

# Comparing thoreau's "civil disobedience", whitman's "one's self i sing", and emer...

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## **Comparing Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience", Whitman's "One's Self I Sing", and Emerson's "Self-Reliance" Essay Sample**

Some of the greatest American writers of the nineteenth century wrote about a theme of the individual. Two that come to mind when writing about the individual are Henry David Thoreau who wrote "Civil Disobedience" and Walt Whitman who wrote "One's-Self I Sing." Thoreau was known for being an individualist, who fought against materialism and social conformity.

Whitman was similar to Thoreau in that he too took powerful and devoted stands against the social and cultural directions of individuals. Whitman also used his own character as a standard of self, submitting his own essence as equal with that of the everyday person. One last person that comes to mind when writing about the individual is, of course, Ralph Waldo Emerson who wrote "Self-Reliance." This literary work is probably the best work about only the individual and how an individual should be perceived.

In "Civil Disobedience," Thoreau begins an attack on the philosophy of a strong ruling government by saying, "I heartily accept the motto 'That government is best which governs least;' and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically." (Thoreau 1614) Thoreau further states that he holds the belief that man will be able to have a government that does not govern at all. He believes that the need for government really arises from the requirement of people to have a sort of "machine" to control things and make their decisions for them. Thoreau explains that the only time government has helped is when it has stood aside. In fact government

does not: keep the country free, settle the west, or educate; rather such achievements come from the character of the people. The message I received from reading Thoreau is to avoid associating with government all together, that people should live by their conscience not the laws of an unjust government. When people do this they can explore new ideas and be creative. Thoreau is trying to challenge the average person to live up to their potential, which reflects on individualism. In other words, don't sit around and let other people dictate your life, stand up and do things for yourself.

In "One's-Self I Sing," Whitman shows his idea of individualism by saying, "One's-Self I sing, a simple separate person, / Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse / Of physiology from top to toe I sing, / Not physiognomy alone nor brain alone is worthy for the Muse, / I say the Form complete is worthier far, / The Female equally with the Male I sing. / Of Life immense in passion, pulse, and power, / Cheerful, for freest action form'd under the laws divine, / The Modern Man I sing." (Whitman 2175) Whitman, in this poem, attempts to persuade the idea of individuality and democracy. As Whitman sees it, the individual and society are inseparable under democracy. When one celebrates an individual, one celebrates all. Society cannot reject a part of itself and remain whole, and as such, the individual cannot reject a part of themselves and remain whole. The body and the mind are indivisible. If one rejects the body then they are rejecting themselves. Likewise, if one rejects the mind, then again, they are rejecting themselves. As part of society, one must celebrate both woman and man in order to be considered complete as a human being. Life can be freed from the "laws divine" which sees man as

sinful and damned. That modern man need not live under the weight of such laws.

In "Self-Reliance," Ralph Waldo Emerson talks thoroughly about the individual. One of the countless things about individualism that he talks about is when he says, "...imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better for worse as his portion." (Emerson 1005) He explains that if people are not true in the sense of individualism, then these people are in effect "committing suicide." Emerson then describes how people must take their individual selves for who and what they are, and that people should neither change nor imitate others. He says, "We but half express ourselves, and are ashamed of that divine idea which each of us represents." (Emerson 1005) He's trying to say that if people believe they cannot be depended on as individual then they can't rely on other individuals. This leads to a lack in confidence and in turn affects every individual's morals and has a negative effect on an individual's consciousness.

#### References:

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