the hardness of their lot or of the times, when they might improve them’.²³²

Thoreau disliked being actively engaged in political life and he, like Ralph Waldo Emerson,²³³ “saw in the politics of a democracy a force likely to absorb and decenter them [Emerson and Thoreau]”²³⁴. He himself viewed political action as a limited obligation and felt that people should have other concerns.²³⁵ This makes more sense when one realizes that Thoreau’s manner of defiance corresponds to his solitary way of living; he does not take part in great revolts but that does not mean that he does not fight. He does not pay taxes, he supports John Brown’s fight for the abolition of slavery, he expresses his opinions in his essays and books. He fights the inequity on his own and wishes for setting an example for other people. Sometimes, however, these forms of resistance were not grasped and appreciated by others. Even one of his closest friends and his mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, regarded Thoreau’s imprisonment as useless²³⁶. “Emerson was ‘out there’ [not in prison] because he believed it was shortsighted to protest and isolated evil; society required an entire rebirth of spirituality.”²³⁷

In the following lines, Thoreau’s influence on three political figures will be analyzed. Firstly, I will focus on Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi first came across Thoreau in 1907 in South Africa when he was provided with a copy of *The Duty of Civil Disobedience*.²³⁸ Since Gandhi’s main concern was to fight colonial rule in India as well as racism in South Africa,²³⁹ it is not that surprising that he was inspired by someone who had similar aims, albeit in different times and in a different country. Thoreau protested not only against the political authorities but also against the actions performed by these, which included slavery, wars or injustice. “Thoreau had opposed the enslavement of man; Indians, being enslaved themselves, needed encouragement in

²³² Mariotti 119.

²³³ Rosenwald.

²³⁴ Rosenwald.

²³⁵ Rosenwald.

²³⁶ McElroy.

²³⁷ McElroy.

²³⁸ Anthony J. Parel, “Thoreau, Gandhi, and Comparative Political Thought,” *Books.google.com*, Google, 16 Apr. 2013

<http://books.google.ie/books?id=bOI4JUUo9J4C&pg=PT488&lpg=PT488&dq=thoreau,+gandhi,+and+comparative+political+thought&source=bl&ots=e2LI51CZ4i&sig=1_U4XQEjUK1toFPHd-KXtvN3mag&hl=cs&sa=X&ei=Yrl_UYOJMuaI7Aem4CgBQ&redir_esc=y>.

²³⁹ “Gandhi, Mohanda K.,” *King Encyclopedia*, 17 Apr. 2013

<http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/kingweb/about_king/encyclopedia/gandhi.htm>.

their struggle.”²⁴⁰ Thoreau, being concerned with the abolition of slavery in the United States, pointed out the importance of liberty, which Gandhi regarded pivotal in his fight for Indian independence. Thoreau put emphasis on the freedom of an individual in America, which can be transmitted to and seen as Gandhi’s stress on the freedom of the Indian nation in the world. Gandhi himself openly admitted having been influenced by Thoreau when it came to his own beliefs and movement:

[...] his [Thoreau’s] ideas influenced me greatly. I adopted some of them and recommended the study of Thoreau to all my friends who were helping me in the cause of Indian independence. Why, I actually took the name of my movement from Thoreau’s essay, ‘On the Duty of Civil Disobedience’ [...].²⁴¹

Gandhi saw Thoreau as the model for practitioners of satyagraha²⁴² and often referred to him as the great Thoreau,²⁴³ which proves the former’s admiration for the latter. Thoreau was not the only person who committed civil disobedience. Through him, Gandhi may have also been inspired by his contemporaries with similar interests²⁴⁴ of whose actions Thoreau is likely to have approved. After having read a biography of Thoreau, Gandhi learnt about the burning of the Constitution of the United States by William Lloyd Garrison in 1854.²⁴⁵ Having been aware of this violent action, Gandhi burned the registration acts of the Indians on August 16, 1908 as a response to the Asiatic Registration Act and was consequently arrested and sent to prison.²⁴⁶

