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## On the Duty of Uncivil Disobedience: Thoreau's Action From Principle

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ON THE DUTY OF UNCIVIL DISOBEDIENCE: THOREAU'S ACTION FROM PRINCIPLE

A Thesis

by

ALAN FERNANDO GARCIA

Submitted to Texas A&M International University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

December 2023

Major Subject: English

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## ABSTRACT

On the Duty of Uncivil Disobedience: Thoreau's Action from Principle (December 2023)

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This thesis explores the uncivil disobedience evident in some of Henry D. Thoreau's work, which is often regarded as the birth and foundation of what is today known as "civil disobedience." Using the nature of Thoreau's subtle language and his philosophy of action from principle in his writings, including "Resistance to Civil Government" (1849), *Walden* (1854), "Life Without Principle" (1863), "A Plea for Captain John Brown" (1859), and some of his real life actions, this thesis will examine the antagonistic and, perhaps, uncivil nature of Thoreau's so-called "civil disobedience." This thesis will also incorporate Sophocles' play *Antigone* (441 BBC), Candice Delmas' *A Duty to Resist: When Disobedience Should be Uncivil* (2018), and Larry J. Reynolds' *Righteous Violence: Revolution, Slavery, and the American Renaissance* (2011) to better understand Antigone's and Thoreau's uncivil disobedience against a deeply unjust state and a civilized society controlled by self-interest and avarice. All of this will culminate in Thoreau's ardent defense and exoneration of radical abolitionist, militant, and man of uncivil disobedience: John Brown. This thesis aims to describe the ways in which Thoreau uncivilly challenged a rapidly industrializing nineteenth-century America, where business and materialism dominated individuals' daily lives and a corrupt and unprincipled government permitted the enslavement and oppression of an entire portion of the American population.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

*“When any real progress is made, we unlearn and learn anew, what we thought we knew before.”*

— *Henry D. Thoreau, Journal, December 31, 1838*

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) was an American philosopher, transcendentalist, poet, and naturalist, whose writings draw upon each of these identities to meditate on and criticize the material and spiritual problems facing individual human beings living in a rapidly industrializing nineteenth-century United States. Thoreau dedicated most of his talents to writing essays and a couple of books. This emphasizes his desire and active effort to clearly convey his own ideas and principles onto American society—a quality that will be critical for his uncivil disobedience. Uncivil disobedience is a form of resistance which is inherently disrespectful against the state, as it does not see a corrupt government as legitimate, is not interested in cooperating with or utilizing the state’s methods for creating change, and is indifferent to not only the state’s demand for civility but to the possibility that this resistance might disrupt the government. Thoreau’s principles and *conscience*, thus, can be found not hidden behind puzzling satire, fictional stories, or a pseudonym, but expressed clearly and boldly in his essays and public speeches, bringing the demands and expectations of nineteenth-century America face to face with his own.

Chapter II focuses on Thoreau’s most famous essay: “Resistance to Civil Government,” which was written by him in 1849. His essay was renamed after his death in 1862 to “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience,” or simply “Civil Disobedience” (Delmas, *A Duty to Resist* 5). It is

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important, however, to note the more antagonizing tone of the former title versus the latter, for the former was chosen by Thoreau and is an inversion of (and a response to) William Haley's chapter on "The Duty of Submission to Civil Government." The title of "Resistance" highlights Thoreau's antagonistic attitude towards the nineteenth-century, slavery-supporting United States government. In this essay, the uncivil side of Thoreau's politics is subtly evident, which is an often concealed part of his work and life story. Here, he sets forth his reasons for disobeying and disassociating from the United States government, which he saw as an unjust institution that enforces the enslavement of millions. Thoreau's disobedience stems from his disapproval of numerous unjust government actions like the institution of slavery, the Mexican-American War of 1846, and the unfair treatment of Native Americans. All of these were acts committed by the U.S. government, a deeply unjust institution that Thoreau could not conscientiously tolerate. With no regard for the good of the state and with full consideration for his principles and the well-being of others, Thoreau disobeys the U.S. government, and he calls on others to do the same. Antigone's character in Sophocles' *Antigone* has a similar dilemma: obey the unjust decree of Creon's government that prevents her from burying her own brother, or follow her own conscience. As Chapter II of this thesis shall argue, both Antigone's and Thoreau's disobedience are inherently uncivil, and rightfully so given their respective situations.

Chapter III focuses on Thoreau's subtle message of uncivil disobedience in his essay, "Life Without Principle," and in his book, *Walden*. In "Life Without Principle," Thoreau meditates on and describes the business-dominated society and material way of life of Concord, Massachusetts and America. Such disagreeable conditions and his philosophy of action from principle prompt Thoreau to withdraw from society and to instead live at Walden Pond, of which he recounts his experiences in *Walden*. For Thoreau in "Life Without Principle," it is small and



seemingly insignificant actions (informal institutions) which are performed by all individuals in their day-to-day lives that chain them to the political and economic systems that oppress them (formal institutions). Never being satisfied with one's material possessions causes one to always want to buy more, which in turn leads to the endless need for more money, which then forces one to miserably work one's health and life away. However, since Thoreau recognizes that small and everyday actions prop up and strengthen the social, political, and economic systems which oppress the people of nineteenth-century America, then these same small and seemingly insignificant actions can (and ought to) undermine them. After all, Thoreau himself retired to the woods, withdrawing his support from the American market economy.

Finally, Chapter IV will focus on Thoreau's speech turned essay on John Brown, "A Plea for Captain John Brown." In "A Plea," Thoreau seeks to defend and save the character of a man whom he deemed exceptionally brave and courageous for standing up against the immense power and might of the United States government. He stood for his principles and his conscience, while many others in America sacrificed theirs. Many within the public, media, and government demonized the man and labeled him a criminal and terrorist. John Brown was a man who made it his life's purpose to destroy the institution of slavery in the United States by any means necessary. John Brown's most famous act is the 1859 Harper's Ferry raid, where he seized a federal armory in Virginia and aimed to initiate a slave revolt in the Southern States. Brown was ultimately captured, placed on trial, and charged with treason against the state of Virginia. He was sentenced to death and hanged on December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1859. Thoreau believed John Brown's death sentence was deeply unjust. Therefore, Thoreau's concept of action from principle will be explored to better understand his defense and exoneration of Brown and his heroic act of uncivil disobedience.

## CHAPTER II

### THOREAUVIAN UNCIVIL DISOBEDIENCE IN *ANTIGONE*

*There is something special about uncivil disobedience, too, and [...] we should stop associating incivility with wrongfulness and look to its aptness and potential value under certain oppressive circumstances. —Candice Delmas, A Duty to Resist, 2018*

In his essay, “Resistance to Civil Government” (1849), now more widely known as “Civil Disobedience,” Henry D. Thoreau famously declares, “[t]hat government is best which governs least” (37). Throughout his lifetime, Thoreau opposed the inherently unjust but legal institution of slavery in the United States and the Mexican-American War of 1846, of which the United States government, he believed, was the unjust aggressor. For Thoreau, the government was overstepping its lot and encroaching on the rights and conscience of individuals. Maintaining that he could not conscientiously obey nor support this unjust institution, Thoreau sought to disassociate himself from the U.S. government by refusing to pay his poll tax, an act now widely regarded as a prime example of civil disobedience. He was arrested and sent to jail in 1846 for this act, and so his essay was born. In a very similar light, Antigone’s character from Sophocles’ play *Antigone* (442 BC) resists King Creon, the political authority of Thebes, and his decree which declared the burial of her own brother, Polyneices, to be illegal. Antigone’s resistance to Creon’s order, like Thoreau’s, is rooted in her belief in a higher moral law that is superior to the flawed and unjust laws of the state. Antigone adheres to the belief that Creon’s decree—an example of when the government oversteps its boundaries and encroaches on the matters of the individual and the family—violates the law of the gods, and, thus, she cannot obey it in good conscience. While many may regard Antigone’s resistance against Creon’s decree as civil disobedience, a more careful examination reveals that such is not necessarily the case. Her

disobedience against Creon's order differs from the traditional formulation of civil disobedience in three ways, based on three fundamental aspects of her character: her isolation, her apolitical nature, and her autonomy (Wiltshire 29). These aspects of her character come closer to Thoreau's own ideas on resistance and his concept of action from principle, both of which are not exactly civil, or respectful towards the state, either. Thoreau's and Antigone's acts of resistance consist of uncivil, and not civil, disobedience, for they do not see their respective state or political authority as legitimate, they are isolated from society, their disobedience is apolitical, and their individual autonomy causes them to defy the fundamental institutions of civilized society, which ensure the smooth functioning of society through civility.

Thoreau's essay "Resistance to Civil Government" can, perhaps, be best summarized by the idea that if government "is of such nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law" (Thoreau 234). In his essay, Thoreau argues that if the government impels or coerces a person to violate his or her conscience by committing injustice, then one has a moral responsibility to resist it. Thus, the concept of civil disobedience was born. Interestingly, Thoreau himself actually practiced civil disobedience numerous times throughout his life. First, when he refused to pay his poll tax to the state of Massachusetts as a means of withdrawing his allegiance to the U.S. government which was unjustly "protecting slavery and making war on Mexico" (Herr 87). Second, when he deliberately violated the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 by helping runaway enslaved people avoid recapture. Lastly, when he spoke in defense of antislavery people who stormed a Boston courthouse to prevent the return of Anthony Burns to slavery, violating an "admittedly valid law" that prevents criminal trespass. His famous "Resistance to Civil Government" essay and his real life actions are perhaps why Thoreau is generally and so often regarded as "the most notable American exponent of civil disobedience,

and it is usually assumed that those engaging in civil disobedience are following in his footsteps.” But what exactly constitutes civil disobedience? Does Thoreau only support civil disobedience, or does he also support a more uncivil approach? These are questions which continue to be debated by those who read Thoreau. His essay, “Resistance to Civil Government” is usually the most examined by critics interested in learning more about Thoreau’s “civil disobedience.” Shawn Jean, for instance, begins his analysis of “Thoreau’s Radical Consistency” with this essay not just because it is the first of his political essays but because “it is the most rhetorically elusive piece of Thoreau” (342). The essay’s charm lies not just in its explicit message but also in its equivocal nature, or in its open support for civil disobedience against an unjust government, but also in its uncivil undertones. Therefore, one may very well read within Thoreau’s “Resistance to Civil Government” a hint of incivility towards the slavery-protecting U.S. government.

Thoreau is also generally associated with the civil disobedience and nonviolent activism of prominent figures like Martin Luther King Jr. to the extent that his equally as powerful advocacy for uncivil disobedience is almost always eclipsed and ignored by it. In his article titled “Thoreau’s Advocacy of Violent Resistance,” Jack Doyle argues that a simplified and idealized version of Thoreau is often taught in American high schools. U.S. history textbooks only depict *one* version of Thoreau, the man “who refused to pay his poll tax in 1846, wrote ‘Civil Disobedience,’ and fathered non-violent resistance,” influencing Martin Luther King, Jr. and others like him (Doyle 5). However, Thoreau’s civil disobedience—his refusal to pay his poll tax or his assistance of enslaved people—does not prevent him from supporting other forms of resistance like uncivil disobedience. Michael Meyer argues that the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s invoked Thoreau’s essay “Resistance to Civil Government,” or “Civil Disobedience,”

so much that “many readers who have any idea at all about Thoreau’s politics believe that ‘Civil Disobedience’ is his primary and representative statement concerning his attitudes towards reform” (301). However, just as Thoreau’s civil disobedience influenced Martin Luther King, Jr., his uncivil disobedience also influenced Robert F. Williams, “a principled and highly controversial civil rights activist [and forefather of the Black Power movement] who drew from Thoreau’s writings to justify his call to ‘meet violence with violence’” (Doyle 5). Although it is a common belief that Thoreau coined the term “civil disobedience” to signify his resistance against a slave state and its laws, “there is no evidence that Thoreau himself ever used the expression” (Herr 87). In fact, there is not a single mention of “passive resistance” in his essay, either. Interestingly, “Resistance to Civil Government,” Thoreau’s most influential essay, was only assigned its more familiar title “Civil Disobedience” in 1866, four years after its author’s death. The changed title suggests a “more passive, peaceful stance” than Thoreau’s more blunt and forthright “Resistance to Civil Government” (Doyle 5). Whereas Thoreau’s original title sounds more uncivil and provocative, the changed title attempts to give the essay a more civil and respectful tone. As a result, many readers of “Resistance to Civil Government” often over-emphasize the essay’s civility and downplay its uncivil undertones.

But what exactly constitutes civility and incivility, or civil and uncivil disobedience for Thoreau and others? Susan Wiltshire recognizes that there are various definitions of civil disobedience, but in brief they include most if not all of the following: one must recognize there is a higher law; one is obligated to follow state laws, but if the state laws conflict with the moral (or higher) law, one has a moral obligation to obey the moral law and disobey state laws; one’s objective in this endeavor should be to bring about social or political change; one must also be willing to suffer the consequences for disobeying the state’s laws, and hope that this punishment

might have positive results for society and the state (29). An important point that is often also associated with civil disobedience, which Wiltshire does not discuss, is that the disobedience must also be passive, nonviolent or, according to Candice Delmas, respectful towards society and the state, hence the word “civil” (Delmas, *A Duty to Resist* 25). Delmas summarizes it perfectly: civil disobedience is committed to basic norms of civility and can be associated with publicity, non-evasiveness, nonviolence, and decorum (42). However, and contrary to civil disobedience, Thoreau’s philosophy and work are everything but respectful and civil towards the state, much like Antigone’s resistance against Creon’s decree and rule. Candice Delmas also argues that proponents of civil disobedience generally believe that breaking the law is wrong, and they only “conceive of it” in terms of permission and not as a moral duty, as Thoreau recommends. They are of the mindset that disobedience is sometimes permissible but not ever morally obligatory (4-9). Although supporters of civil disobedience may believe a particular law to be unjust, they still believe in the legitimacy of the state, so they are still trying to ensure the state’s continuity.

