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### **“Civil Disobedience” Reading Response**

**Rebellion against injustice is one of Thoreau’s main themes. What sort of rebellion does he advocate? Does it make sense to you?**

Henry David Thoreau in his essay, “Civil Disobedience” is deeply impassioned by the need for resistance against the government when necessary. Thoreau holds some rather strong opinions on the participation in unjust government practices, no matter the activity or passivity. Moreover, the communication of a theme of rebellion is present throughout this piece, with special focus on the exigence that drives him to communicate this theme. Despite Thoreau’s lesser-than-radical stance on the state of political and theoretical affairs, he sets the precedent for what it means to be part of a passive resistance for many thinkers in the future.

“Rebellion against injustice” is indeed one of Thoreau's main themes in the advocacy of resistance. Thoreau adopts a very individualistic approach in his dealings with the law, coming off as somewhat moralistic and ambitious in his discussion of such dealings -- “...I ask for, not at once no government, but at once a better government. Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it” (372). Thoreau’s reasoning for this is valid, given that the cesspool of American politics is founded on corrupt moral practices, such as the espousal of slavery and an unjust war -- to which Thoreau is deeply resistant. According to Thoreau, every man must disobey laws as he sees fit, or in this case, unfit. He posits that complicit participation in justice is a moral ill and must be remedied by

the picking and choosing of laws to obey -- and these laws need not be grounded in majority consensus, but in individual conscience -- “Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience then? I think that we should be men first and subjects afterward” (372-373). Thoreau believes that American democratic rule has long surpassed the capacity for reason and ethical understanding, and ultimately, given that the law is only as fallible as the man who creates it, there exists a divine order of things, where morality ideally supersedes law and order. Moreover, his rebellion manifests in a refusal to pay taxes to fund the Mexican-American War, and his rhetorical purpose is satisfied when he laments on this experience.

Thoreau denounces the government altogether -- “I cannot ... recognize that political organization as my government which is the slave's government also” -- and he goes as far as to be imprisoned for his refusal to pay taxes. (375). It is here that he exercises his willful power of picking and choosing which laws he sees fit. He problematizes the American prison system in his swift, shrewd and pointed truism: “Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison” (384). Nevertheless, the rebellion for which he advocates is ultimately for people to look inward and consider their sources of moral guidance -- which should be founded entirely on their OWN conceptions of what it means to do right, as opposed to the influences of legislation, politicians, and the trap of “expediency”, using it to mean reaping the benefits of an immoral practice, such as slavery.

As adamant as he is in his resolve to fight “for a better government”, he absolutely does not advocate the overthrow of government, or even the remedying of it -- “It is not a man’s duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong; he may still properly have other concerns to engage him; but it is his duty, at least, to wash his

hands of it and, if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support” (379). His purpose here is to reinforce and salvage the good name of individualism, which is corrupted by a desensitization to and distancing from the “self”, which is masked by a stripping of the human will by an institution that is not conducive to reform, questioning, and progress within the social fabric -- “ Why does it cry and resist before it is hurt? Why does it not encourage its citizens to be on the alert to point out its faults and do better than it would have them? Why does it always crucify Christ and excommunicate Copernicus and Luther and pronounce Washington and Franklin rebels?” (381). His rhetorical questioning is extremely telling of this phenomenon, therefore, man must take matters into his own hands to navigate the swamp of the body politik. The rebellion for which Thoreau advocates is stemming entirely from within and the divine, and no government can truly maintain a stronghold over the mind and soul -- only the body.

I certainly find Thoreau’s philosophical arguments sound, captivating and easy to agree with -- his refusal to be compliant with a state that is supportive of a broken system of moral regress is a noble one, however idealistic and moralistic it might be. However, he does not entirely consider the relativism of what he asserts -- what is “just”? What is the “divine order of things”? Dogmatically invoking religious precepts always proves to be problematic in political philosophy, and philosophy in general. People will forever have varying conceptions of what is ethical or unethical, therefore, the governance reflected will only be dependent on what is popularly accepted -- and slavery at the time was viewed as not only standard, but necessary -- and salvation in the name of the “white man’s burden” was used to justify human indecency. Moreover, the epistemes with which we are acquainted as human beings are incredibly complex and variable from person to person, and one with a collectivist-oriented frame of mind might wholly disagree with his blatant neglect of a “common good”. Thoreau does not acknowledge

privilege and hierarchy in his analysis of good-doing and doing-good. This begs the question, what if a black man were to reject complicity? After all, Thoreau's stay in jail for 1 (one!) night was really pretty lavish -- imagine the repercussions that a different person would have faced. Ultimately, his argumentation is bold and fantastic, his deliverance lofty and ambitious -- and definitely sensical. But, it is more admirable than realistic, and I cannot not truly envision the full manifestation of his philosophies in the world in which we live.