

# Forging of the American Identity in the Works of Henry David Thoreau and Frederick Douglass

---

**Marinković, Dominik**

**Undergraduate thesis / Završni rad**

**2019**

*Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj:* **Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku, Filozofski fakultet**

*Permanent link / Trajna poveznica:* <https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:142:921028>

*Rights / Prava:* [In copyright](#)/[Zaštićeno autorskim pravom.](#)

*Download date / Datum preuzimanja:* **2024-07-13**



*Repository / Repozitorij:*

[FFOS-repository - Repository of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Osijek](#)



J.J. Strossmayer University of Osijek  
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Double Major BA Study Programme in English Language and Literature and  
German Language and Literature

Dominik Marinković

**Forging of the American Identity in the Works of Henry David  
Thoreau and Frederick Douglass**

Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Dr. Sanja Runtić, Associate Professor

Osijek, 2019

J.J. Strossmayer University of Osijek  
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Department of English

Double Major BA Study Programme in English Language and Literature and  
German Language and Literature

Dominik Marinković

**Forging of the American Identity in the Works of Henry David  
Thoreau and Frederick Douglass**

Bachelor's Thesis

Scientific area: humanities

Scientific field: philology

Scientific branch: English studies

Supervisor: Dr. Sanja Runtić, Associate Professor

Osijek, 2019

Sveučilište J.J. Strossmayera u Osijeku  
Filozofski fakultet Osijek

Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskoga jezika i književnosti  
i njemačkog jezika i književnosti

Dominik Marinković

**Oblikovanje američkog identiteta u djelima Henryja Davida  
Thoreaua i Fredericka Douglassa**

Završni rad

Mentor: izv. prof. dr. sc. Sanja Runtić

Osijek, 2019.

Sveučilište J.J. Strossmayera u Osijeku

Filozofski fakultet Osijek

Odsjek za engleski jezik i književnost

Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskoga jezika i književnosti  
i njemačkog jezika i književnosti

Dominik Marinković

**Oblikovanje američkog identiteta u djelima Henryja Davida  
Thoreaua i Fredericka Douglassa**

Završni rad

Znanstveno područje: humanističke znanosti

Znanstveno polje: filologija

Znanstvena grana: anglistika

Mentor: izv. prof. dr. sc. Sanja Runtić

Osijek, 2019.

## IZJAVA

Izjavljujem s punom materijalnom i moralnom odgovornošću da sam ovaj rad samostalno izradio te da u njemu nema kopiranih ili prepisanih dijelova teksta tuđih radova, a da nisu označeni kao citati s napisanim izvorom odakle su preneseni.

Svojim vlastoručnim potpisom potvrđujem da sam suglasan da Filozofski fakultet Osijek trajno pohrani i javno objavi ovaj moj rad u internetskoj bazi završnih i diplomskih radova knjižnice Filozofskog fakulteta Osijek, knjižnice Sveučilišta Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku i Nacionalne i sveučilišne knjižnice u Zagrebu.

U Osijeku, 16. rujna 2019.



0122224010

Ime i prezime studenta, JMBAG

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	1
Introduction.....	2
1. Individualism and Self-reliance as the Ideal.....	4
2. Thoreau's Idea of the Rugged Individualist.....	8
3. Douglass and (Re-)gaining of Identity through Self-reliance.....	11
4. Thoreau's and Douglass' Actualisation of Individualism.....	14
Conclusion.....	17
Works Cited.....	18