Uncivil disobedience, on the other hand, refers to a type of resistance or disobedience which is not exactly concerned for or respectful towards the state or its institutions, and it may *or* may not involve violence. Unlike its civil counterpart, uncivil disobedience is most concerned with one’s acting in accordance with what is morally right, or following the moral law, and staying true to one’s principles *regardless* of how this negatively impacts the state and its institutions. For Delmas, the civility of civil disobedience “defuses the destabilizing potential of lawbreaking by demonstrating to the public the agent’s sincerity and underlying respect for the legal system’s legitimacy” (*A Duty to Resist* vii). Thoreau, however, does not believe in the legitimacy of a slave state, as he declares, “I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as *my* government which is the slave’s government also” (“Resistance” 230).

Uncivil disobedience does away with this demand for civility which so often shields illegitimate states and their injustices. Uncivil disobedience, according to Delmas, also undermines law and order and thereby destabilizes society. The actions of agents of uncivil disobedience are thus often considered disrespectful, for they violate the moral duty to obey the law and do not attempt to remedy this through civility. They also criticize and openly disregard democratic processes, and they threaten the “civic friendship” which binds society together (50). Whereas people who engage in civil disobedience are respectful, public, non-evasive, and nonviolent, uncivil “disobedients” resist disrespectfully, in private or anonymously, they may evade punishment, and may resist violently against people or property. Thoreau never rejected violence as a legitimate tactic for positive social change, and he never displayed the commitment to nonviolence that is considered crucial to civil disobedience. According to Herr, “his defense of the attack on the Boston courthouse, in which a man had been killed, was clear evidence that he did not feel violation of the law need be nonviolent to be justified” (89). For Thoreau, then, uncivil disobedience is an acceptable method in the pursuit of justice and the defense of freedom.

However, neither uncivil disobedience nor its acceptance of violence to resist injustice create a scenario of anarchy where everything is permitted; one must still abide by the moral law through self-reliance, both of which Thoreau alludes to repeatedly to justify his resistance. This higher law requires Thoreau and, ideally, all people to resist the government when it morally infringes on the former. Thoreau believes that the perfect and unchanging moral law is superior to the often flawed and unjust laws of the state. This attitude towards the human laws of the state on Thoreau’s and the transcendentalists’ part often provokes hostility. For instance, in his 1841 essay “Self-Reliance,” Thoreau’s good friend and mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson declares, “I obey no law less than the eternal law. [...] The populace think that [one’s] rejection of popular

standards is a rejection of all standard, and mere antinomianism; and the bold sensualist will use the name of philosophy to gild his crimes. But the law of consciousness abides” (131). What Emerson explains is that one’s adherence to the moral or eternal law over unjust human laws is not anarchy nor nihilism but fairness and justice. The moral law did not sanction and protect worldly injustices like slavery, the Mexican-American War, the ill treatment of natives, nor the future Fugitive Slave Act. Rather, it was popular and unjust human laws created and approved by prejudiced men. In his essay, Thoreau writes:

They who know of no purer sources of truth, who have traced up its stream no higher, stand, and wisely stand, by the Bible and the Constitution, and drink at it there with reverence and humility; but they who behold where it comes trickling into this lake or that pool, gird up their loins once more, and continue their pilgrimage toward its fountain-head. (245)

Here, Thoreau asks his readers to imagine Truth as a “stream flowing down a mountainside, forming pools or lakes in its descent, and the truthseeker as a person who climbs that mountain and follows its stream” (Grieve-Carlson 323). For Thoreau, most people do not climb higher than the Constitution or the Bible in the search of Truth; thus, they are unaware of its rewards. On the other hand, people who have accessed and embraced the moral law through their conscience and self-reliance are incorruptible by ideology. Countries and laws like the Constitution can only be improved by the moral law and its adherents, for they recognize that enslaving or discriminating against another person is cruel and wrong regardless of tradition or political system.

The first indication of Thoreau’s support or, in the very least, acceptance of uncivil disobedience within his essay “Resistance to Civil Government” is the fact that he does not view a slave state like the nineteenth-century U.S. government as legitimate. He notes, “[h]ow does it become a man to behave toward this American government today? I answer, that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it” (Thoreau 23). Since Thoreau denies the legitimacy of a



government which supports slavery, there is no binding reason for him or others engaging in civil or uncivil disobedience to be faithful towards the state when resisting it. In other words, people do not have a moral or political obligation to follow the unjust law(s) or to engage only in civil disobedience for the sake of the state. They do not “owe the state anything [...] nor are they bound to only disobey its law civilly; they may resort to radical forms of resistance,” if necessary (Delmas, *A Duty to Resist* 9). One form of this radical resistance, for Thoreau, is the right to revolution, as outlined in the Declaration of Independence. According to Thoreau, “it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize” (230). Thoreau is himself not an anarchist, but he believes that if the government wants its citizens’ respect and obligation, it needs to halt its unjust actions and stop encroaching on people’s rights and freedoms. Nancy Rosenblum writes that his essay “Civil Disobedience” (or “Resistance to Civil Government”) “does not make the case for civil disobedience that many have read into it” (90). Evidently, Thoreau’s tone, like that of the original title of his 1849 essay, is more belligerent and assertive than it is passive and civil. In fact, Thoreau’s disobedience is influenced by what Rosenblum calls his “militant conscience” that designates a psychological appetite for opposition. This militancy on the part of Thoreau is, indeed, characterized by anger, challenge, and insistence and may come close to militarism and organized aggression (Rosenblum 81). For Thoreau, then, one ought to challenge and express one’s frustrations against an unjust government, even to the point of resistance and rebellion.

Yet another hint of Thoreau’s favorable reception of uncivil disobedience is his emphasis on the individual and his call for self-reliance, both of which may cause a sort of isolation or withdrawal from society. Whereas civil disobedience calls for the reliance on others and/or on the legal processes of the government itself to achieve change, Thoreau’s way of resistance does not require the state’s nor other people’s aid or approval. Rather, he calls only for the reliance on

oneself and the moral law, for that is all one needs to act in accordance with principle. When Thoreau discusses that disassociation from the government is the proper course for people of conscience, he is talking about self-reliance. One ought to rely on one's conscience and one's sense of right to "not be complicitous in evil" (Rosenblum 92). Therefore, one must separate oneself not just from the government but from others in society who coerce or impel us to act unjustly. In "Self-Reliance," for example, Emerson notes how one must declare one's independence from other people in order to truly be self-reliant. He believes that one should "[I]ive no longer to the expectation of these deceived and deceiving people with whom we converse. [One should] [s]ay to them [...], I have lived with you after appearances hitherto. Henceforward I am the truth's. [...] I must be myself" (131). When it comes to resisting the unfair and unjust actions of the government, one must do so alone, following only one's conscience. This is so, because, for Thoreau, it is when the individual is most left alone that he or she can truly be oneself, or achieve self-reliance. After all, Thoreau himself withdrew from society and stayed for two years at Walden Pond from 1845 to 1847. However, this is not to say that the self-reliant person cannot resist the government alongside others. Thoreau would perhaps be open to collective or semi-collective action as long as it is action performed by self-reliant individuals, each following his or her own conscience, together. In fact, he argues that "a corporation has no conscience; but a corporation of conscientious men is a corporation with a conscience" (228). Thoreau's "perception and performance of right," or action from principle, should aim to provoke one's neighbor into a process of "individual self-reform" that will help them become vigilant citizens capable of conscientious political agitation (Turner 453). Such is one of Thoreau's ways of resisting the state.

Thoreau's resistance or disobedience is quite apolitical, which means not necessarily absolute withdrawal, but that he is not overly concerned for the well-being or survival of the state, making his disobedience more uncivil than civil. As one may recall, according to Wiltshire, one's objective in the pursuit of civil disobedience should be to bring about positive social or political change (29). In other words, one should care to improve the government and its laws, thereby making society better. Thoreau, however, does not disobey to benefit the government nor to make its laws better or more "followable." Rather, he resists as a concern for his personal purity and the well-being of others, feeling that society, its government, and its laws are what oppress the individual. An instance of Thoreau's carelessness towards the state is when he compares it to a broken machine that must be disposed of: "all machines have their friction; and [...] when the friction comes to have its machine, and oppression and robbery are organized, I say, let us not have such a machine any longer" (230). For Thoreau, the slavery-protecting U.S. government is but a criminal organization which, through its thievery and corruption, steals people's freedom and encroaches upon their unalienable rights. Therefore, resistance, in this case, should not be a civil or respectful attempt to nicely ask the government for one's rights back. Militancy, according to Rosenblum, is the appropriate approach towards the state, because it was a slave state for all its subjects, and no one was truly free. This is a fight for survival, and the "absence of resistance is suicide; if we want to save our lives, we must fight for them" (92). Thus, for Thoreau, the U.S. government of nineteenth-century America is "a demoniacal force [...], a monster, a 'semi-human tiger or ox, stalking over the earth with its heart taken out and the top of its brain shot away'" ("A Plea" qtd. in Rosenblum 92). Many talk of the greatness of America's representative government, but for Thoreau, this is a government which is lacking in head and heart and one that has failed to stop evil. Individuals do not benefit from the effort to

make society or the government better for it is these which subjugate them. Rather, individuals gain most from their own action from principle, for they compel the state to accommodate to the needs and freedoms of individuals and not the other way around.

Further evidence of Thoreau's uncivil disobedience is that his militant conscience causes within him a sort of unwavering autonomy which leads him to question and repudiate the institutions of civilized society and put off any external influence from these or others in general. For instance, in "Resistance," Thoreau argues that voting and democracy as an institution are questionable for one's self-reliance. For Thoreau, voting is a sort of gamble, "a playing with right and wrong, with moral questions," where people cast their vote as they think right, but they are "not vitally concerned that the right should prevail" (Thoreau 231). Rather than individuals engaging in action from principle, they leave important moral questions up to the majority, which is usually wrong before it is right. This way of things allows injustice to continue to exist simply because of the majority rule. Thoreau, as a result, sees representative democracy as incompatible with his own fundamental moral commitments (Jenco 356). To abide by the moral law and one's conscience, then, is not a matter of conforming to the dictates of flawed institutions. Yes, one ought to vote for the common good, but conscience requires something more for Thoreau; it requires action. Action from principle, or conscientious action, "is the obligation one assumes to *do* at any time what *you* think [is] right" (Rosenblum 98; emphasis added), especially if such an act goes against established norms and regulations which protect injustice and evil. Thus, whereas those who engage in civil disobedience tend to think of democracy as an instrument to secure positive change (they are not wrong), Thoreau criticizes democracy on fundamental grounds. He sees the democratic process as one which causes moral damage in individuals, a criticism that is much "more militant" and "more morally centered" compared to the criticism of

other transcendentalists like Emerson (Jenco 363). As a result, one ought not to sacrifice one's self and one's sense of right by allowing implicated institutions and the majority to make decisions for oneself.

A perfect example of Thoreau's uncivil disobedience is the character of Antigone from Sophocles' play *Antigone* (441 BC). In the play, King Creon of Thebes establishes a new decree in the city, and his subjects, the Theban citizenry, are expected to obey it. His order declares Polyneices, Antigone's brother, a traitor for fighting on the side of the invading army. Therefore, the order states, Polyneices does not deserve a proper burial in Thebes. Antigone sees herself forced by Creon's decree to commit an injustice against her own dead brother, for she is not allowed to carry out her familial duty, that is, provide proper burial for kinsmen. As a result, she sets on a mission to do what is right—bury her dead brother—even if it means breaking King Creon's unjust decree. Antigone perfectly illustrates Thoreau's uncivil disobedience, because she disrespectfully defies the unjust and illegitimate commands of King Creon, severing her bonds with her sister and the Theban citizenry in the process. When she discusses Creon's decree with Ismene and asks for her help in burying their brother, Ismene demures:

ISMENE. We must remember that we two are women, so not to fight with men; and that since we are subject to stronger power, we must hear these orders [...].

ANTIGONE. Be what you want to; but that man shall I bury. For me, the doer, death is best. [...] I shall lie with him, yes, [...] when I have dared the crime of piety. (59-74)

Ismene here seems afraid of the powerful state and “gauges her responses on their probable political consequences rather than on their intrinsic merit” (Wiltshire 32). Antigone, on the other hand, is indifferent towards the state's power in her effort to do what she believes is right. As a woman in the ancient and masculine-dominated Greek *polis*, Antigone “speaks and acts out of place” (Robert 414). Instead of accepting her “proper” place in the *oikos*, or the home/household,

or civilly asking men for change, Antigone takes matters into her own hands, steps into the male-dominated political sphere, and “improperly” speaks and acts within the *polis*. Antigone’s disobedience is uncivil, for her resistance “threatens to destabilize the sexual economy upon which the *polis*, and hence Creon's authority, rests” (Robert 414). Whereas Ismene tries to civilly follow tradition by obeying men in power, Antigone ignores these expectations and freely defies the political authority of Creon. The destabilization of the male order within the *polis* makes Antigone’s resistance uncivil, for it threatens to destabilize King Creon’s political authority and his monarchical state.

