

# Thoreau on Consumerism, Slavery, War, Freedom, and Reform Literary Analysis

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More than 150 years ago, Henry David Thoreau created awareness among the masses of his country about increasing consumerism. He was of the view that people must align consumption according to their needs; they must not go after the things that are unnecessary as they would be a burden on their pocket. He predicted the consequences of rampant consumerism in the 19th century during his life. Consumerism came into effect as a result of the Industrial Revolution towards the end of the 18th century and by the start of the 19th century. During, a lot of hype was there. Thoreau was of the view that increasing commercialism and consumerism would take our happiness and make the world more materialistic. There should be a balance between purchasing and consumption. His warning was evident in his writings; he gave the lesson of simplifying things so that people during the mid-19th century didn't fall prey to the hype of excessive commercialism and consumerism. Thoreau's own life was a leading example of anti-commercialism and consumerism. He was greatly inspired by Socrates, especially by his quote, "The unexamined life is not worth living" (Socrates); he wanted his readers and ordinary people to adopt this quote of Socrates as a principle of their lives.

Thoreau's emphasis on the appropriate usage of things justifies his views on consumerism and rampant commercialism of the 19th century. His approach was clear; he wanted to live an economic life with the proper utilization of sources that were available to him. He was firm in his stance that he wouldn't go with the wind of consumerism; he didn't want to be part of the system during that era as, according to him, the sole purpose of commercialism and consumerism was to make a profit by exploiting resources. Thoreau opposed this system and made clear in his writings that this system was by no means for the welfare of the common people. When he threw light on anti-consumerism, he was favouring common people's rights as he wanted less burden on the pocket of the American people. He could foresee things, and that is why he highlighted the damaging results of consumerism and commercialism in the years to come and even in the century to follow. His renowned book *Walden* speaks volumes about consumerism and its harmful effects on society. In a way, he gave no value to the dollar; instead, he deemed it unnecessary for man. In fact, he was in favour of humanity. He explained that property is a hurdle in spirituality, he was of the view that property and possessions make people poor from inside. As a result of his firm belief in anti-consumerism and commercialism, he didn't accept any job as a full-time employee.

According to him, full-time employment would result in more consumption, which is an unnecessary element of human life. He cut his wants greatly. Therefore, he was able to claim that six weeks of labor would be enough for the whole year of living, it was indeed a considerable claim. He said, happiness lies in demanding less, the more demand and will bring more troubles and hassles to life, not only he preached this, he practiced this as well. The earth's resources were exploited to make

profits, which was so unfortunate. A particular group or class of people made natural resources like trees, minerals, and water commodities, and the idea behind that was to make money. These natural resources are made for human and <sup>[2]</sup>no one should be able to grab them to earn money, he deemed it as the robbery in that era of consumerism and commercialism.

## *Thoreau's views on Slavery, War and Freedom*

Thoreau wrote an essay about slavery in Massachusetts after the speech that he delivered at an anti-slavery rally after the controversial decision of the Fugitive Slave Act- it refers to sending free slaves that were living in the North for slavery purposes to the South. He continually expressed in his essay anti-slavery views as lethal for America's democracy and freedom. According to him, slavery was against the fundamental rights of the human. Slaves were not allowed any freedom, which was ironic because everyone was talking about democracy, but democratic values were not visible in society as a result of slavery. Before the Civil War, the demand for slaves increased as they were required to work in different industries. In 1853, various buyers purchased members of families differently so that they never see each other again in their lives, which was so tragic. Thoreau made valid points on anti-slavery and also exposed the hypocrisy of those people who are apparently against enslaving people, but in reality, they can't see their actions, which were contradictory to their views. He was a firm believer in individual freedom; through his writings, he awakened people and conveyed to them the significance of a free soul. Thoreau was a powerful opponent of slavery. Once, he resolutely refused to pay the poll taxes as, according to him, it was exploitation and a means of enslaving people. His refusal to go to the local tax collector took him behind bars for one night, but he didn't compromise his rules. Thoreau's writing about anti-slavery had a historical background as, during those days, slavery was a more significant issue, and many prominent figures of that society were not ready to change their opinion on slavery. Thoreau, being a good personality, expressed his anti-slavery views as an eye-opener for many people. Also, he was against Mexican-American war that was fought between 1846-1848 as a result of American armed intervention in Mexico.

## *Problems Identified by Thoreau*

In his writing, he explicitly defined hatred as an issue of society; he termed it as a disease that was spreading, and its roots were strengthening. He further mentioned that hatred was separating people of the United States from each other, which was an alarming thing. He also criticized people who were following the materialistic approach of the time. He wanted the masses to open their eyes and realize the challenges that were faced by society during that time. Many Americans were viewing the world, not from their own eyes. Thoreau was foresighted, which enabled him to point out such issues.

## Thoreau writing about Reforms

Reform and Reformers was the essay that Thoreau wrote, but it was not publicized during his life. He believed that reformers such as communists, religious reformers, and free love-oriented people were not entirely clear in their minds about what they were propagating at the time. According to him, such reformers should not only do lip service; instead, they should practically demonstrate their ideology through their actions. He also endorsed the concept of self-reform. Therefore, he gave recommendations to all such reformers to start reforming themselves first and then think about changing society. In this regard, he gave the message to the common people of America that instead of following any reformer, improve yourself first. Actions should describe the personality of an individual. Starting from yourself is the real reform that can collectively bring change to society and the behaviour of people. The community during the mid-19th century was suffering from many diseases, and it needed a cure at large. Therefore, everyone was responsible for his deeds, and the responsibility lies on everyone's shoulders to analyze things from their perspective in a realistic manner so that the country could see the real reforms.

## End Notes

Kuhn, Bernhard. *Autobiography and natural science in the age of Romanticism: Rousseau, Goethe, Thoreau*. Routledge, 2016.