## Abstract

American literature is rich in stories of individualists who succeeded only by their own merits and faced the unknown, unexplored territory also called the *frontier*. This idea defines the identity of the nation to the point that even long after the literal *frontier* has been conquered and explored, the American spirit is to find new *frontiers*. This paper provides a brief socio-historic overview in order to explain why individualism and self-reliance marked the American identity and what conditions those created in America. It also discusses the problems of society which clashed with those ideals, and thereby created the new *moral frontier*. The analysis focuses on three works: *Walden or, Life in The Woods* (1854) and *Civil Disobedience* (1849) by Henry David Thoreau and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) by Frederick Douglass, all of which uphold the unadulterated idea of individualism and self-reliance. Whereas Thoreau intended to overcome the materialistic, superficial way of modern life and live only on the factual necessities in order to seek out what makes a happy and fulfilled life, Douglass wanted to overcome the hurdles of his life and the life of all other slaves, which he managed to do through his own hard work and expediency. The paper also provides a comparative analysis and synthesis of Thoreau's and Douglass's works and their philosophies and differentiates between two kinds of *frontier* – the internal, or personal, and the external, or the socio-political one – by analysing how those *frontiers* are overcome by perseverance.

**Keywords:** Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Henry David Thoreau, *Walden or, Life in the Woods*, *Civil Disobedience*, identity, self-reliance, *frontier*, pioneers, spartan life, non-conformism, materialism.



## Introduction

Identity is the key set of features that makes one individual or group distinct from all others. It is defined by the common patterns of behaviour and the particular set of values commonly held by the largest portion of the population. The American Identity has been the topic of discussion since the Nation's conception. It is hard to define the American character without making generalizations; however, throughout American culture, there are two features that stand out as common to all Americans and seem to create the distinctly American identity: individualism and self-reliance. This paper discusses American identity and how those two values influenced it. The first chapter provides the reason why those two values became the ideals by putting them into historical context provided in Frederick Jackson Turner's essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Based on Tocqueville's analysis of American character presented in *Democracy in America*, it also argues that Turner's thesis has brought forth an extreme *frontier-mentality*, that is, an *us vs them mentality*, which was used to fuel exclusivist attitudes and concepts such as *manifest destiny* and allowed for and justified the existence of slavery, and that this mentality is ultimately contradictory to the values of both individualism and self-reliance. The following two chapters will analyse the most important works of two American authors: *Walden or, Life in The Woods* (1854) and *Civil Disobedience* (1849) by Henry David Thoreau and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) by Frederick Douglass.

Thoreau was a well-off student at Harvard College, later an essayist, poet, and philosopher. He was influenced by the Transcendentalist movement, which sought after the spiritual rather than the material fulfilment, and therefore he rejected modern society in order to "live deep and suck out all the marrow of life" (Thoreau, *Walden* 63). He wrote his accounts and conclusions down in *Walden* – one of the most famous documents of American individualism and non-conformism. On the opposite end of the social ladder was Frederick Douglass, a former slave, who later became a statesman, orator, and renowned abolitionist. Douglass gave his accounts of slavery and his escape from it. Also, his autobiography shows us how he became a self-made man who had been "given the inch, and no precaution could prevent [him] from taking the ell" (Douglass 33). He can certainly be regarded as a self-reliant individualist, who started out as a slave, and ended up as one of the most iconic Americans who have ever lived. Both of these authors explore in two unique ways how this American ideal is actualised. Furthermore, both authors, seeing the failures of society in the

nineteenth century, became American *frontiersmen*; namely, they took up the task to become free in their own regards and became prime examples of true American spirit.

## 1. Individualism and Self-reliance as the Ideal

While most other countries justify their culture, traditions, and identity with centuries or even millennia of continuous existence and ownership of their lands, contemporary America is too young of a nation to do the same. From its birth in 1776, when The United States declared independence, the nation has forged a unique perspective of life and how one ought to live it. The settlers who had arrived in the seventeenth century had an identity of their own, namely as White, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant. They left their homeland in the Old World to escape persecution and start anew according to their own rules. Their culture and identity was theirs to create deliberately and actively, and unlike the nations of the Old World, who underwent a lengthy transformation of their various cultures and identities, either by conquering or being conquered, converting or being converted, etc., the settlers arrived in a vast, dangerous wilderness rich in resources and mostly unmolested by previous dense settlement.