As is the case with both civil and uncivil disobedience, Antigone justifies her resistance by invoking the law of the gods, or the higher moral law, which requires her to fulfill her familial duty, that is, bury her brother. As a result, she rejects Creon’s decree. When Creon asks Antigone why she dares resist his decree, Antigone responds:

ANTIGONE. For me it was not Zeus who made that order. Nor did that Justice who lives with the gods below mark out such laws to hold among mankind. Nor did I think your orders were so strong that you, a mortal man, could overrun the gods’ unwritten and unfailing laws. (450-55)

Much like Thoreau’s real life actions and his philosophy of resistance, Antigone brings up the moral law to not only explain why she resists, but also to declare Creon’s decree and political authority illegitimate. In order to engage in either civil or uncivil disobedience, “one must posit the existence of an objective moral standard beyond [...] the man-made laws” (Tiefenbrun 37). This higher moral law constitutes a universal principle that defines what is right and wrong, and right and wrong action. Such a moral absolute and categorical imperative helps one determine not only whether a law is unjust and wrong, but also what one must *do* to deal with such law. Antigone uses this perfect moral standard to emphasize the inferiority of human laws, specifically Creon’s law (an unjust law) which prevents her from burying her brother (a just

action). Conscience motivates Antigone in her disobedience against Creon's decree. Polyneices is Antigone's brother, and, according to Theban tradition, it is Antigone's familial/filial duty that she ensures her fallen sibling is properly buried. The gods even help Antigone bury Polyneices by, first, burying the corpse themselves (*Antigone* 245) and, later, by obscuring Antigone from the guards when she gives Polyneices his second burial (416). This demonstrates that Antigone's actions are in accordance with the divine law (279), despite Creon repeatedly associating his ruling on Polyneices with it. As Wiltshire puts it, Antigone's defiance consists of "a resounding declaration of 'no faith' in Creon's entire system of values" (34). Much like Thoreau has "no faith" in or respect for a slave-protecting American government, Antigone does not believe in the legitimacy of Creon's political authority nor its values. As a result, her disobedience is not limited by a respect for Creon's monarchical state and its unjust law, for these are illegitimate due to their violation of the divine law.

Although the appeal to a higher moral law may be applicable to both civil and uncivil disobedience, it is the way that Antigone chooses to abide by this law of the gods which moves her resistance away from civil and more towards uncivil disobedience. Antigone's isolation in the play perfectly captures Thoreau's uncivil demand for the individual to stand aloof from the state, for the former ought to avoid the latter's corrupting force. Antigone is alone in her effort to bury her brother, because an individual who lives according to his or her conscience is rare. Thoreau, indeed, believed that not a lot of people acted from principle. As he puts it in his essay, "Resistance to Civil Government,"

Action from principle,—the perception and the performance of right,—changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary, and does not consist wholly with anything which was. It not only divides states and churches, it divides families; aye, it divides the individual, separating the diabolical in him from the divine. (Thoreau 233)

Thoreau's action from principle is about separating good from evil; it is about self-reliance, or the perception and performance of right. If one desires to be distinguished from evil, one must boldly defy it. Such is what separates Antigone from Creon's state, the Theban citizenry, and her sister, Ismene. Hence, her loneliness. Although "the whole town" of Thebes is in agreement with Antigone, as Haemon reports to Creon (*Antigone* 690), none of the citizens actually act in support of Antigone and against Creon's decree (except Ismene near the end of the play, when it is already too late). Thus, Antigone is alone in her disobedience, "utterly isolated from any sort of social involvement," moving in a "terrifying vacuum" with little desire for help from any source (Wiltshire 30). She "is isolated as a woman in a man's world," and she is alone especially in her death. Creon cruelly imposes the death penalty on Antigone, by having her buried alive for the crime of fulfilling her familial duty and burying her own dead brother (Wiltshire 30). After Creon has sealed Antigone's fate and forcefully sent her to her tomb, she complains of her fate.

ANTIGONE. No marriage bed, no marriage song for me, and since no wedding,  
so no child to rear. I go, without a friend, struck down by fate, living, to the  
hollow chambers of the dead. (918-21)

Her death is the consequence of Antigone's actions, for choosing to disobey Creon's unjust political authority and decree, and for choosing to abide by the moral law and live by her conscience instead. However, she would rather act according to what is right in her conscience, than live merrily with others in evil or conformity.

Civil disobedience mandates that resistance be respectful in the sense that one ought to associate and cooperate with the state and others. Antigone, however, uncivilly dissolves her connection with Creon's state, the Theban polity, and her sister in her effort to do what is right. Interestingly, many of the points that are used to explain civil disobedience (and label Antigone's resistance as such) do not apply to the character of Antigone. Among these reasons, according to



Wiltshire, is her isolation (29). Civil disobedience is a unifying force; it brings one and others closer to people of the same minds and goals. In fact, the purpose behind an act of civil disobedience is to bring as many people together as possible, as the act must be done publicly “with intent primarily to educate or persuade the majority” (Herr 88). A perfect example of this is the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, whose members protested civilly in order to win the approval and support of the white majority in the United States. Antigone, however, is not interested in persuading the citizenry of Thebes to join her in her resistance. If anything, she insults them, represented by the guards, for their fear and cowardice: “All these would say that they approved my act / did fear not mute them” (*Antigone* 504-5). Wiltshire summarizes Antigone’s condition in the play and her relation to civil disobedience perfectly:

Even though a person involved in an act of civil disobedience may often experience solitude in the process of the act itself or in fasting, prison, or exile, that person nevertheless typically feels a strong sense of solidarity with others committed to the same objectives. Antigone, however, is one whose actions increasingly sever her relationship with other persons. For her there is no social community; she sees herself as completely alone, in living and in dying. (30)

Antigone sees herself in a reality where *no one* in Thebes is willing to assist her in her struggle, or in the struggle between good and evil, because it seems that no one is willing to act in accordance with principle. She alone is brave enough to defy Creon’s order. Thus, she destroys the “ties of civic friendship” (Delmas, “Uncivil Disobedience” 28) which civil disobedience tries to preserve through civility and respect. Her uncivil disobedience, then, lies in the fact that she not only acts alone, but also disrupts the unfair “rules of public engagement,” which are present in Thebes—and all of civil society—and delineate who gets to speak, when, where, and how (Delmas 36). She alone speaks and acts against injustice, and, in doing so, threatens the whole legal apparatus of Creon’s political authority and his monarchical state.

Antigone's apolitical nature captures the essence of Thoreau's early attitude towards the problem of slavery in the United States, which is evident in his 1849 essay "Resistance to Civil Government." Wiltshire's explanation of civil disobedience includes the following and necessary condition: one's objective in this endeavor, or in the act of civil disobedience, should be to bring about positive social or political change (29). In other words, the primary concern of the person resisting (in this case Antigone) ought to be to socially and/or politically improve the state. However, Sophocles' play makes clear that Antigone's primary concern is simply to bury her brother, Polyneices; the *polis*, or Thebes, is only of secondary concern for her. More specifically, Creon's political authority is of no concern at all for Antigone, for her decision to commit suicide at the end of the play brings about the downfall of his tyranny. Antigone makes the intentions of her disobedience clear: "what greater glory could I find than giving my own brother funeral?" (*Antigone* 502-3). She wants nothing more than to bury her deceased brother, for that is what her own conscience tells her to do. She follows her conscience and the moral law *not* for the sake of others, society, or the state, but for herself and because it is the right thing to do. Antigone's disobedience, then, is purely familial, and her resistance is one which she undertakes simply to fulfill her duty to bury her brother. She attempts to do what is right for her regardless of whether her actions bring positive change or disastrous consequences to Creon's political authority/state. In "Resistance," Thoreau similarly notes: "I came into this world, not chiefly to make this a good place to live in, but to live in it, be it good or bad" (234). Critics often use this passage to describe Thoreau as a self-absorbed romantic or a "prig" (Buranelli 259) who cares only about his own virtue and completely disregards society. But for Thoreau and Antigone alike, a fundamental part of living is living with principle, and if that disrupts a corrupt and unjust state, then *c'est la vie*.

While the goals of people who engage in civil disobedience are inherently political, Antigone is almost completely apolitical in her disobedience, acting in a way that goes against civility and the status quo. Unlike the struggle for civil rights in the 1960s United States, Antigone does not resist Creon's decree for the purposes of changing the law and/or bringing about positive change through legal means like voting or reform. She resists in the name of family. Even the Thoreau of "Resistance to Civil Government" would agree with Antigone: "[a]s for adopting the ways which the State has provided for remedying the evil, I know not of such ways. They take too much time, and a man's life will be gone" (234). Like Thoreau, Antigone's primary concern is not to legally improve the political system of Thebes, which is controlled by Creon. The state is a cold, corrupt, and often unjust institution that allows corruption, immorality, and wrongdoing to thrive. For Rosenblum, the romantic Thoreau, standing aloof from the government, was isolated because he saw his spirit as extraordinary and as being exempt from social conventions and political rules (83-4). Antigone, in a similarly uncivil way, acts and disobeys *beyond* the rules and laws of Thebes and in such a way that empowers those oppressed (herself) by the status quo and its self-preserving civil processes. For Martin Heidegger, Wiltshire argues, the *polis* is more than a mere city or city-state; it is the historical place in which, out of which, and for which history happens. But Antigone operates *outside* of the city, *outside* of its rules, laws, and regulations. Her actions are not in the interest of King Creon's political authority, and her attitude is not one of loyalty to the (or his) state, but one which ignores its interests completely. In short, the Thoreauvian disobedience that Antigone displays is not only uncivil but also necessary because it gives oppressed individuals or groups the means to contest or disrupt the pro-status quo consensus that is embodied by "civility" (Delmas, "Uncivil Disobedience" 36). Antigone's apolitical disobedience is uncivil, for it subverts the status quo

and the “civil” but often unfair way of doing things, and civilized society—and the Theban *polis*—shall be better off for it.

Antigone’s unapologetic independence, or her “unabating autonomy” as Wiltshire puts it, is yet another (and the final) way her character perfectly demonstrates Thoreau’s uncivil disobedience. As already discussed, Antigone’s resistance is not one which fits within the limitations of civil disobedience. Much like Thoreau’s militant conscience and his ideas on resistance, Antigone’s disobedience is a law unto itself. Throughout Sophocles’ play, Antigone thinks and acts with complete independence and self-determination, demonstrating that she is not only outside the bounds of the city, but that she is “outside law itself.” She has effectively become a “law unto herself,” removing herself from all man-made laws, except that of her own nature, or her own conscience (Wiltshire 32). For example, the chorus at one point declares that Antigone’s “self-willed temper” has destroyed her (*Antigone* 875). But her “self-willed temper” is nothing more than Antigone’s determination to hold onto her own conscience, principles, and self-reliance, even, or especially, if others punish her for it. This is evident when Creon declares to Antigone that he wants nothing more than her arrest and death for her disobedience:

ANTIGONE. Why are you waiting? Nothing that you say fits with *my thought*. I pray it never will. Nor will you ever like to hear my words. (499-500; emphasis added)

Creon can be interpreted in this interaction as a personification of the state and the institutions which compel citizens to think and act in a certain way, seamlessly oppressing and subjugating the individual. Antigone demonstrates a militant conscience much like Thoreau’s, because she is unwilling to reconcile the corrupt state’s demand for obedience and civility with her own thought and actions. She uncivilly defies all expectations of civility and decorum imposed on her by Creon’s state and society, such as the tradition of ancient Thebes which prevented women from

disobeying men and from participating in the political processes of the *polis*. Rosenblum puts it perfectly: for Thoreau, “all institutions are cold, complex and impersonal. They stifle and finally inhibit individual goodness and spontaneity. They produce conformity” (90). When one relies too much on others or on institutions, one inevitably loses one’s self-reliance and becomes a mere conformist, and that is what Antigone refuses to become, for she refuses to accept evil/injustice.

Hence, much like Thoreau’s militant conscience, Antigone’s unabating autonomy leads her to uncivilly disobey the institutions of civilized society and reject any and all external influence or support. Antigone not only acts outside the Theban *polis* and Creon’s authority, disobeying the laws and most important traditions of Thebes, she also refuses to be moved or influenced by anyone or anything trying to dissuade her from her convictions, such as her sister, Ismene. As seen in the play time and time again, “Antigone is not to be persuaded” (Wiltshire 32-3). For Antigone, to allow others to change her convictions without any serious thought or consideration is to lose her own self-reliance. This course of action would mean that she would be forced to forsake her principles and her familial duty to bury her brother for the sake of others’ conformity. Antigone shows no sign of willingness to compromise her thought with others, much like Thoreau’s refusal to negotiate his principles with the state, its institutions, or the majority opinion. Even when Ismene offers to help her in her resistance later in the play, finally standing up against King Creon’s tyranny, Antigone not only rejects but also mocks her support. The following interaction takes place between the two sisters:

ISMENE. Sister, I pray, don’t fence me out from honor, from death with you, and honor done the dead.

ANTIGONE. Don’t die along with me, nor make your own that which you did not do. My death’s enough.

ISMENE. When you are gone, what life can I desire?

ANTIGONE. Love Creon. He’s your kinsman and your care.

ISMENE. Why hurt me, when it does yourself no good?

ANTIGONE. I also suffer, when I laugh at you. (*Antigone* 544-51)

Sophocles' play portrays Antigone as someone who is not a moderate. She goes to extreme lengths to disobey Creon's decree, to bury her dead brother, and to ensure that her sister Ismene feels her contempt towards her for failing to act with her, or for being a sister whose love consists of "mere words" (*Antigone* 543). So intense is her extremism that it leads to her own death. In terms of civil disobedience, its proponents may worry of Antigone's extremism and "uncivil disruption" against the state. This may be especially the case when considering the need of those who engage in civil disobedience to garner the public's support for their cause (Delmas, "Uncivil Disobedience" 36). However, neither Antigone's nor Thoreau's uncivil disobedience depend on their ability to gather popular support; both Antigone and Thoreau resist, not for others, but for their conscience, or their moral responsibilities to disobey unjust law. Unlike with civil disobedience, Antigone is not concerned at all with strategy nor with ensuring that as many people as possible are comfortable enough with her disobedience.