Gandhi believed that it was the “height of one’s good fortune to be in jail in the interests and good name of one’s country and religion.” In jail the necessities of life were provided and the soul was left free; the body was restrained, but not the soul. A malevolent warden merely taught self-control to the prisoner. Gandhi trusted “that the [his] readers [...] will be

²⁴⁰ George Hendrick, “The Influence of Thoreau’s ‘Civil Disobedience’ on Gandhi’s *Satyagraha*,” *The New England Quarterly* 29.4 Dec. 1956: 467.

²⁴¹ Hendrick 463.

²⁴² Satyagraha is a concept introduced by Mahatma Gandhi in the early 20th century, which emphasizes insistence on truth and nonviolent and determined resistance to evil. It was originally used by the Indians in their struggle against British imperialism. “Satyagraha,” *Merriam-Webster’s Encyclopedia of World Religions*, 1999 ed.

²⁴³ Parel.

²⁴⁴ Hendrick 469.

²⁴⁵ Hendrick 469.

²⁴⁶ Hendrick 469.

convinced that the real road to ultimate happiness lies in going to jail and undergoing sufferings and privations there in the interest of one's country and religion."²⁴⁷

Gandhi felt that he was placed in a similar position like Thoreau and he realized that their opinions on prison were alike.²⁴⁸ The above quote markedly resembles Thoreau's words "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison"²⁴⁹ from his *Civil Disobedience*. Both Thoreau's and Gandhi's gestures for which they were sent to prison were done as a rebellion in order to express their opinions on particular actions of which they did not approve and since both of them felt that they have been absolutely right about it and that the whole political system was absurd, they accepted their confinement without any objections.

There is, however, a contradiction between Thoreau's and Gandhi's philosophy. The latter explains that

Satyagraha ... is literally holding on to Truth and it means, therefore, Truth-force. Truth is soul of spirit. It is, therefore, known as soul-force. It excludes the use of violence, because man is not capable of knowing the absolute truth and, therefore, is not competent to punish.²⁵⁰

Thoreau, on the contrary, as it was explained in the foregoing chapter of this thesis, did not deprecate violence in general. This fact is noticeable from his defense of John Brown's raid at Harpers Ferry in Virginia in 1859. Gandhi's theory of means and ends supports the idea that his view of violence differed significantly from that of Thoreau's. Mahatma Gandhi emphasizes the means because they determine the ends and believes that they are as important as the end; for him, means and ends are inseparable.²⁵¹

To whatever extent was Gandhi inspired by Thoreau, one should not overestimate the American writer's influence upon the Indian politician.²⁵² Gandhi claims that his idea of civil disobedience was not derived from Thoreau's writings and that it had been well advanced even before he had a chance to read the latter's essay.²⁵³

²⁴⁷ Hendrick 469.

²⁴⁸ Hendrick 470.

²⁴⁹ Henry David Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience," *The Thoreau Reader*, 8 Sept. 2009, 18 Apr. 2013 <<http://thoreau.eserver.org/civil2.html>>.

²⁵⁰ Parel.

²⁵¹ Anil Dutta Mishra, "Sarvodaya Philosophy," *Reading Gandhi*, ed. Surjit Kaur Jolly (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2006) 151.

²⁵² Hendrick 471.

²⁵³ Hendrick 471.

He may have been inspired by particular actions and thoughts of Thoreau's disobedience (for example in the form of public revolts; Thoreau's not paying taxes is, in a sense, similar to Gandhi's burning of the registration acts of the Indians) but not with the whole idea of civil disobedience.

