

"Resistance to Civil Government"

by Henry David Thoreau

Learning Goals

Students will understand:

- Thoreau's philosophy of nonviolent civil disobedience
- Thoreau's argument, his underlying assumptions
- Thoreau's exigence, the "imperfection marked by urgency"
- The nature of Thoreau's appeals: to authority, to audience, to text
- Close reading and annotating
- How to divide the essay into sections while noting the rhetorical purpose of each section
- Thoreau's use of figurative language and his motives for using it in specific situations
- Connotations of words, particularly "govern"
- How to apply Thoreau's concepts to King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"

Discussion Questions:

1. This essay has three major sections. Describe the content of each. Describe how Thoreau's arguments unfold.
2. Write down the major themes of the essay.
3. Interpret, "That government is best which governs least. ... That government is best which governs not at all." Discuss Thoreau's view of the role of government.
4. Why does he describe the Mexican War as, "...the work of comparatively a few individuals using the standing government as their tool"?
5. Interpret the metaphor of the "wooden gun" in paragraph 2.
6. In the third paragraph, Thoreau advocates a *better* government. Do you agree with his idea of a *better* government? What is your idea of a *better* government?
7. How does Thoreau feel about majority rule?
8. According to Thoreau, how can justice be achieved? Do you agree? Why?
9. Interpret, "Thus, under the name of order and civil government, we are all made at least to pay homage to and support our own meanness."
10. According to Thoreau, when does the American government recognize the individual?

11. **Paradox** is a statement or expression that presents an apparent contradiction actually expressing a truth.

What is the truth behind these two paradoxes?

- a. "I saw that, if there was a wall of stone between me and my townsmen, there was still a more difficult one to climb or break through, before they could be as free as I was."
- b. "I felt as if I alone of all my townsmen had paid my tax."

12. Why was Thoreau's night in jail "like traveling into a far country"?

13. How were Thoreau's perceptions of his fellow citizens changed by his night in jail?

14. What is the significance of the shoes and huckleberry party?

15. According to Thoreau, what is required for a free and enlightened State?

16. Review Thoreau's arguments. Which do you find convincing, and with which do you disagree?

17. Do you think that there would be civil order if each person followed his or her own conscience? Explain your answer. What do you believe the role of government should be?