In "Self-Reliance," Emerson writes, "[i]t is only as a man puts off all foreign support, and stands alone, that I see him to be strong and to prevail. He is weaker by every recruit to his banner. Is not a man better than a town?" (136). Emerson's words here perfectly capture the essence of both Thoreau's and Antigone's resistance, for they both emphasize the importance of the individual, of making decisions alone, and of acting alone. When Thoreau said that one should break the unjust laws of an unjust government, he did not make clear how one was to break the law—whether through nonviolent (civil disobedience) or violent tactics (uncivil disobedience). He did not explicitly recommend or describe pacifism, either. Thoreau writes that the reformer ought to do "only what belongs to himself and to the hour" (242), concluding that the "form of the resistance was [to be] rightly determined by the individual and specific situation" (Doyle 5). Thus, the individual should *not* feel restricted in his disobedience and

should, rather, let his or her conscience decide the type of resistance to be performed. In *A Duty to Resist*, Delmas holds that the ordinary conception of civil disobedience is so often shaped by an idealized theory and an unrealistic interpretation of the 1960s African American civil rights struggle within the United States. This unfeasible demand for civility and nonviolence, for Delmas, undermines emancipatory efforts, deters noncompliance, and reinforces the unjust status quo (23). For example, in the vision of its proponents, civil disobedience is meant only for cautious reform and not bold change, and it is permissible only when it is nonviolent, accepts a moral duty to obey the law, and reaffirms the state's legitimacy (26). Antigone's and Thoreau's action from principle, on the other hand, prioritizes a *personal* regard of right and establishes the individual as the sole source of moral authority. Hence, Thoreau emphasizes the moral authority of "*persons*, not rules, laws, institutions, or traditions. He derides the U.S. government for [...] lacking entirely the vitality of even a single living man" (Jenco 360). This worthiness of the individual and the unworthiness of institutions like the government is at the foundation of both Antigone's and Thoreau's uncivil disobedience. The individual person should rely on him or herself, and not wait on others to act in accordance with their principles. One need not submit to the expectations of society, nor be coerced by the expediency of the majority, to make one's disobedience more civil or acceptable. Instead, one should, like Antigone, defy resolutely.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE INCIVILITY OF ORDINARY ACTION

*It happens that the stage sets collapse. Rising, street-car, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, street-car, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm—this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the “why” arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement.*

—Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 1942

The subject of Thoreau’s work, especially his book *Walden* and his essay “Life Without Principle,” often focuses on the type of materialist lifestyle that was lived by most if not all Americans in nineteenth-century America. Thoreau witnessed all around him not individuals but a flock of people enamored with material possessions and physical comfort, at the expense of their spiritual values and moral principles. Americans, Thoreau observed, are compelled to spend the great majority of their lives meaninglessly laboring for a valueless living. They pursue this sort of living only to waste their fleeting time of leisure purchasing products or services that cost them even more of the short lives that they have left. Needless to say, there is little to no concern for ethical principles or values like justice or equality under such conditions. In *Walden* and “Life Without Principle,” Thoreau explores the relationship between the individual and society, and he criticizes the manner in which American society has completely consumed the individual into its extensive and all-encompassing social, political, and economic system of endless labor and consumption. He believes that society constrains individuals through informal institutions, which penetrate deeply into Americans’ daily lives (influencing their small, ordinary actions and how they decide to spend their days) and, in turn, establish the dominance of the formal institutions that cause much of Americans’ oppression and suffering. Therefore, in his writings, Thoreau



recommends a thoroughly radical and self-reliant lifestyle which focuses on ordinary actions as a means for *all* to resist. Such a way of life is a form of principled and uncivil disobedience which absolutely and disrespectfully rejects the formula of life that has been handed down to individuals by all-pervading formal institutions like the government and market economy. According to the lifestyle of uncivil disobedience, which Thoreau recommends, individuals are responsible *for* their fellow human beings but not responsible *to* society at large.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of July 1845, the 69th anniversary of the founding of the United States, Thoreau moved out of his family home in Concord, Massachusetts and moved into a cabin at Walden Pond which Thoreau himself built. He lived there for two years and two months, and it is the place where he wrote much of his book, *Walden or, a Life in the Woods*. Many scholars and commentators have interpreted this move away from civilization and towards nature as a writer's retreat or a ridiculous experiment on simple living. Regarding his decision to move, however, Thoreau writes,

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation [...]. (*Walden* 74)

At Walden Pond, Thoreau sought to disassociate from society and its overwhelming demands, so that he could live a life according to nature and determine the true necessities of life. However, such a radical and individualistic lifestyle and philosophy, alongside Thoreau's chief concern with his own personal purity above all (Plotica 470), has unfortunately led many commentators to wrongfully think of Thoreau as an apolitical or anti-political thinker. Many critics also regard his philosophy as "contradictory" or "unclear," while others say that Thoreau's philosophy is at odds with his future participation in the abolitionist or antislavery movement in New England (McKenzie 422). For instance, in attempting to resolve the discrepancy between Thoreau's

radical individualist political philosophy and his involvement in the abolitionist movement, mid-twentieth-century scholar Hannah Arendt brands Thoreau's politics "a failed brand of egoism and anarchism" (McKenzie 422). But this could not be further from the truth. Thoreau himself mentions he does not wish to practice resignation to life. Irresponsible comments like these prevent a good faith conversation from taking place regarding Thoreau's valuable ideas and contributions to not just political thought, but to philosophy and life in general.

Thoreau's radical and individualist lifestyle, along with his persistent effort to mind his own business and live a simple life, is not a case of mere egotism, apathy, or an absolute withdrawal from social and political affairs, but one of principled, uncivil disobedience. In his essay, "Life Without Principle" (1863), first published a year after his death in the October 1863 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, Thoreau famously writes, "[L]et us consider the way in which we spend our lives. This world is a place of business" (874). This brief introductory statement perfectly captures Thoreau's concerns about the world and the people around him, who are dominated by "incessant business" (Thoreau 875). While everybody else is consumed by business and the material, he pauses and meditates on the nature of his relationship with society to determine an appropriate course of action, or action from principle. Thus, he resorts to moving to Walden Pond, "partly because of his disgust with the ordinary life [of business] men were leading" (Macshane 323). Some may argue that such action is evidence of Thoreau's "political indifference," or his "detachment of the self from public matters" (McKenzie 423). But wrongly. In fact, Thoreau's decision exhibits his learning from Eastern thought, specifically from the Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavad Gita*, which argues for action unlike most other Hindu texts that argue for renunciation of the world (Nolen 50). The *Gita* explains that "those who aspire to the state of yoga should seek the self in inner solitude through meditation. With body and mind

controlled they should constantly practice one-pointedness, free from expectations and attachment to material possessions” (Easwaran 140-41). The “yogi” should retire into a solitary place, as Thoreau did, and exercise control of his or her distracting desires. Thoreau carries out such retirement to Walden not in a manner of surrender or resignation, but as a means to “gain an understanding of higher ends” (Macshane 329) so that he can act appropriately, as he did when he spoke against the Mexican-American war prior to his 1846 arrest. Evidently, Thoreau’s unwavering goal is characterized by an effort to remain true to his “private morality in a world demanding endless compromises” (Plotica 470). Unwilling to negotiate his principles, Thoreau acts at the expense of the market economy and way of life of the United States, making his goal and action uncivil due to his distrust of and lack of respect for American institutions.

In *Walden*, Thoreau harshly criticizes the market economy which has become inherent to American society. In the first chapter of *Walden* titled “Economy,” Thoreau describes how average Americans live “lives of quiet desperation” (9). Frank Macshane argues that Thoreau believed this desperation “arose because of an inability [of people] to reconcile the ordinary activities of daily life with ultimate ends” (323). Although Thoreau comments on the lives of individuals in nineteenth-century America, matters have only become worse today, highlighting “the Solitary of Walden as a prophet for our time” (Buranelli 258). Americans of past and present were and continue to be unable to resolve their lifestyle obsessed with material possessions with their longing for meaning and spirituality. Thoreau “saw how the pernicious side of democracy and the Industrial Revolution had become [e]ntrenched in this country. He saw how Americans were being [...] leveled down by universal standards, dominated by majority opinions, constricted more and more tightly by the tentacles of politics and economics.” Thoreau saw civilized society as nothing more than a complicated mechanism organized for the sole and

uninspiring purpose of making money. Unless they reflect upon their conditions and act, the feet of Americans are doomed to be “chained for life” (*Walden* 6) to the commodities and material products and to the social, economic, and political systems that produce them. The dominant way of life was, for Thoreau, a mistake committed through ignorance. He declares, “[m]ost men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them” (7). In order to truly experience and enjoy the fruits of life, individuals have a moral responsibility to escape this oppressive ignorance and system of living.

The supposedly “free” market economy is often said to encourage and promote individual freedom, but for Thoreau nothing could be further from the truth. What kind of freedom does the market economy promote? Thoreau would say: the freedom to be slaves. He notes,

America is said to be the arena on which the battle of freedom is to be fought; but surely it cannot be freedom in a merely political sense that is meant. Even if we grant that the American has freed himself from a political tyrant, he is still the slave of an economical and moral tyrant. [...] What is it to be born free and not live free? What is the value of any political freedom, but as a means to moral freedom? Is it a freedom to be slaves, or a freedom to be free, of which we boast? (“Life Without Principle” 889).

This capitalist economic system serves only to seize the individual and place him or her in an endless cycle of labor, suffering, and consumption. In this cycle, no matter what so-called choices the individual makes in his or her life, he or she will almost always contribute to the financial support and strength of the economic system. This is why, for Thoreau, regulating one’s incessant appetites and desires, like he did at Walden, is crucial, because it is the “key to resisting subjugation by the market” (Neely 146). As Dr. William Nolen also notes in his MA thesis chapter on Thoreau titled, “Thoreau’s Hero as Everyman,” such life is “a ‘fool’s life bred by a pivotal mistake conceived and agreed to by each and all men” (63). Thus, another way of life is

needed for Thoreau, one which will allow human beings to achieve higher ends. In “Life Without Principle,” he encourages individuals to “separate from the multitude” (881) to make better choices; for, in fact, there are better choices, though each and all individuals think and behave as if there are none (*Walden* 9). He proclaims, “I might pursue some path, however solitary and narrow and crooked, in which I could walk with love and reverence” (“Life Without Principle” 881). In this difficult but liberating path, which is also different for every individual, the human being recuperates the freedom and independence that he or she once lost in civil society and its economic system. But one may ask him or her self: how can one choose this path?

Thoreau emphasizes individuals’ habitual choices and actions, as a way to explain their suffocation under American society and its market economic system. He describes the situation in which individuals find themselves in American society as “conscious penance,” or as voluntary self-punishment (*Walden* 6). Thoreau writes, “everywhere, in shops, and offices, and fields, the inhabitants have appeared to me to be doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways” (6). For Thoreau, individuals commit self-punishment through their ordinary choices and actions: they wake up early in the morning every single day for their lifeless job to come back home at the end of it exhausted and defeated; only to sleep and repeat the cycle all over again the next day. This is the way of life Americans have “deliberately chosen” (Thoreau 9). According to Macshane, “[m]ost men seemed divided between earthly occupations and a realization that death would make these very occupations seem futile and empty” (323-24). For Thoreau, it is men’s meaningless actions which make their lives and occupations seem empty. There is no universal law or divine commandment requiring human beings to live their lives in such a self-punishing way. As Nolen notes, “Thoreau emphasizes that we choose to believe in the value of these trinkets and consequently choose to pursue these goods by working almost non-stop” (63). All

individuals choose to abide by this way of life every single day; For Thoreau, each individual is his or her own slave-master. Thoreau writes, “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” (*Walden* 8). Many people rightfully talk of the slavery of African Americans in the United States and its evils, but no one talks of the oppression and subjugation that one puts oneself through by means of our individual opinions, beliefs, choices, and actions. In fact, the “consumerist and acquisitive imperatives of capitalism” means not only enslaving others, as buying market products produced by slavery helped perpetuate the slave system in the U.S., but also oneself, since an inability to manage one’s desires means being controlled by the market economy (Neely 146). It is these forms of informal institutions, in collaboration with other formal American and authoritarian rules and laws, that intricately and forcefully dictate individual human beings’ fates.

Thoreau believes that it is individuals’ acquisitive day-to-day behavior that serves as the basis by which the capitalistic order of society is established and maintained. Society is not only preserved through formal institutions like the law and the government but also, and especially, through informal ones. Luke Plotica points out that, “Thoreau turned his most careful attention to the scarcely perceptible ways in which individuals served to shape and preserve the order of society, from how they labored to what they consumed” (473). This is so, because for Thoreau, the individual is shaped by society more prominently through informal pressures, which “are ‘not usually upheld by such extreme penalties’ as those imposed by laws, but leave the individual with ‘fewer means of escape, penetrating more deeply into the details of life’” (John Stuart Mill qtd. in Plotica 475). The way that individual human beings *choose* to live their lives through their individual beliefs, opinions, and actions effectively determines the type of society and the type of

formal institutions that they will live under for the rest of their lives and whether these are authoritarian and oppressive or not. In an effort to help him see his blunders, Thoreau berates the common man in *Walden*:

It is very evident what mean and sneaking lives many of you live, for my sight has been whetted by experience; always on the limits, trying to get into business and trying to get out of debt, [...] always promising to pay [...] to-morrow, and dying to-day, insolvent; seeking to curry favor, to get custom, by how many modes, only not state-prison offenses; lying, flattering, voting, contracting yourselves into a nutshell of civility. (8)

For Thoreau, the widespread belief that people ought to labor and consume for their living until they die plagues individuals' minds. Believing that they are only tending to their own private affairs when they work, borrow, and spend, individuals blindly lend their energies and support to the existing social order. Therefore, "even as the individual is responsible to only [him or] herself and [his or] her principles, [the individual] is ineluctably responsible for the part [he or] she plays in crafting and sustaining [his or] her society and its vices" (Plotica 479). Acquiring endless debts and working endlessly to pay them leads people to a downward spiral of self-inflicted pain and suffering. It is these individual beliefs and actions performed en masse that support the order of things and constrain the individual. This ensures that the social, political, and economic systems that dominate individuals will continue to prosper, essentially robbing them of their liberty and commanding almost every aspect of their daily lives.

