

Emerson-Thoreau Comparison Chart

Name	Date	Class

Emerson shared many of Thoreau's political views. He distrusted majority rule for the same reasons Thoreau did and held the same views of mass culture. This chart illustrates the similarities between Emerson's "Self-Reliance" and Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience".

On the relationship between the individual and the law:

No law can be sacred to me but that of my own nature.

Emerson

It is not so desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right.

Thoreau

On the relationship between property and government:

And so the reliance on Property, including the reliance on governments which protect it, is the want of self-reliance. Men have looked away from themselves and at things so long, that they have come to esteem the religious, learned, and civil institutions as guards of property, and they deprecate [disapprove of] assaults on these, because they feel them to be assaults on property.

Emerson

When I converse with the freest of my neighbors, I perceive that . . . they cannot spare the protection of the existing government, and they dread the consequences to their property and families of disobedience to it.

Thoreau

On political parties:

The political parties meet in numerous conventions; the greater the concourse [gathering], and with each new uproar of announcement

. . . the young patriot feels himself stronger than before by a new thousand of eyes and arms. In like manner the reformers summon conventions, and vote and resolve in multitude. Not so, O friends! will the God deign to enter and inhabit you, but by a method precisely the reverse. [You will connect with the divine not through the support of others but only by cultivating your own spiritual strength alone.] It is only as a man puts off all foreign support [support outside himself], and stands alone, that I see him to be strong and to prevail. He is weaker by every recruit to his banner. Is not a man better than a town?

Emerson

I hear of a convention to be held at Baltimore, or elsewhere, for the selection of a candidate for the Presidency, made up chiefly of editors, and men who are politicians by profession; but I think, what is it to any independent, intelligent, and respectable man what decision they may come to? Shall we not have the advantage of his [the independent, intelligent, respectable man] wisdom and honesty, nevertheless? Can we not count upon some independent votes? Are there not many individuals in the country who do not attend conventions?

Thoreau

Emerson-Thoreau Comparison Chart Continued

On philanthropy:

Then, again, do not tell me, as a good man did to-day, of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they *my* poor? I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent, I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong. There is a class of persons to whom by all spiritual affinity I am bought and sold; for them I will go to prison, if need be; but your miscellaneous popular charities; the education at college of fools; the building of meeting-houses to the vain end to which many now stand; alms to sots; and the thousandfold Relief Societies; — though I confess with shame I sometimes succumb and give the dollar, it is a wicked dollar which by and by I shall have the manhood to withhold.

Emerson

The American has dwindled into an Odd Fellow —one who may be known by the development of his organ of gregariousness, and a manifest lack of intellect and cheerful self-reliance; whose first and chief concern, on coming into the world, is to see that the almshouses are in good repair; and, before yet he has lawfully donned the virile garb, to collect a fund for the support of the widows and orphans that may be; who, in short ventures to live only by the aid of the Mutual Insurance company, which has promised to bury him decently.

Thoreau