In his essay “The Significance of The *Frontier* in American History,” Frederick Jackson Turner identifies that virgin land as *the frontier*. Because the settlers were not numerous in the beginning, nor were they protected from the wild like in Europe, where most of the land was owned, settled, and explored, the New World was unknown, and their main goal was to explore, settle, conquer, and tame it:

The peculiarity of American institutions is the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people—to the changes involved in crossing a continent, in winning a wilderness, and in developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the *frontier* into the complexity of city life. (Turner 1)

The *frontier* was something to be explored and sought to overcome, and the ideal person fit for this task, according to Turner, is self-reliant and individualistic. That archetype has been idealised by Americans, who have made him the classic American male hero: the rugged individualist. Turner points out that the civilised European is no match for the harsh wilderness that calls for anti-social and selfish tendencies. Because of that, the American identity was shaped by robust, competent, and self-reliant individualists, and the defining aspect of it was to seek out an obstacle and overcome it (Turner 2). It is thus to conclude that the further the *frontier* expands and moves away, the more *American* it gets. As Turner notes,

“the frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. The wilderness masters the colonist” (13). According to Turner, American identity was shaped by being in “continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society” (12); the essential part of this American character was created through westward expansion, and its epitome is the simple self-sufficient farmer:

Nothing works for nationalism like intercourse within the nation. Mobility of population is death to localism, and the western frontier worked irresistibly in unsettling population. The effect reached back from the frontier and affected profoundly the Atlantic coast and even the Old World. (Turner 35)

However, this attitude of conquest and westward expansion, according to Turner, also meant that everything that was part of the *frontier* had to recede further and further away; that is, the Native Americans, who did not fit into the picture of a fully civilised America were pushed out. Turner deemed this rightful and necessary as he included in his idea of the *frontier* “the whole frontier belt, including the Indian country and the outer margin of the ‘settled area’ of the census reports” (13). Such views were widely accepted in American society of the nineteenth century and were seen as justifications for the expansion and American imperialism, also called *manifest destiny*. That sentiment, is not represented in the American identity as a whole, but is rather an extreme expression of the American conquering spirit, which creates an *us against them* mentality that is antithetical to the very idea of individualism itself. Because Turner saw Americans as destined to conquer the *frontier*, all other people were logically seen either as obstacles or as means of achieving that goal. It is also that mentality that allowed another antithesis to American ideals to exist: slavery.

In the days of the pioneers, individualism in combination with self-reliance created a situation where everybody had to work for their survival. Such a state, also regarded as an ideal to be aspired to, is called *equality of conditions*. In his work *Democracy in America* Alexis De Tocqueville, a Frenchman who came to the U.S. in 1831, wrote down his accounts of American culture, and in the first chapter he wrote: “Amongst the novel objects that attracted my attention during my stay in the United States, nothing struck me more forcibly than the general equality of conditions” (1). Thus, the institution of slavery did not fit into this picture of equality of conditions. Forced labour and ownership of people, according to

Tocqueville, was so antithetical to the American values of individualism and self-reliance, so he argued: “Slavery, as we shall afterwards show, dishonours labour; it introduces idleness into society, and with idleness, ignorance and pride, luxury and distress” (41). In other words, Tocqueville saw slavery, a social condition in which people owned others and forced them to work, as simply inconsistent with individualism and self-reliance, that is, self-determination. Self-determination means that one can choose what one shall do – and nobody chose to be a slave; hence, slavery is in opposition to those values. It is the reason why that and other flaws in society that clashed with the aforementioned values, such as inequality between the sexes and segregation of African-Americans, all needed strong political pressure to be removed in order to bring American society closer to its ideals. This new struggle became a new kind of *frontier*: the moral *frontier*.