Thoreau, in both *Walden* and "Life Without Principle," encourages uncivil disobedience in his fellow neighbors that consists in them performing ordinary and seemingly insignificant actions in order to withdraw their implicit allegiance and support from the United States' established market system. Thoreau advises his fellow neighbors that they ought to choose wisely how they spend their time. He writes, "[i]f 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” (“Life Without Principle” 878). If nothing else, the individual has or ought to have the power to choose: to choose oneself above others and to choose those affairs which impact him or her more directly, as opposed to the endless demands and compromises with which society burdens the individual. As Jonathan McKenzie points out, “[m]inding one’s own business is, in Thoreau’s view, an *antidote* to the market and industrial revolution, which has radically transformed the lives of the nation’s citizens, indebting them to corporations or to other persons with more power than they” (424-25; emphasis added). Something as simple as doing what one loves most and consciously engaging in self-improvement is revolutionary in a world which forces the individual to partake in things which are to his or her detriment. For Thoreau, “all work was meaningless distraction,” and while some of his contemporaries tried to ridicule him, he “declined to give up his large ambition of knowledge and action for any narrow [...] profession. He focused instead on the “art of living well” (Emerson qtd. in Raymond 130-31). Evident in Thoreau’s philosophy and action is a principled, uncivil disobedience which should be undertaken even if, no, especially if it goes against conventional opinion and the dictates of society. He writes in “Life Without Principle,” “[t]he aim of the laborer should be, not to get his living, [...] but to perform well a certain work [...] Do not hire a man who does your work for money, but him who does it for love of it” (877). For Thoreau, industriousness is not a virtue by its own right. Simply because all people work for a living for the great majority of their lives under the current system does not make it right. Thoreau “values work only insofar as it promotes the well-being as the individual himself [or herself] defines it” (McKenzie 425). Therefore, what is most important and what ought to be prioritized in life and in work is personal meaning and individual choice, rather than earning as much money as possible since it seems that the latter was and, unfortunately, continues to be the sole purpose of work today.



If it is ordinary consumerist choices and habits of private individuals which strengthen the grasp of the market economy upon the individual, then the opposite must be true as well: the ordinary and conscious actions of individuals can loosen the hold which these institutions have on them. For Thoreau, all institutions are “cold, complex, and impersonal” (Rosenblum 90). They stifle and inhibit individual goodness and spontaneity, and they produce conformity. By elevating and empowering the individual, and arguing for people to live deliberately, Thoreau, in his subtle ways, declares a quiet war against all orders or institutions that prosper on the limitation and misery of individual human beings. He declares in *Walden*, “I cannot believe that our factory system is the best model by which men get their clothing. [A]s far as I have heard or observed, the principal object is, not that mankind may be well and honestly clad, but, unquestionably, that the corporations may be enriched” (Thoreau 23-24). For Thoreau, the intent or motivation behind a person’s or corporation’s actions are important: there is a difference between producing clothes to help keep human beings warm and producing them to enrich oneself. But more importantly, Thoreau encourages in individuals an unapologetic withdrawal or conscious non-participation. In trying to help people labor less and live more, Thoreau seeks to normalize having patches in one’s clothes (*Walden* 20), which ends up hurting corporations’ profits. On his story of the frustrated Native American who was not able to sell his basket to a lawyer, he writes in *Walden*, “instead of studying how to make it worth men’s while to buy my baskets, I studied rather how to avoid the necessity of selling them” (Thoreau 18). For Thoreau, the best way to resist the market economy which exploits individuals every day is to avoid participating in it. As Plotica points out, “[i]n Thoreau’s own characterization, withdrawal is an act of war rather than a pacifist refusal to join the fray” (485). For Thoreau, the game is fixed; one’s mere participation in the game is an endorsement of existing practices and structures which

oppress and exploit the masses. Therefore, withdrawal is not only a “critical intervention” (Plotica 485), but it is action from principle and a subtle form of uncivil disobedience. Thoreau’s withdrawal is not a retreat or defeat, but quite the opposite: it is a deliberate and positive response against the complicity of ordinary, day-to-day life in the limitation of the individual and his or her moral degeneration.

What makes Thoreau’s message in “Life Without Principle” and *Walden* uncivil disobedience is its effect of undermining the market economy, which is at the foundation of American society. Under the current order, to be civil is often associated with compliance and conformity, or the blind and uncritical encouragement of the smooth operation of American society and its market economic system. In a world in which the chief concern is to create and accumulate as much wealth as possible, to be obedient is to contribute towards the security of this money-making process; to be disobedient is to impede or subvert it. Incivility, as a result, may lead to decreased effort and productivity in the workplace and society. Thoreau reminds his readers, “Simplify. Simplify” (*Walden* 75). Thoreau’s reminder for others to live a life of simplicity is uncivil, especially when the smooth functioning of society depends upon its coercion of the individual into a life of complete intricacy, indulgence, and civility. Throughout his work, Thoreau tries to educate others that labor is not as important a task as is the task of living. Thoreau encourages others to be more productive spiritually and less so in the material market sense. In fact, by going to live in the woods for two years, Thoreau proves that there are other ways of living. Michelle Neely writes, “Thoreau’s Walden Pond experiment in extreme frugality is compelling insofar as it multiplies, not reduces, the possibilities, futures, and modes of living” (148). In *Walden*, he assures his readers, “[n]ature and human life are as various as our several constitutions” (11). However, the market economy has a monopoly on life and modes of

living; Thoreau's philosophy of resistance is essentially what seeks to dismantle this monopoly. Characteristic of his individualism, Thoreau's attitude towards society and its schemes is defiant (Plotica 476). His self-reliant individualism explains society's aversion towards him, because it sees him and his philosophy as its existential threat. Thoreau simply encourages individual persons to live a life of simplicity, to live freely and independently, so as to "never [...] put one's paw into [the] trap" of society (53-5). But such a trap is society's means of survival; society lives at the expense of the individual. Even though "[s]ociety's ends are too often trivial, [...] its effects upon the individual are not" (Plotica 476). If society can be undermined by people living deliberately, then it should be undermined by the conscious and deliberate actions of individuals. Such is the character of Thoreau's uncivil disobedience against the market economy.

Although Thoreau may not feel a responsibility *to* society, he still feels a responsibility *for* his fellow neighbors. This demonstrates that his uncivil disobedience is still guided by the divine law and his concept of action from principle. In his essay, "Resistance to Civil Government" (1849), Thoreau writes, "I am as desirous of being a good neighbor as I am of being a bad subject" (745). For Plotica, in Thoreau's work, one must distinguish between the responsibility for one's society, or the relationships one has with others and their causal and/or moral implications in an intersubjective context, and the responsibility to one's society, or the accountability to society's rules, conventions, and judgments. Thoreau insists on the former but absolutely rejects the latter, for it is a responsibility to one's society which is inherently coercive and distracts individuals from self-cultivation. Thoreau consistently refuses to bend in favor of the standards of society which he so ardently criticizes. He refuses to participate in (and thus give legitimacy to) both formal and informal institutions of America which oppress the individual. These institutions "[n]ot only [...] come to find the individual, demanding overt

allegiance in the form of money, votes, and legal obedience, but lesser, private actions often enact more subtly allegiance to the same arrangements” (Plotica 479). For Thoreau, institutions are often coercive, and he criticizes all of them equally; laws, policies, associations, and customs that support an unjust and oppressive status quo are especially degrading for the individual and inhibit his or her goodness and potential. But nineteenth-century American society finds in Thoreau one less cog in the machine, one less participant in its fixed game, that is, one less person lending his or her support and allegiance through participation. People’s ordinary actions are small, yes, but, given the web of relations and the interconnected context by which human beings exist in the world, they have the potential to create a chain reaction of other individuals taking similar, or perhaps completely different actions, but which nonetheless come close to a common goal while still retaining their individual autonomy. Such principled disobedience and withdrawal performed by “many though independent constituents can sever unions and halt social, political and economic mechanisms through its revolutionary essence” (Nolen 81). This is exactly what makes Thoreau’s nonviolent disobedience uncivil, especially because he tries to inspire others to take similar action.

Thoreau’s sense of responsibility for his neighbors was enough for him to return to society in September of 1847, after spending two years at Walden Pond. Despite Thoreau’s criticism against it, his relationship with society is quite complicated. Plotica rightfully expresses a concern that Thoreau’s “isolating doctrine,” or the solitude and self-cultivation that Thoreau calls for, may easily make individual human beings poor neighbors and friends, who are “separated from one another by something more profound than physical distance” (471). But Thoreau’s life, his speeches and writings, including *Walden* and “Life Without Principle,” demonstrate a constant commitment to his fellow human being, a commitment which takes the

form of an enduring effort to wake his neighbors. Thoreau considered his “life and work to be exemplary” (Plotica 481). In *Walden*, Thoreau reminds his readers, “I do not propose to write an ode of dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up” (69). He addresses his neighbors, or his audience, which consists not only of the residents of Concord, Massachusetts but of all the people of America and beyond. He brags not for himself, but to wake his fellow neighbor. In the opening paragraph of *Walden*, Thoreau writes, “[a]t present, I am sojourner in civilized life again” (5). Unlike the Hindu renunciant who permanently turns his or her back on the world by retreating into the wild of nature in a forever search for “illumination,” Thoreau does expect one to return from one’s summit, “ready to live better, simpler lives and set an example for others” (Nolen 67) in society.

Thoreau seeks to be an example for his neighbors as a means for them to elevate themselves above the meager conditions of life under the American market economy, each providing for themselves a means by which to resist their assigned lot in society and become something more. Thoreau recognizes that the most one can do for one’s fellow human beings is to set an example for them and advise, for anything more would be infringing upon their own person and constitution. He acknowledges that every individual has or ought to have the right and the responsibility to choose their own life. As he states in *Walden*, “I would not have anyone adopt my mode of living on any account; [...] I desire that there may be as many different persons in the world as possible; but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue his own way, and not his father’s or his mother’s or his neighbor’s instead” (58). Determining one’s own fate in a world where everyone lives another’s life through emulation is a noteworthy feat. The true reformer is the person who begins by transforming him or herself first. In his essay “Slavery in Massachusetts” (1854), Thoreau notes, “[t]he fate of the country [...]

does not depend on what kind of paper you drop into the ballot-box once a year, but on what kind of man you drop from your chamber into the street every morning” (869). Thoreau’s objective is to demonstrate to his fellow neighbors that it is indeed possible to become something *more* than a mere cog in a machine. By simply affording his neighbors this responsibility, or this duty to choose their fate, Thoreau is indirectly imparting to them the means by which to resist their condition caused by the government, the market, or both. As Nolen observes, “[t]he average man can be heroic by being revolutionary as a private individual choosing for his own life” (65). By simply having the ability to meaningfully and truthfully choose their lives, individuals are already resisting the system, for it previously did not give them any real choice. Thoreau’s agenda is nothing more but to return to individual human beings their freedom and independence which society had originally robbed from them. If the fact that individuals have such a choice and decision-making power discomforts society or the state, so be it. The problem is not that Thoreau’s goal may sound idealistic; the problem is that society gives individuals no real choice on how to live their lives.

The public oppression of the government, which Antigone experiences, and the private oppression of the individual by the business of the market economy may not be the same, but they are similar. Creon’s order and America’s economic system both coerce the individual into one sort of lifestyle: the one which the individual is subdued into almost complete and utter compliance. In the case of Antigone, she is forced into the type of life in which one ought to obey the state at all costs, often at the expense of the individual. On the other hand, Thoreau and all Americans of his time and after are compelled by the social and economic order of the United States to keep busy, to keep working, to keep acquiring and paying off debts, often at the expense of their own dreams and true passions. But for Thoreau, such is not the aim of the human being

nor of the laborer. In *Walden*, Thoreau reminds his reader to “[p]ersevere, even if the world calls it doing evil, as it is most likely they will” (60). One ought to persevere in his or her endeavor to live freely and deliberately, for society will do everything in its power to ensure one fails. The social, political, and economic arrangements of the United States today continue to keep the individual busy, distracted, and asleep, preventing him or her from self-cultivation. This is not surprising, for awakened individuals, which Thoreau seeks to inspire, are counter-productive to the self-preserving ways of society and the American market economy. Formal institutions, such as the government and its laws, are a prominent factor in the stifling of the individual and his or her moral degeneration, but informal ones are just as important. The ordinary actions of individuals, or those habitual actions which all people make on a day to day basis are precisely what can create great change. Antigone simply buried her own brother—she did what she believed was right—and brought about the downfall of Creon’s tyranny. There is no need for larger-than-life deeds or superhuman action to change things. Most people think of dissent and resistance as a burden which require superhuman and impossible qualities, but Thoreau says no. For Thoreau, one can resist and change his or her condition in life by simply disagreeing with the status quo and acting on such disagreement according to one’s own principles. This courage and uprightness is what truly makes one free in a deeply unfree world.

## CHAPTER IV

### JOHN BROWN: HEROIC UNCIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

*His zeal in the cause of freedom was infinitely superior to mine. Mine was a taper light, his was the burning sun. Mine was bounded by time, his stretched away to the silent shores of eternity. I could live for the slave, but he could die for him.*

—Frederick Douglass, *An Address at the 14<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Storer College, 1881*

Henry D. Thoreau's uncivil disobedience is very much based on his unique perspective of transcendentalism and his concept of action from principle, which can be used to understand his defense of heroic abolitionist and agent of uncivil disobedience, John Brown. Thoreau's primary concern, like most transcendentalists at the time, was man's "soul and its cultivation." According to Barry Andrews, the American transcendentalists engaged in what is known as "self-culture," which involves "spiritual practices such as contemplation, reading, conversation, journal writing, solitude and daily commune with Nature" (qtd. in Raymond 132). Nature was important for the transcendentalists and Thoreau because they believed that one's connection with Nature would open up the mind to revelation from the "divine force of God or the Over-Soul" (Raymond 132). The wisdom derived from these spiritual practices was meant to enlighten one's conscience, helping human beings regard practices and systems like slavery and the oppression of people as morally wrong. As a result, this knowledge was assiduously applied to everyday struggles and concerns like education, the abolition of slavery, and women's rights. For Thoreau and the transcendentalists, these goals reflected a reaction against the ugly materialism, competitiveness, and acquisitive nature of the market economy of nineteenth-century America, all attributes which were also characteristic of American slavery itself. Transcendentalists believed in the power of reforming oneself as a way to change the world, but Thoreau soon realized that private reform



could not substitute political reform. Such is evident in his active participation in the Underground Railroad (Neely 147) and his ardent exoneration of John Brown in his 1859 essay “A Plea for Captain John Brown.” Thoreau defends Captain Brown because he embodies his concept of action from principle, as he is “divinely inspired” to abolish the sin of slavery in the United States, by any means necessary. Hence, Thoreau, through his emphasis on conscientious action (action from principle), regards Brown as a hero because of, rather than despite, his uncivil disobedience and violent resistance.