Secondly, Thoreau's influence upon Martin Luther King will be analyzed. King, a famous civil rights leader, became familiar with Thoreau's writings in college in 1944.²⁵⁴ In his *Stride Toward Freedom*, King admits having been influenced by Thoreau as well as the fact that he was fascinated by the latter and states that reading his essay *Civil Disobedience* was his first encounter with the nonviolent resistance theory.²⁵⁵ King is compared to the Transcendentalists because, like them, he had to deal with a double question:²⁵⁶ "whether they [he] would make the world better by working to renovate man's nature or by organizing to improve his institutions; and second, if they [he] chose the latter course, whether to attempt a gradual amelioration or a drastic and sudden change."²⁵⁷

Having a similar conflict, however, is only the beginning; the more important thing, by which one can measure the influence of Thoreau upon King, is the way of how the problem was solved. King found Thoreau's stress on individualism very attractive.²⁵⁸ In his *Civil Disobedience*, Thoreau emphasizes the need of becoming a mentally strong and sentient individual in order to be able to fight for one's rights and deal with injustice. The importance of individualism is present in all of his works. The question is whether King would agree with Thoreau's acceptance of violence.²⁵⁹ From this point of view, Thoreau's impact on Martin Luther King is very similar to that upon Mahatma Gandhi. Both of them approved of most of Thoreau's theories but rejected violence, which he advocated.

Non-violence for King begins with individual persuasion and moves through legal persuasion in the courts to the ballot box, to noncooperation, and thence to active resistance in the form of boycotts, strikes, massive demonstrations, and finally to outright civil disobedience. Non-violence never means

²⁵⁴ Warren E. Steinkraus, "Martin Luther King's Personalism and Non-Violence," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 34.1 Jan.-Mar. 1973: 97, 99.

²⁵⁵ George E. Carter, "Martin Luther King: Incipient Transcendentalist," *Phylon* 40.4 1979: 318.

²⁵⁶ Carter 318.

²⁵⁷ Carter 319.

²⁵⁸ Carter 319.

²⁵⁹ Carter 318.

passive acquiescence. It does mean pressure and coercion but never overt violence against persons.²⁶⁰

By vindicating John Brown, Thoreau does not do anything else but approve of straight violence against people. It is, therefore, likely that King's and Thoreau's opinions on violence differed significantly.

Martin Luther King's view of punishment for acting against the law and of anarchy seems to be related to that of Thoreau. "King reiterated his desire not to advocate evading or defying the law because such would lead to anarchy."²⁶¹ He also suggests that openly breaking the law which one believes is unjust and consequently accepting the penalty, which comes after is the right way of how to express respect for law.²⁶² Thoreau, too, emphasizes that he does not want to reach anarchy; on the contrary, he wants a functioning system in the government and credible political authorities. The thing which he demands is a change concerning both the system and the people who decide about the fate of the country. When it comes to the view of imprisonment and its acceptance, the opinions of Thoreau, King and Gandhi do not differ much. Even though it has been claimed by critics that Thoreau never said anything about the importance of accepting punishment for civil disobedience,²⁶³ it seems to me that, based on his opinions on his own imprisonment, he approved of accepting punishment for it very much.

Thirdly, I will deal with Václav Havel's essay *The Power of the Powerless* and point out some similarities with Thoreau's theory. In the essay, Havel is concerned with the political system, which he calls posttotalitarian, in the 1970s Czechoslovakia. He claims: "This system serves people only to the extent necessary to ensure that people will serve it. Anything beyond this, that is to say, anything which leads people to overstep their predetermined roles is regarded by the system as an attack upon itself."²⁶⁴ This idea is very similar to Thoreau's view of American government. In his *Civil Disobedience*, he suggests that it uses people who have elected it because once it has access to power, it does not care for the citizens anymore and treats them not as humans but rather as mere machines.

²⁶⁰ Steinkraus 106-107.

²⁶¹ Carter 323.

²⁶² Carter 323-324.

²⁶³ Carter 321.

²⁶⁴ Václav Havel, "The Power of the Powerless," *Vaclavhavel.cz*, 25 Apr. 2013
<http://www.vaclavhavel.cz/showtrans.php?cat=eseje&val=2_aj_eseje.html&typ=HTML>.

