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The Individual's Relationship to the Community

As Explained by Emerson and Thoreau

The nineteenth century rhetoric of reform carried many new and progressive ideals with its movement which took place before, during, and after the Civil War. With people beginning to step up and argue for their individual rights, and with their communities/authority figures fighting back, the rhetoric of reform brought a new boldness and passion to writing and speaking. Both Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau had new and forward-thinking ideas to bring forth during this time regarding the individual's relationship to his or her community. Their essays "Self-Reliance" (Emerson) and "Civil Disobedience" (Thoreau) bring both homologous and contrasting thoughts and arguments explaining how one may be the strongest, most useful individual in a larger community possible. Both pieces exemplify similar qualities of the rhetoric of reform while using similar and different rhetorical strategies to do so.

Although the two reformist writers had similar ideals and exemplified similar qualities, there were also strong differences between their separate beliefs regarding how an individual should act in a larger community. Emerson believed in challenging those who rely on tradition, authority, and dogma, and encouraged people to appeal to the inner self, to intuition, and to nature as guides to living life and creating a near-perfect social reality. Emerson writes that "Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of our own mind" (Emerson para 5). While Emerson

focused on meditation and improving oneself to create a more diverse and healthy community, Thoreau encouraged protesting harmful authority figures and government systems in order to gain and maintain rights. Thoreau wrote “Civil Disobedience” in an attempt to popularize and familiarize people with his philosophy of nonviolent resistance as a means of protest against unjust governmental decisions, in this particular case, against paying taxes that supported the United States’s war with Mexico. Thoreau believes that it is the duty of the people to rebel and fight back against an oppressive and authoritarian government to earn the rights that they want and that they deserve: “The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think is right” (Thoreau para 3). Emerson believes that separating yourself from the bonds of society and living one’s own way with his or her own individual ideals and styles is the key to living a fulfilling life. He thinks that society is corrupting its human members by encouraging them to all think, look, and act the same. Thoreau similarly thinks that society has many issues, but rather than focusing on the individual’s personal growth outside of the community like Emerson, he focuses on the individual’s political involvement in the community. Like Emerson believes in following your own thoughts rather than grasping onto the beliefs and ideals of others, Thoreau argues that one should stay true to his or her beliefs and that he or she should never stop fighting for what they believe to be their rights; he says, “His vote is of no more worth than that of any unprincipled foreigner or hireling native, who may have been bought. Oh for a man who is a man, and, as my neighbor says, has a bone in his back which you cannot pass your hand through!” (Thoreau para 13). Both writers use an artful variation of schemes and tropes to effectively argue in favor of their uniquely progressive ideas.

Emerson's "Self-Reliance" is primarily a persuasive essay which is written in middle style, is aimed towards everyday people, and is written for the main purpose of persuading people to think for themselves and avoid conformity. Emerson uses figurative language, specifically metaphors, to create imagery and make his points more relatable. One of these metaphors may be found in the fourth paragraph: "Society is a joint-stock company in which the members agree for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater" (Emerson para 4). This metaphor is a true picture of society. In this metaphor, the author argues that in order to be a true member of society, one must give up his or her individuality in order to fit in and join the majority of people in their harmful societal bubble. Emerson largely relies on aphorisms in his document, such as the aphorism in the fifth paragraph in which he aims to emphasize the importance of trusting the goodness and righteousness of our own moral intuition: "Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of our own mind" (Emerson para 5). In Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience," the writer relies on a very specific arrangement of ideas to make his point clearly and persuasively. At the beginning of the essay, Thoreau explains the main issue to his audience. He then begins to talk about rebellion and why the act of protesting is so important. To finish the essay, Thoreau continues to write about the importance of protest; and the potentially positive results that protesting could produce not just in the specific situation about which he is writing, but in other future situations in which rights and/or decisions are being taken away from the citizens as well. Thoreau takes on the persona of a dreamy, ambitious, rebellious socialist who believes in giving more power to the people and is highly anti-government; he says, "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. Carried out, it

finally amounts to this, which also I believe,--'That government is best which governs not at all'; and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have" (Thoreau para 1). He uses metaphors to show how important protesting is in times of distress. He uses anecdotes and explanations of personal experiences to bring his arguments to life many times throughout the essay. Both pieces are highly effective in light of the rhetorical situation.

Both Emerson and Thoreau do an excellent job of ensuring maximum persuasion through various rhetorical strategies and careful organization of their essays. Emerson's usage of aphorisms helps keep a nice theme going throughout his piece. His metaphor of the joint-stock company helps to dramatize the piece and use a real-life situation to appeal to his audience through pathos. This utilization of pathos throughout assists the author in motivating his readers to seek out their most divine purpose, instead of focusing on conformity, societal acceptance, and carrying out the unoriginal ideas of others in the past. This metaphor also adds to his credibility, helping him to appeal to his audience through ethos as well. Like Emerson, Thoreau uses metaphors to help with relatability and to appeal to a wider, more diverse audience. Thoreau's usage of anecdotes helps him sound more reliable and trustworthy. Thoreau primarily appeals to his audience through ethos. This appeal can largely be seen in his use of various metaphors: "All voting is a sort of game, like checkers or backgammon" (Thoreau para 8) and "All machines have their friction--and possibly this does enough good to counterbalance the evil. At any rate, it is a great evil to make a stir about it. But 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" (Thoreau para 12). Additionally, both pieces reflect many important qualities of the rhetoric of reform. Both writers advocate revision of ineffective structures while avoiding advocacy of war;

they remain critical, but optimistic; they are nonviolent, but confrontational; they are rebellious, but inclusive; and they have a common goal of the creation of a more perfect union. Thoreau's essay focuses more on equity and justice, whereas Emerson focuses more on self-reflection and meditation, exemplifying many qualities of transcendentalism as well as romanticism.

Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were a couple of the most influential Transcendental reformist writers of their time period. Emerson's "Self-Reliance" and Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" both begged for a certain social responsibility to be recognized and acted upon. They both spoke of and relied upon the intuition of everyday citizens to think for themselves perform their moral duties. They also both encouraged non-conformity to society; they pushed their readers to practice individuality; and they encouraged their audience members to exercise their rights as humans, and also as citizens of a larger community. The progressive and passionate ideas displayed in both of these exceptionally influential, Transcendental essays have inspired individuals to take part in changing their communities for the better for over a hundred years. These authors have reminded people of the importance of rights, as well as the importance of maintaining those rights. Both "Self-Reliance" and "Civil Disobedience" exemplify qualities of the rhetoric of reform while using similar and different rhetorical strategies to achieve maximal persuasion and inducement.