John Brown was a militant anti-slavery abolitionist, and he is most famously known for his raid on Harper’s Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia), which took place from October 16<sup>th</sup> to October 18<sup>th</sup>, 1859. In his raid, Brown and his men captured a number of prominent slave holders of the town and seized the federal armory. Among the captured was Lewis Washington, the great-grand-nephew of President George Washington. He did not harm or kill any of these captured men. In fact, Brown “went out his way to protect them” and made sure they were okay (Finkelman). Nonetheless, people still died. Brown’s hope for the raid was that the local enslaved population would join and, through the raid’s success, he and his men would supply weapons to enslaved Black people, starting a slave revolt throughout the Southern United States. This, however, did not happen. John Brown first confronted the local militia on the morning of the 17<sup>th</sup>, eventually taking refuge in the arsenal’s engine room. On the afternoon of the 18<sup>th</sup>, a wounded Brown was captured by then U.S. Colonel Robert E. Lee and the U.S. Marines, who had stormed into the engine house. By this point, “most of the raiders were either wounded or dead” (Finkelman). Brown was swiftly put on trial and charged with treason against the state of Virginia, murder, and conspiring with slaves to rebel. He was sentenced to death for his actions and hanged on December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1859. Many believe that Brown was the spark which ignited the

American Civil War (1861-65) just two years later. Indeed, it was not long after his death that John Brown's war against the sin and institution of slavery became the United States's own war.

Brown was also involved in other personal endeavors and historical incidents throughout his life, some good and others not so good. Like Thoreau, John Brown was active in the Underground Railroad, assisting and protecting enslaved Black people in their escape towards freedom. In 1855, after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, he moved to Kansas not just to seek opportunities to improve his family's economic status, but also, and perhaps, especially, to "spread freedom in the West" (Finkelman). Because the Kansas-Nebraska Act stated that "popular sovereignty," or a popular vote, would decide the issue of slavery in these territories, each side sent settlers to Kansas and the conflict soon turned violent. "Much of that violence, however, was the work of pro-slavery 'border ruffians,' aimed at intimidating antislavery settlers" (Grieve-Carlson 325). According to Paul Finkelman, in December of 1855, Brown "helped defend Lawrence, [Kansas,] the center of antislavery settlers, from an armed attack by proslavery forces." On May 21, 1856, when Brown was away, pro-slavery men again "sacked and burned the free-soil town, destroying the printing press there, burning buildings, and terrorizing residents." Five days later, on the 26<sup>th</sup>, acting in retaliation against the raids on the free settlement at Lawrence, the killings of free-state settlers in Kansas, and constant threats and attacks by pro-slavery settlers, "Brown and his band of free-state guerrillas killed five Southern settlers along the Pottawatomie River" (Finkelman) in what is known as the "Pottawatomie Massacre." A *Herald of Freedom* piece from October 29<sup>th</sup> of 1859 (reprinted on November 5) recounts in grim detail that all the men were found the next morning by the roadside, some with their throats cut, others with holes through their chest, and with hands and fingers cut off (Meyer 302). Three months later, in August of 1856, Brown himself "lost [his] son [Frederick] to

[pro-slavery] Border Ruffians,” (Griffin 379). His body was riddled with bullets when it was discovered. This conflict between pro-slavery and free-state settlers is famously known as “Bleeding Kansas.”

Thoreau’s speeches on John Brown, however, deal almost entirely with the character of Brown’s uncivil actions at Harper’s Ferry. This fact has led a number of critics to believe that Thoreau did not know of Brown’s actions in Kansas, while others believe he did know but completely ignored them. Both interpretations, however, are likely wrong. In his article, “Emerson, Thoreau, and John Brown,” Gilman Ostrander makes a peculiar argument, which seems to be based more on assumption than evidence. He argues that the only information Emerson and Thoreau had of Brown was that which Brown conveniently presented of himself to them when they first met in January of 1857 in Concord, Massachusetts (714). With such limited and inexact information at their disposal, Ostrander infers, Emerson’s and Thoreau’s speeches in defense of John Brown are foolish. Another similar account is provided by Walter Harding, who claims that “[h]ad Thoreau known of Brown’s [...] bloodthirsty Pottawatomie massacre in Kansas, he might never have endorsed him and might have been convinced of his insanity” (qtd. in Meyer 302). But in order to take Ostrander’s argument seriously, one would have to make the assumption that Thoreau did not read any newspapers whatsoever and that he missed the widely re-reported news of the massacre in 1859 New England. The Democratic press planned this wide re-reporting of the incident to hurt Republicans politically in preparation for the upcoming November elections of 1860 (Meyer 303). In fact, the news of the Pottawatomie massacre were reported up to six times around Brown’s November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1859 sentencing; first, on October 29<sup>th</sup> by the *Herald*, then again twice on November 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>, then again within the same week by the *Boston Daily Courter* and *Boston Post* respectively, both of which were Democratic papers

(Meyer 304-5). However, Michael Meyer errs in his assumption that Thoreau either ignored or chose not to believe these reports (303). It seems like there is a positive correlation between the number of critics and the number of assumptions of Thoreau. As Shawn St. Jean, author of “Thoreau’s Radical Consistency,” notes, “[o]ne’s argument [on the subject], it seems, depends less on Thoreau’s than on one’s point of view” (342). Thus, one must be cautious when reading Thoreau so as to not assume his meaning, especially if one’s conclusions go against his fundamental ideas.

However, for Jean, it is not that Thoreau did not know of Brown’s actions in Bloody Kansas, nor that he knew of them and completely ignored them. Instead, he argues that Thoreau indeed knew of John Brown’s involvement in the Pottawatomie Massacre *and*, rather than condemning, he accepted and defended these acts. This highlights Thoreau’s radicalism and indicates “just how far Thoreau had come [from 1849] in his acceptance of the viability of violent resistance” (Jean 350). In his article, Jean claims that there is more evidence to support this conclusion of Thoreau. One need only look at a passage of Thoreau’s October 30, 1859 speech, “A Plea for Captain John Brown,” which he made a little over a week after Brown’s Harper’s Ferry raid.

When a man stands up serenely against the condemnation and vengeance of mankind, rising above them literally *by a whole body*,—even though he were of late the vilest murderer, who has settled that matter with himself,—the spectacle is a sublime one,—didn’t ye know it, ye Liberators, ye Tribunes, ye Republicans? (Thoreau 933)

Perhaps, Thoreau’s “murderer” reference was meant to more clearly express his admiration for Brown’s conscience, but “it also describes (intentionally or by accident) [Brown] as demonized by decriers of Pottawatomie” (Jean 349). Assuming that Ostrander is right and that Thoreau never actually heard of the events at Pottawatomie, the statement above suggests that his

knowledge of Brown's acts would not have changed his position. If anything, Jean notes, Thoreau's statement "shows that Thoreau was more radical in his endorsement of Brown (and Brown's methods by implication) than has been previously supposed." For Thoreau, Brown acted in the spirit of action from principle, and this mattered more than his tactics. This is, perhaps, the clearest example of Thoreau's endorsement of not just uncivil disobedience but of principled violent resistance, and critics' inability to reconcile Thoreau's words with John Brown's actions reflects their conception of Thoreau.

Nonetheless, after his Harper's Ferry raid, most people saw John Brown through hostile eyes; they saw him and his actions, like Harding stated earlier, as insane and deplorable. In fact, although the Northern abolitionists—the "Liberators" themselves (Thoreau 933)—agreed with him, they too questioned his tactics and his "'misguided, wild, and apparently insane' adventure" (William Lloyd Garrison qtd. in Griffin 370). This was (and continues to be) the conventional opinion of Brown and his actions amongst the American public, media, and government of the nineteenth century, and it has unfortunately endured to this day. If one recalls, Antigone was, too, regarded as reckless and insane for her disobedience. When Ismene questioned her on what she planned to do, and the latter declared her intent to bury her brother, an appalled Ismene replied, "[o] reckless one, when Creon spoke against it!" (*Antigone* 47). Soon after, Antigone's sister says to her again, "[g]o, since you want to. But know this: you go / senseless indeed" (98-9). King Creon, too, believed that Antigone had been born without sense and that she was sick with the disease of wickedness (734). In the same way that Ismene and Creon thought of Antigone as reckless, senseless, insane, and wicked for her disobedience against the state, so was John Brown viewed. Such is the nature of the beast; the state will demonize anyone who threatens it, much like Creon's rhetoric fashioned Antigone as reckless for defying his authority. Thus, Thoreau's

mission in “A Plea for Captain John Brown” was to “defend a notorious man before an unfriendly audience. He had to convince his audience of the rightness of John Brown's principles and the act proceeding from those principles” (Albrecht 393). In fact, so impossible it is in the mind of critics for Thoreau to conscientiously defend Brown's actions at Harper's Ferry (and beyond) that authors like Meyer attempt to argue that Thoreau does not exactly defend Brown's actions, but only his principle, or John Brown as an “ideal” (311-12). According to him, the name of Brown is special and meaningful only when it is considered that he died for his principles, but repulsive and worth ignoring when considering the violent actions of the man, or his killings of pro-slavery men in Kansas and his raid on Harper's Ferry.

But to heed the principle and ignore the action that proceeds from such principle is very much antithetical to Thoreau's personal philosophy, especially when considering his transcendentalist beliefs and his concept of action from principle. Action is imperative to Thoreau's philosophy. Indeed, his entire transcendentalist philosophy rests upon his concept of action from principle, not just principle. For Thoreau, when the crowd is juxtaposed to a man and principle like John Brown, who resisted and took up arms against the immense power of the United States government to destroy the dreadful system of slavery in the United States, subsequently standing up “against the condemnation and vengeance of mankind, [...]—we become criminal in comparison” (“A Plea” 933). Action is what makes one courageous, helping one to rise above the crowd. What makes the crowd “criminal” is the fact that it knows “slavery is unjust but [it is] far too apathetic” (Matzke 65) to act. Thoreau often derides his “craven-hearted neighbors” (*The Journal* 584) for this very reason. Principle alone, then, for Thoreau, is not nearly enough, and without action it only makes one a coward complicit in a crime. Thoreau only sought to follow his own inclinations with dignity, and he desired for others

to be able to do the same. The key to achieve this, he believed, was to distinguish between action and the fruit of one's actions (Macshane 327). For Thoreau, what ought to be discouraged is selfish and interested action, rather than principled action which he believed that Brown performed. The former is the type of action the market economy of the United States has exhorted from its members ever since its inception, and it is epitomized in its most extreme by American slavery. While half of the American population is possessed by an insatiable desire that compels it to support and/or engage in the commodification and possession of other human beings, the other half, although aware of the evil, does nothing about it.

For Thoreau, then, John Brown is not just a principle or an ever-unreachable ideal; he is the embodiment of his concept of action from principle, a principle of action which may include righteous violence. John Brown is an average person who liberated himself from the shackles of nineteenth-century America, its pro-slavery rules, institutions, and expectations. He was able to turn paralyzing contemplation into action. Thoreau identifies with Brown (Reynolds 116), for he saw in him a “man of rare common sense and directness of speech, as of action; a transcendentalist above all, a man of ideas and principles,—that was what distinguished him. Not yielding to a whim or transient impulse, but *carrying out* the purpose of life” (“A Plea” 925; emphasis added). For Thoreau, Americans' selfish obsession for the fruit, or the result, of their actions, was the reason for their apathy towards slavery, for their standing idly by in the face of such a grave injustice. Thus, he attacks the lifestyle of his countrymen, for “luxuries and possessions all interfere with proper understanding” (Macshane 328) and prevent one from acting against evil. Brown, however, was not deluded by material wealth. While other abolitionists and transcendentalists resorted to civil disobedience and nonviolence to deal with the problem of slavery in the United States John Brown turned to bolder action. Thoreau

stridently defends him because he saw in Brown “the [true] transcendental hero of his time and who recognized that ‘[t]he question is not about the weapon, but the spirit in which you use it’” (Thoreau qtd. in Meyer 301). This, too, is action from principle. The use of a weapon for good, or for the protection of oneself and/or others, and to fight against evil, such as slavery, is not necessarily wrong. This is only true when other nonviolent methods have been exhausted within a deeply unjust state. According to Matzke, Thoreau himself eventually realizes that his earlier recommendation of what most regard as “civil disobedience,” such as peacefully withholding his taxes, was ineffective against the monster and massive apparatus that was American slavery (66). In fact, according to Larry Reynolds, author of *Righteous Violence* (2011), Thoreau himself argued for the purifying benefits of righteous violence (115). This means that, for Thoreau, it is possible for one to lift a weapon for good and still experience the same spiritual benefits of action from principle.

Critics may be quick to assume that Thoreau’s emphasis on action and violence, along with his late involvement in the abolitionist movement, contradicts the earlier Thoreau of “Resistance,” who, at times, displays a radical individualist philosophy detached from the affairs of the world. This early Thoreau says: “I have other affairs to attend to. I came into this world, not chiefly to make this a good place to live in, but to live in it, be it good or bad” (234). But in 1854, when the problem of slavery had only worsened due to the Fugitive Slave Act, Thoreau admits that his escapist solution had been a mistake: “I had foolishly thought that I might manage to live here, minding my private affairs, and forget it [the government]” (“Slavery” 871). Although the earlier Thoreau of “Resistance” may appear at odds and as rhetorically inconsistent with the later Thoreau of “Slavery in Massachusetts” and “A Plea,” he *always* demonstrates a “moral coherence” of action, not only throughout his life and but also in his writings (Jean 342).