Havel's theory of the automatism²⁶⁵ of the system, according to which a person does not exist for themselves but rather in order to support and create the automatism of the system, is related to the before mentioned opinion in *Civil Disobedience*. Havel maintains that "Individuals are reduced to little more than tiny cogs in an enormous mechanism and their significance is limited to their function in this mechanism."²⁶⁶ He, similarly to Thoreau, claims that people

[...] may surrender their human identity in favor of the identity of the system, that is, so they may become agents of the system's general automatism and servants of its self-determined goals, so they may participate in the common responsibility for it, so they may be pulled into and ensnared by it [...].²⁶⁷

Thoreau, likewise, asserts that men serve the state as machines. He encourages the citizens to break the law in the name of justice and by doing so to become a counter-friction to the system. The author of *The Power of the Powerless* deals with the topic of individualism and mentions that it is impossible to keep one's individual will in the posttotalitarian state and its automatism because these do not allow anything else but mediocrity and anonymity. He points out that once a person attempts to cross this mediocrity and to live in truth, they are accused of opposition:

Opposition [of the people] can [...] be understood as everything that does or can have an indirect political effect in [...] everything the post-totalitarian system feels threatened by, which in fact means everything it is threatened by. In this sense, the opposition is every attempt to live within the truth, from the greengrocer's refusal to put the slogan in his window to a freely written poem [...].²⁶⁸

Both Havel and Thoreau state that one's individuality is necessary to live in truth and in dignity and that without it one can never reach true liberty. Instead of finding themselves, the citizens of such a posttotalitarian state become alienated to themselves and, paradoxically, help to preserve the system that destroys them.

²⁶⁵ The term *automatism* refers to the term *autokinesis*, which was used in Plato's or Aristotle's philosophy.

²⁶⁶ Havel.

²⁶⁷ Havel.

²⁶⁸ Havel.

Both writers feel that the government is non-functional and wish for a political change but not that in the sense of mere traditional liberal democracy. Havel, unlike Thoreau, besides that, refers to Martin Heidegger and sees the existential crisis of his time rooted in the disruptive power of technology, which the human race cannot resist. He calls for “fundamental opposition to the automatism of technological civilization and the industrial-consumer society”²⁶⁹. Havel claims that any attempt for a revolt would be almost impossible and without any bright prospects in the posttotalitarian state because due to its well thought out supervision over society it would end up as a gesture of few isolated individuals fighting against the overwhelming majority. This idea is very similar to the situation of Thoreau and of other abolitionists, who were asserting their intentions in a world where the majority was standing against them.

The influence of or at least some similarities in behavior with Thoreau, can be traced in other sources as well. Rosa Parks’ refusal of giving up her seat to a white passenger in Montgomery in 1955 has been compared to Thoreau’s choice to defy the state by not paying taxes.²⁷⁰ Unlike people who organize into groups in order to intentionally and expressly disobey the law,²⁷¹ “Rosa Parks [...] committed civil disobedience without going a single step out of her way; in fact, she committed it precisely by trying to proceed along her way, seeking not to be arrested but simply to go home.”²⁷² It is possible that Thoreau’s civil disobedience inspired other famous writers. There is an interesting connection between Thoreau and the main character of William Faulkner’s short story “A Rose for Emily”. Emily refuses to pay taxes; even though her reasons slightly differ from Thoreau’s - she does not protest against any particular injustice but she tries to keep her family’s prerogative of not paying taxes and refuses to give up and to abandon the past - the form of civil disobedience as well as its accomplishment in order to reach one’s aim is the same.

To sum up, Henry David Thoreau greatly influenced many important political and literary figures. I have analyzed the way of how he affected Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Václav Havel. Although some of Thoreau’s opinions, mainly his positive view of the use of violence, did not meet with much appreciation by these personages, his ideas about civil disobedience, about individualism, about the political system or about the law and its breaking had a significant impact on many future leaders

²⁶⁹ Havel.