Whether such action consisted in abandoning society and being one with nature (for even that consists of action), or passionately defending the use of violence to destroy the institution of slavery, he always remained true to his conscience and principles. This moral consistency is clearly more important for Thoreau than mere rhetorical cohesion, which only serves to limit the individual. For Jean, this moral consistency is “best demonstrated” by his attitude toward violence” (342). Therefore, action becomes a means for one to exemplify and live in accord with one’s conscience and principles. For Thoreau, this may include violence *if* necessary, and it is best illustrated by John Brown himself and his actions. After all, it is the early Thoreau of “Resistance” who declares: “But even suppose blood should flow. Is there not a sort of blood shed when the conscience is wounded?” (236). Hence, as early as 1849, and within the essay where many argue the theory of civil disobedience was born due to the essay’s seeming message of “passive resistance,” Thoreau leaves open the possibility for violence and for blood to flow when one’s conscience has been wounded by the state and its implicating injustices.

Among Thoreau’s reasons for defending the actions and person of John Brown is the belief that he was divinely inspired to destroy the institution of slavery in the United States. Brown was a fervently religious man, and he believed that sin abounded in the United States. Brown believed that the sin of slavery needed to be eradicated by any means necessary (Brown “Unflinching”). According to Charles Griffin, some saw Brown as a prophet and believed that he “had been sent by God to chastise and redirect a nation that had lost its moral bearings and gone seriously astray” (380). In fact, in 1837, according to DeNeen L. Brown, a then unknown John Brown declared publicly in an Ohio church: ““Here, before God, in the presence of these witnesses, from this time, I consecrate my life to the destruction of slavery.”” Brown’s proclamation came after the abolitionist and journalist Elijah P. Lovejoy was murdered by a

white pro-slavery mob in the free-state of Illinois. After his raid on Harper's Ferry, during his trial in October of 1859, he told the court that his actions against slavery were consistent with God's commandments (Finkelman). While this may cause some to heed and agree with the all-too-common comments accusing John Brown of being insane, Thoreau himself would push back against them. In "A Plea," he perfectly explains:

Many, no doubt, are well disposed, but sluggish by constitution and by habit, and they cannot conceive of a man who is actuated by higher motives than they are. Accordingly they pronounce this man insane, for they know that *they* could never act as he does, as long as they are themselves. (930)

Although the many who criticize and demonize Brown may be decent people, their lack of action against slavery (whether violent or nonviolent) is problematic and shows a lack of principle. They are only concerned with the fruit of their actions, forsaking their conscience in their daily lives. Many of Thoreau's neighbors are of the opinion that Brown "threw his life away" and *gained* nothing from it, "as if he expected to fill his pockets by this enterprise" (Thoreau 928). Such criticism against Brown reflects the chokehold the market economy of the United States has on the mind of the average American. As Raymond puts it, "[m]oney became the measure of the man, not morality, and the common good suffered consequently" (141). But for Thoreau, rather than being obsessed with the material realm, Brown was an agent of the divine, an "enforcer of a 'higher law,'" whose weapons and words were used in favor of his God (Reynolds 116). The masses, thus, cannot understand Brown nor his divinely inspired goals, for they are controlled by self-interest; they are unable to rise above the little and futile pursuits of making a living and forever trying to be richer. Brown rejects this way of life and pursues higher motives.

Rather than constituting a mere religious and violent crusade, as most may be quick to conclude, Thoreau saw in Brown's actions a great and secular concern for others, for justice, and for equality. For Thoreau, one should do as Brown did, that is, act not for one's benefit, but for

the benefit of the world. In reality, Brown's violent action against slavery is not that much different from the transcendentalists' and abolitionists' nonviolent action, such as their countless speeches and conferences, their writing of anti-slavery literature, or their boycott of products made from slave labor. There are, indeed, different forms of action, and both of these civil and uncivil acts arise from the same principle: looking out for the weak and powerless. Brown acted not for his sake but for the sake of others, fully giving "his life to the cause of the oppressed" (Thoreau "A Plea" 933). Brown defends his acts in a speech he gave during his 1859 trial, galvanizing many Northerners and abolitionists throughout the country:

I believe that to have interfered as I have done [on] behalf of His despised poor, is no wrong, but right. Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments, I say "let it be done." (Finkelman)

Brown declares his actions as righteous in an unjust country and accepts their consequences, fully sacrificing himself for others. According to Thoreau, he was "a man of principle, of rare courage, and devoted humanity; ready to sacrifice his life at any moment for the benefit of his fellow man" (Thoreau 938). Brown, like Antigone, accepts his punishment, not because he believes in the legitimacy of the State (or Creon's political authority) but because he is convinced of the rightness of his acts. In his speech, Brown also seems to defend his actions on secular grounds rather than on religious ones. For Marouf Hasian this blurring of the secular and the sacred helped solidify his status as "divinely appointed martyr," allowing Americans to visualize the natural law, embodied by Brown, as both spiritually "beautiful and reasonable" (qtd. in Griffin 381). Therefore, Brown's efforts are sublime not because he acts and kills for his beliefs, but because his actions, equally of the divine as they are of the secular, further a noble and just cause in the face of an irrational and selfish government and country. For this reason, Brown's

actions in Harper's Ferry and beyond are actions which sought to liberate rather than oppress others and, thus, carry considerable weight.

Thoreau perceived John Brown's uncivil actions against slavery as being more just, righteous, and aligned to American principles than the actions (or lack thereof) of the expedient United States government. Not only did the average nineteenth-century American do nothing about the massive evil of slavery, the U.S. government—the very institution which ought to ensure “liberty and justice for all”—criminally stood idly by as well, as it often does with matters of conscience. “No man in America,” Thoreau recognized about Brown, “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” (“A Plea” 933). But why did such an “exceptional” government and its people fail to effectively intervene in the problem of slavery for so long? For Thoreau, the answer lies in the U.S. government's inexpedient expedience. He sees representative democracy, one factor behind people's inaction, as a merely practical “force that polarizes mind and body [...] and substitutes offices and institutions for the actions of men” (Jenco 357). Democracy and its practical process of “one person one vote” weakens individuals in the carrying out of their moral obligation, for they think that voting is enough. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, a product of representative democracy, forced freedom-supporting Northerners to participate in the hunting down and the returning of runaway slaves to their masters in the South against their conscience and will. It also prevented them from freeing or attempting to free any enslaved persons. Thus, the “state was no longer distant, impersonal, and inconsequential” for Thoreau (Dooley 183). The government, due to its so-called expediency, was now effectively ordering all American citizens, including Thoreau, to deliberately violate their own conscience and engage directly in injustice. It was everybody's

duty, Thoreau believed, to disobey such government force (“Resistance” 234), and Brown was one who did just that. Regarding his Harper’s Ferry raid, Thoreau notes in “A Plea,” “[a]ll is quiet at Harper’s Ferry,’ say the journals. What is the character of that calm which follows when the law and the slaveholder prevail? I regard this event as a touchstone designed to bring out, with glaring distinctness, the character of this government” (936). Of what good is the calm and peace of Harper’s Ferry after John Brown, if these are maintained by the enslavement and suffering of millions? Such a peace is but a fake; it is merely an illusion, imagined for the wicked benefit of American slavery and its benefactors. “All men are created equal,” or so states the Declaration of Independence. Between Brown and the nineteenth-century U.S. government, the former remains faithful to American principles and the eternal Truth; the latter, on the other hand, disrespects and disregards it. For Thoreau, this selfish peace, which includes some and excludes others, is unjust and, thus, shall not stand.

While many may believe that the state’s supposed expediency may ensure order and stability in civilized society, the truth is that, as seen with American slavery, it generates a state of war characterized by lawlessness and conflict. Wendell Glick, for example, argues that this so-called practicality or convenience is necessary in civilized society for it maintains order, even if it disregards ideals like justice and abridges some people’s rights. Otherwise, a state of anarchy and chaos would ensue “in which every human right was sacrificed” (105). It is expedience and not justice, for Glick and others, which supposedly ensures order and peace in society. This, however, could not be further from the truth. An injustice allowed to stand by expedience gives rise to discontent and resentment within good and law-abiding citizens’ hearts, especially if it goes on for too long, as slavery did. After the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act and the return of Anthony Burns to slavery in 1854, Thoreau himself uncivilly declares: “now I cannot persuade

myself that I do not dwell *wholly within* hell. [...] My thoughts are murder to the State, and involuntarily go plotting against her” (“Slavery” 871-2). Whereas Thoreau’s disobedience may have been less uncivil when he wrote “Resistance” in 1849, by the time he wrote “Slavery” in 1854, and even more so by John Brown’s raid in 1859 and his subsequent essay defending Brown’s actions (“A Plea”), he realized he had “seriously underestimated the state and its influence upon his countrymen” (Dooley 183). The development of Thoreau’s views on resistance and disobedience indicates, then, that widespread and deep-rooted injustice, as slavery was in nineteenth-century America, creates conflict rather than peace. It is as John Brown himself put it: “slavery is a state of war” (U.S. National Park Service). According to Reynolds, the issue of slavery was one which periodically challenged Thoreau’s sense of control, as there were moments when the “beastly” and “brutal” intruded into his “serene” consciousness (124). As such, Thoreau became more open to and forcefully defended the use of violence by and on behalf of oppressed people against a slave state like the U.S. government. Brown and his party of white and freed black abolitionists were indeed denounced as insane, criminals, and terrorists for their violent and “treasonous” resistance. However, American society is itself sustained by systematic and pervasive violence, and the truly insane and dangerous are those who fail to recognize this fact (Newman 111-2) and, as a result, delegitimize oppressed peoples’ struggle for emancipation. One ought to only look at slavery in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, segregation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and police brutality and mass incarceration in the 21<sup>st</sup>. Every century, it seems, has its own form of oppression for mankind.

Although acts of militarism and uncivil disobedience like Brown’s may lead to violence and the spilling of blood, Thoreau does not view these as evil in and of themselves but as a way to do what is right in a country that is maintained by evil systems and unjust acts. Thoreau notes

in “A Plea” that “[t]he evil is not merely a stagnation of blood, but a stagnation of spirit” (930). The flow of blood does not necessarily make an act evil, for there may very well be just and emancipating causes, and other legitimate reasons, to fight and die for. Rather than righteous acts of violence, it is the absence of spirit and principle in one’s actions (or the lack thereof) that constitutes evil for Thoreau. Action without principle is merely behavior which disregards principles of right, and is, as a result, unjust and/or evil. For Thoreau, true evil occurs when a person’s conscience is attacked and harmed; it is “[t]hrough this wound [that] a man’s real manhood and immortality flow out, and he bleeds to an everlasting death. I see this blood flowing now” (“Resistance” 236). True evil and bloodshed occur when one violates one’s own or others’ conscience, regardless of when it is done at the direction of an unjust institution like the state. The widely hated Fugitive Slave Act was one example of this “blood flowing” which Thoreau saw, as Northern Americans were forced to aid Southern slaveholders against their consciences. This law caused more and more New England abolitionists, including Thoreau, to “accept the belief that the killing of oppressors was justified” (Reynolds 126). In fact, according to Jean, for Thoreau, “actual bloodshed is preferable to the ‘sort of blood’ that flows from denying one’s conscience” since he believed, like other transcendentalists, that conscience and the moral law were more binding and “of more consequence” than human law (344). Thoreau himself even goes as far as to say that one “should be shocked by the death of a slaveholder only if one were equally shocked by the horrors of slavery” (Matzke 65). Evidently, Thoreau believes that there is no moral contradiction when one seeks to achieve benevolent ends, such as assisting enslaved or oppressed people in their struggles and emancipatory efforts, by means of violence. Much worse, for Thoreau, is when one witnesses other peoples’ struggle, their oppression, and

their suffering and one does nothing about this; to believe in nothing and to fight for nothing is evil, for inaction, or even timid action, leads to the rule and triumph of injustice in the world.

Hence, for Thoreau, Brown is not a traitor nor a terrorist, but a freedom fighter and martyr to the cause of *true* freedom; he is someone who, through a determined and militant uprightness, refused to play the dirty game of nineteenth-century American slavery. John Brown was one of the few among the crowd who, like Antigone, stood up for his principles and acted according to his conscience and convictions, saving his soul in the process (Thoreau “A Plea” 928). He sacrificed his own life for the sake of principle, for the sake of freedom and justice, an act which, for Thoreau, is as great as it is rare and will inspire others. As he writes in his “Plea,”

Such do not know that like the seed is the fruit, and that, in the *moral* world, when good seed is planted, good fruit is inevitable, and does not depend on our watering and cultivating; that when you plant, or bury, a hero in his field, a crop of heroes is sure to spring up. This is a seed of such *force and vitality*, that it does not ask our leave to germinate. (928; emphasis added)

When one acts from principle, some good will come out of it sooner or later; such is the nature of John Brown’s uncivil disobedience and his sacrifice. Neither the greatness of Brown’s heroic act nor the impact of his martyrdom on future persons depend on other people’s approval or “cultivation,” especially not from those Americans who live their lives without principle and who choose to either support or entirely ignore evils like slavery. Brown’s martyrdom, or the planted seed which will yield a future crop of heroes, is one of force and vitality. For Thoreau, this force and militancy is the appropriate approach toward the demoniac state because “it is a state of war,” and the U.S. government is on the wrong side of the conflict. This is a government which is incompetent due to its inability to “control the diabolical forces it has loosed among men” (Rosenblum 92), for its political and economic institutions have empowered the worst parts of human beings. It was not in American institutions, but in Brown’s militancy where Thoreau



found the uprightness and vitality necessary to fight against and abolish the sin of slavery within the United States.