²⁷⁰ Rosenwald.

²⁷¹ Rosenwald.

²⁷² Rosenwald.

and their movements. This is where Thoreau's true merit lies; since he was a writer and a philosopher and not a politician, he influenced others through his writings rather than changed the world through his political action.

Conclusion

The object of this thesis was to discuss and find out what view of slavery Henry David Thoreau held. In order to do so, his works, primarily his essays *Civil Disobedience*, *Slavery in Massachusetts* and *A Plea for Captain John Brown*, were discussed. During his lifetime, Thoreau witnessed the rise of the abolitionist movement, which demanded an immediate end of slavery. The abolitionist efforts led to the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, which made all slaves from regions still in rebellion free, and to the 1865 Thirteenth Amendment, which outlawed slavery. Even though Thoreau had a similar view of slavery, he belonged among the critics of some of the abolitionist methods.

In his *Civil Disobedience*, Thoreau criticizes the government for enabling slavery and for waging the Mexican-American War. He scorns it for the bad manner in which it treats its citizens, who have elected it. On the other hand, Thoreau is also dissatisfied with the negligent approach of the American inhabitants towards the question of slavery. The author is devoted to the principles that he believes are right and does not hesitate to break the law in the name of these. Although slavery is not the predominant concern of the essay, Thoreau reveals its features in the present workings of political power and points out the importance of individuality and grassroots movements for modern society.

In *Slavery in Massachusetts*, Thoreau once again reprehends his fellow citizens; this time he reproaches them for not showing concern for their neighbors who have to deal with slavery. The writer does not agree with the decisions of many political authorities in his country and focuses on the role of law, which, rather than protecting people, serves as something that restricts them and takes their liberty away from them. The unreliability of the press is also one of the topics of the essay. Thoreau is disappointed with the way of how the situation in America is but believes that there will come a time when people's freedom will be regarded as one of the most important things in the world.

Thoreau's essay *A Plea for Captain John Brown* deals with a particular problem connected with slavery, namely the dangers of insurrection and armed violence. The author speaks in John Brown's favor and justifies his violent action. Since Brown's aim has noble reasons, Thoreau approves of the means used in order to reach it. Brown is here even depicted as a Christ-like figure because he dies as a savior.

Thoreau's voice developed during the years in which he wrote the discussed essays; it is very harsh in the last one and the focus of it is much more specific than in both *Civil Disobedience* and *Slavery in Massachusetts*. In *Civil Disobedience*, he criticizes war but in *A Plea for Captain John Brown*, he vindicates a deed that has very similar consequences as war, specifically, the loss of people's lives.

An important fact about Thoreau is that he stays true to his principles and is willing to disobey the law should it be a cause of one's enslavement and inequity. He is able to keep his mind open and to change his behavior according to what a particular situation demands. To demonstrate this, one can get back to his opinions on violence as analyzed in this thesis. Thoreau's social sentiment seems to be one of his virtues and his ambition to live a free life is stronger than the need to observe the law.

Thoreau's mind is best portrayed in his *Walden* and *Life Without Principle*. In these works, he stresses the importance of living in concord with nature, which can teach one a lot about themselves and which enables one to free themselves of all unnecessary aspects present in one's lives. Only after a person is able to understand themselves completely, they can live happily and freely. Liberty and individuality are the highest virtues, which every man should reach. Vanity and cupidity, on the other hand, belong to demerits which enslave people. Being familiar with these opinions of Thoreau's and having read his essays which deal with the topic of slavery, one can say that his view of slavery is very negative and radical because it clashes with the idea of a free individual.

Even though Thoreau did not contribute to any particular political change regarding slavery, he touched many people of his time by writing on the topic. He also had, through his opinions, a great impact on famous political authorities and figures, like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King or Václav Havel. Thoreau's legacy lies, among others, in the deeds of those who were influenced by him.

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