John Brown, then, should not only be regarded as a hero for his uncivil disobedience and violent resistance, his actions should be deemed as necessary against a government which continued to oppress and deny the freedom of millions, despite civil and nonviolent efforts to end slavery. Thoreau makes the situation of nineteenth-century American slavery abundantly clear in his “Plea” for Captain John Brown:

When a government puts forth its strength on the side of injustice, as ours to maintain slavery and kill the liberators of the slave, it reveals itself a merely brute force, or worse, a demoniacal force. It is more manifest than ever that tyranny rules. [...] There sits a tyrant holding fettered four millions of slaves; here comes their heroic liberator. This most hypocritical and diabolical government looks up from its seat on the gasping four millions, and inquires with an assumption of innocence: “What do you assault me for? Am I not an honest man? Cease agitation on this subject, or I will make a slave of you, too, or else hang you.” (936)

Thoreau regards Brown as a hero and liberator time and time again throughout his essay, often juxtaposing his valiant character with the evil actions of the government. As a student of Homer and ancient heroism, Thoreau understood that a “hero’s actions spring from character inexorably working itself out in the world” (Rosenblum 94). Such was the nature of Brown’s character in a country spoiled by the sin of slavery. However, the state assumes its own innocence and disingenuously demands civility when Brown disobeys with violence. But after a decade or two of civil and nonviolent demands for the state to abolish slavery, this was no longer an option in 1859. Peaceful methods had been exhausted, and the government refused to listen. Both Thoreau and Brown believed it was the time for principled, uncivil disobedience, specifically violent resistance. It is important to note that what makes uncivil disobedience different from the terrorist violence of, say, the Ku Klux Klan is that “[r]esistors must act with a respect for other

people's interests, including but not limited to, their basic interests in life and bodily integrity" (Delmas, *A Duty to Resist* 49). Those who engage in uncivil disobedience must respect people's rights to freedom and self-determination, allowing them to choose for themselves the values that shape their own lives. In other words, one should act with principle in one's disobedience, as Brown sought to do when he attempted to liberate enslaved persons.

When Thoreau declares in "A Plea" that "[t]he same indignation that is said to have cleared the temple once will clear it again" (939), he associates John Brown's actions in Harper's Ferry and Kansas with Christ but also, more subtly, with the divine cycle of destruction and creation. In *Righteous Violence*, Reynolds notes that Thoreau acquired from the *Gita* an understanding that "the forces of destruction are inseparable from the forces of creation [in the world] and that the divine encompasses them both" (117). Thoreau uses the analogy of Jesus cleansing the temple, that is, his expelling of merchants, money changers, and all those who bought and sold inside the temple, to explain Brown's efforts to cleanse and purify America of slavery; as Christ destroyed the corrupting market within the sacred temple, so must Brown destroy slavery within the United States. In order to build a better and more principled country which does not coerce individuals to act against their conscience and partake in blatant injustice, one must be willing to destroy the perverse traditions and institutions which maintain these. As Thoreau's case illustrates, one must first try to accomplish change peacefully with moral suasion and nonviolence, or what many call "civil disobedience," such as refusing to pay one's taxes (which can, too, be regarded as uncivil). But when civility fails to abolish slavery, or any other oppressive evil, one must resort to other methods. Thoreau's concept of action from principle means that whatever an individual person believes to be right must be accompanied by action. One's deeds must coincide with one's conscience, and sometimes uncivil disobedience and even

violent resistance may be necessary to defend conscience. One must be careful, however, to not confuse conscience with ideology, for the latter is merely a set of beliefs that misrepresents important social realities and perpetuates unjust social relations (Delmas, *A Duty to Resist* 14). Although Thoreau never acted in any violent manner himself, even before Brown's Harper's Ferry raid, he described his own thoughts as "murderous and likened them to bullets, making his mission as a writer out to be an act of war" (Rosenblum 97). Thoreau's militant conscience evidently influenced his philosophy of action from principle and explains his antagonistic resistance against the state, which dates back even to his 1849 essay, "Resistance to Civil Government." Although Brown's raid failed and led to his death on December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1859, he nonetheless contributed to the end of slavery in America. His actions eventually led to the Civil War two years later in 1861 and the full emancipation of African Americans in the Southern rebellious states four years later in 1863. Slavery was abolished in all of the United States upon the passage of the thirteenth amendment in January of 1865. Nonetheless, the struggle continues.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

*I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both.*

—Thoreau, “Higher Laws, Walden, 1854

Throughout his life, Henry D. Thoreau emphasized the importance of action guided by principle. This is the reason why in July of 1845, Thoreau sought to live a life of simplicity, away from the corrupting influence of American society and its market economy, and moved to Walden Pond. This is also why in July of 1846, during a brief walk into town, Thoreau was arrested and sent to jail for refusing to pay his taxes in Concord, Massachusetts, which he did in protest of the Mexican-American War. In September of 1847, Thoreau returned to society from Walden Pond, and he got involved with the Underground Railroad in 1850, helping runaway slaves after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. This adherence to action from principle also led Thoreau to speak in October of 1859 before the citizens of Concord in defense of Captain John Brown after his Harper’s Ferry raid. After his 1846 arrest, he also wrote his most famous work: “Resistance to Civil Government.” In this essay, he argues that if the law coerces the individual to violate his or her conscience, he or she should break the law. Thoreau, however, does not make clear how one should break the law, or whether one should use nonviolent or violent methods. Nonetheless, many associate Thoreau’s “Resistance” essay, alongside his efforts to resist the government, with the civil disobedience of the 1960s American Civil Rights Movement and its nonviolent tactics, but, perhaps, wrongly. In his essay, Thoreau himself never uses the terms “civil disobedience” nor “passive resistance.” In addition, the argument that he develops in “Resistance” leads very smoothly into two other essays that plainly endorse

violence: “Slavery in Massachusetts” and “A Plea for Captain John Brown.” In fact, Thoreau himself even admits in “Resistance” that following one’s conscience may lead to bloodshed (Grieve-Carlson 321). Hence, Thoreau’s tone in “Resistance” is not a very civil or respectful one towards the state, as he feels a sense of moral indignation against the U.S. government for its evil protection of slavery and its unjust 1846 invasion and occupation of Mexico.

In fact, the character of Antigone from Sophocle’s play, *Antigone*, offers valuable insight into the nature of Thoreau’s philosophy and disobedience within his essay, “Resistance to Civil Government.” Sophocle’s play is yet another work that is often associated with the idea of civil disobedience, especially when one looks at Antigone the character. But a deeper analysis of the play and the character reveals that Antigone’s disobedience is inherently uncivil. This is the case due to three fundamental aspects of Antigone’s character: her isolation, her apolitical nature, and her unabating autonomy. First, whereas the theory of civil disobedience demands cooperation between oneself and others, or to work together with other people and the government, Antigone is extremely isolated from the Theban citizenry and the state; she is utterly alone in her resistance, repudiating even her own sister’s support. Second, while civil disobedience requires the goal of one’s efforts to be the creation of positive social and/or political change, Antigone resists purely for personal reasons; she simply wants to bury her dead brother, a freedom which Creon’s state denies her. Antigone is unbothered by how her disobedience might positively or negatively impact the state, and she does *not* seek to politically improve the Theban *polis*. Lastly, whereas civil disobedience emphasizes the moral duty to obey the law, Antigone is a law unto herself. She refuses to subject herself to the laws of Thebes or to be even persuaded by the deeply misguided Theban citizenry. Also, much like Thoreau and unlike civil disobedience, she sees Creon’s political authority as illegitimate. These aspects of Antigone’s disobedience are

almost identical to the type of disobedience which Thoreau calls for in “Resistance,” which means that, like Antigone, he resists to maintain the purity of his soul and not to benefit the government or society. Walter Harding argues that Thoreau’s political essays (“Resistance,” “Slavery,” and “A Plea”) represent a progression of increased resistance against the state, with each one becoming more uncivil and violent as the problem of slavery worsened in the United States. But he regards “Resistance” as the more “civil” or “polite” one, as it is the earliest of his political essays (Harding qtd. in Jean 342). However, as the case of Antigone illustrates, incivility is evident even within this first early 1849 political essay from Thoreau.

But Thoreau did not just resist the nineteenth-century U.S. government, he also made it his object to disobey the emerging market economy of the United States, which he saw as the root cause of other problems like unprincipled action and slavery. In both, *Walden* and “Life Without Principle,” Thoreau argues that Americans’ ordinary actions, or how Americans choose to live their day to day lives, are responsible for their moral depravity and self-oppression. To this day, Americans are compelled by the social, political, and economic order of the United States to work tirelessly until old age, engage in unrestrained consumerism, acquire endless debts, and vote (if one even cares to vote) for the lesser of two evils and the most expedient option every four years. Such a lifestyle leaves little to no room for the individual to even think of his or her principles and the matters of the soul. For Thoreau, these small actions constitute the informal institutions which give rise and power to the formal institutions which subject the individual, like democracy, capitalism, and, in the nineteenth-century, American slavery. In other words, their ordinary actions lead to their own moral and/or physical oppression. Thoreau recognizes, however, that if people’s ordinary actions spring up these institutions, then they, too, can bring them down, and therein lies his subtle uncivil disobedience within *Walden* and “Life

Without Principle.” Perhaps, this is why Thoreau, much like Antigone’s isolation, decides to live a life of solitude and simplicity in Walden Pond surrounded by nature and far away from the shackles of nineteenth-century American society. However, the same principle which motivated Thoreau to retreat to nature also prompted him to return to society two years later to inspire others to resist their condition, demonstrating a concern for his fellow man, his well-being and his emancipation. Although critics like Dooley may claim that Thoreau’s disobedience is elitist and arrogant (181) due to his eventual support of violence, Thoreau demonstrates the opposite when, upon his return to society, he offers his fellow citizens a way for *all* to resist by simply being an example of how other ways of life are possible beyond the market economy. Thus, while Thoreau’s disobedience may illustrate a concern and responsibility for others, it does not demonstrate a responsibility to society itself nor the state.

Thoreau’s most explicit support for uncivil disobedience and for the use of violence as a means to resist occurs in his essay “A Plea for Captain John Brown.” In this essay, Thoreau defends John Brown’s actions in Harper’s Ferry, where he had planned to distribute weapons to slaves and incite a slave rebellion throughout the Southern United States. For Thoreau, Brown represents a transcendental hero, for he was one of the few who had the courage to actually live according to principle and to follow his conscience. Although some may say the use of violence as a means to resist is immoral and contradicts with the earlier Thoreau of “Resistance,” for Thoreau, there is no *moral* contradiction in achieving benevolent ends, such as liberating slaves, with violence. This is what Jean regards as Thoreau’s “radical consistency”: “dispensing with the machine might be accomplished by either [the] withholding of taxes (denying power to the machine) or violent rebellion (destroying the machine)” (344). Although Brown was one of the few to act (and die for his actions), this does not mean that the duty to resist demands a heroic

self-sacrifice from “moral saints” which most people are unable to live up to. As mentioned previously, ordinary actions are enough to resist, but most “fall short of fulfilling [...] their basic political obligations” (Delmas, *A Duty to Resist* 18). For Thoreau, Brown was divinely inspired to abolish the sin of slavery across the United States, while at the same time demonstrating a secular concern for justice and the well-being of others. Many branded Brown as insane for his wild campaign, criticizing how he gained nothing for his efforts but his death. But for Thoreau, this type of criticism against Brown only reflects how consumed Americans are by the market economy, being unable to consider higher purposes than forever making a living. Both Thoreau and Brown sought the complete emancipation of African Americans from slavery, but they also sought the liberation of their own conscience from the state. Neither of them could live peacefully with slavery nor with the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850; thus, both Thoreau and Brown followed their moral obligation to try to resist and abolish these.

In a time when freedom seems to be a privilege rather than a right and when governments violate people’s civil liberties so casually, one must not forget Malcolm X’s words from his January 7<sup>th</sup>, 1965 speech in New York: “[y]ou can’t separate peace from freedom because no one can be at peace unless he has his freedom.” In order for the individual to live at peace and in an orderly fashion within society, the state must respect his or her rights to freedom. Social Contract Theory states that in order to create a civilized society, human beings must give up some of their rights and freedoms in exchange for their security. But both parties must uphold their own end of the bargain, and, as seen throughout American history, the U.S. government has failed to ensure some people’s freedom and security time and time again. Many Americans, it seems, are willing to tolerate the loss of their rights or other injustices simply because these were done by majority vote or by other government institutions. But wrongly. Individuals must stop merely following



the majority and its path of expediency. In fact, the sole reason why an individual conscience like Thoreau's is so often at odds with majority opinion is because the majority follows the flawed path of expediency, often ignoring and resisting what their conscience tells them is morally right (Grieve-Carlson 324). Yes, one must first try to resist civilly, for civil disobedience and nonviolence are fine, as long as they work. However, if these fail to abolish injustice, one must resort to uncivil disobedience to bring about justice. One must strive to be an Antigone or a John Brown, that is, a vigilant citizen capable of conscientious political agitation (Turner 453). The manner of disobedience, or whether resistance is violent or nonviolent, ought to be determined by the individual him or herself, depending on the specific situation. After all, both forms of disobedience can be read within Thoreau's work, especially in his famous "Resistance to Civil Government" essay. Jejediah Britton-Purdy puts it perfectly, Thoreau is, indeed, a radical for *all* seasons, he is "pro-environmental, antiracist, anti-imperialist, feminist, reformist, spiritual but not religious," and an advocate of both civil and uncivil (nonviolent and violent) disobedience. Nonetheless, when the government criminally denies the people's unalienable rights, it has no right itself to tell the people what methods or tactics to use to regain these rights. Indeed, it is the Declaration of Independence of the United States which argues that governments have one important responsibility: to protect people's unalienable rights. If they do not, the Declaration famously states: "whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government." John Brown was simply someone who practiced his right of resistance when the U.S. government failed to protect the inherent rights of people. His (and others') self-reliance and action from principle guaranteed the freedom of around four million enslaved people; it was government institutions and millions of Americans' conformity which enslaved them.

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