Even though the *frontier* was completely conquered and settled more than a hundred years ago, today, the *frontier* is not merely gone, but it has just moved further away. The idea of the *frontier* has not vanished, even though the *frontier* is not there anymore, but has been extended to become the borderline between America and every “unknown territory,” either of the individual or the society, the internal, or personal and the external, or political, social, and moral. In other words, the *frontier* just echoes throughout American history. In his 1960 acceptance speech, “The New Frontier,” John F. Kennedy invoked this old myth of exploration by attaching it to the change of American society, to the need to be more fair and more prosperous. Also, he expanded the meaning of the *frontier* in the context of the Cold War with the hostile Soviet Union in order to set forth the resolution of disputes and prevent the looming destruction of the world: “I stand tonight facing west on what was once the last *frontier*. From the lands that stretch three thousand miles behind me, the pioneers of old gave up their safety, their comfort and sometimes their lives to build a new world here in the West” (Kennedy).

Because individualism seeks freedom and self-expression as well as self-reliance – a certain kind of independence which rejects interference of society in one’s own life and thus logically arises from individualism – those two can be mistaken for mere egotism and selfishness. In order to distinguish those two, Tocqueville provided the following explanation:

Egotism is a passionate and exaggerated love of self, which leads a man to connect everything with his own person, and to prefer himself to everything in the world.

Individualism is a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellow-creatures; and to draw apart with his family and his friends; so that, after he has thus formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves society at large to itself. (Tocqueville 587)

For Tocqueville, the key difference between Egotism and Individualism is that Egotism comes from mere instinct, while Individualism comes from a thorough assessment of society and, finding fault in it, rather than to conform, the individual wants to separate from it. However, according to Tocqueville, individualism can lead to materialism, and even to a kind of materialistic morality. In his visit to America, Tocqueville noticed the exact same trend in the population: materialism and the need to acquire massive wealth because, as he concludes, Americans seem to link the financial and material standing of the individual as a reliable indicator how good they are as a person. One possible way out of this vicious circle of materialism is separation from society, thus re-affirming the value of self-reliant individualism.

The reason one should rather contemplate separation from society and non-conformism is that society does not progress when there is nobody to step out of it and point out its faults. Those who do bring about change to society are people who are unique, who never imitate, as Thoreau's transcendentalist guide Ralph Waldo Emerson claimed in his essay "Self-Reliance": "The Scipionism of Scipio is precisely that part he could not borrow. Shakespeare will never be made by the study of Shakespeare. Do that which is assigned you, and you cannot hope too much or dare too much" (Emerson 18). It is thus the duty of any American to seek for and value their uniqueness, because if history remembers only the extraordinary – the ordinary remain forgotten.

## 2. Thoreau's Idea of the Rugged Individualist

*Walden; or, Life in The Woods* is a set of Essays written by the nineteenth-century transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau and published in 1884. Thoreau wrote the draft for *Walden* while living in a small cabin in the woods around Walden Pond near the town of Concord, Massachusetts. By choosing his solitary, spartan life in the woods, he tried to reconnect with Nature, and practically went back to the simple life of the American pioneers on the *frontier*, a way of living that was already obsolescent in mid-nineteenth century America. According to Thoreau, basic necessities of life – fuel, shelter, food, and clothing – if they are in sufficient amounts, are all one needs to live a happy and fulfilled life.

Thoreau postulates that mankind itself needs to improve before it improves the circumstances around it: “While civilization has been improving our houses, it has not equally improved the men who are to inhabit them” (Thoreau, *Walden* 9). He noticed that people put their hope of a happy future into commodities and the advancement of technology, which would allow them to have more time and less work to do. However, exactly the opposite was happening: people grew busier, hastier, more anxious, and overall less happy. The pace of life was adapting to a far more complicated network of technology; people started to think in much bigger time frames and started linking success and wealth to the qualitative state of life, so much, in fact, that they were happy to sacrifice their present happiness for their future happiness: “Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life? We are determined to be starved before we are hungry. Men say that a stitch in time saves nine, and so they take a thousand stitches today to save nine tomorrow” (Thoreau, *Walden* 47). He noted that out of all the technology, in all its efficiency and possibility that we have acquired, very little actual practical use for us as individuals comes out: “We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate” (Thoreau, *Walden* 27). The material wealth that we acquire only warps our view of reality – and even more importantly, our sense of what is necessary for life: “Superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only. Money is not required to buy one necessary of the soul” (Thoreau, *Walden* 184). Likewise, from his outsider perspective, Tocqueville noted that Americans were constantly seeking new stimuli and that they were never quite happy with what they had:

In the United States a man builds a house to spend his later years in it, and he sells it

before the roof is on: he plants a garden, and lets it just as the trees are coming into bearing: he brings a field into tillage, and leaves other men to gather the crops: he embraces a profession, and gives it up: he settles in a place, which he soon afterwards leaves, to carry his change-able longings elsewhere. (De Tocqueville 623)

Thoreau believed that man had forgotten the values of self-reliance and individualism: “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” (*Walden* 169). The only cure for this condition, according to Thoreau, was to leave society behind, live of one’s own labour and in harmony with nature. In order to prove that, Thoreau set up a small cabin on a piece of land that belonged to his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson, in which he lived and wrote down his thoughts in the first draft which would become *Walden*: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived” (Thoreau, *Walden* 63). The point of that endeavour was to leave behind all unnecessary commodities which hinder our relationship with nature because he believed that society had become way too hasty and busy, so much, in fact, that people had forgotten how to live – or enjoy life to the fullest.

Thoreau also noticed that people did not spend time with each other to communicate anything of value, but rather communicated out of custom and for pointless banter’s sake. That is the reason why, according to him, people should avoid having a great number of friends in a small area. He pointed out that there is no reason to be afraid of solitude. Furthermore, he stressed how important self-reliance is:

I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. . . . Society is commonly too cheap. We meet at very short intervals, not having had time to acquire any new value for each other. We meet at meals three times a day, and give each other a new taste of that old musty cheese that we are. (Thoreau, *Walden* 87)

If a man cannot spend time by himself without being sad or bored, it just shows how empty his life really is, and therefore we should practice voluntary solitude from time to time.

Even when the future looks bleak and life is unkind to us, it is, according to Thoreau,



merely our perspective of it that is faulty, and rather than longing for something better, we should enjoy the little joys of the life that we already have: “However mean your life is, meet and live it; do not shun it and call it hard names. . . . The fault-finder will find faults even in paradise. Love your life, poor as it is. You may perhaps have some pleasant, thrilling, glorious hours, even in a poorhouse” (Thoreau, *Walden* 184). This inversion, in which one adapts oneself to the circumstances, rather than trying to adapt the circumstances to oneself, is a re-occurring theme in *Walden*, and it is indicative of Thoreau’s advocacy of self-reliance, originality, and robustness of character: “The Harivansa says, ‘An abode without birds is like a meat without seasoning.’ Such was not my abode, for I found myself suddenly neighbor to the birds; not by having imprisoned one, but having caged myself near them” (Thoreau, *Walden* 59).

Yet, Thoreau’s experiment was not to last. After two years’ time, his experiment was concluded: “I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one” (Thoreau, *Walden* 159). That is where most of his critics deem his experiment failed: he did not manage to live up to his own standards and have a happy life in the woods, and the fact that he returned proved him wrong. However, Thoreau never made the claim that he was going to stay all of his life in the woods, but rather, he strove to experience life outside of civilisation and share those experiences with humanity, so that it could learn from them and become more conscious of itself. His experiment was thereby even more successful because it provided a glimpse of what an honest and independent life looks like and thereby exposed modern life’s faults. His observations are an invaluable source of inspiration for all individualists, i.e. Americans.

### 3. Douglass and (Re-)gaining of Identity through Self-reliance

Frederick Douglass (born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey; c. February 1818–February 20, 1895) was born a slave in Tuckahoe, Maryland. In his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, he described his life under slavery and later escape from it. His life story is a path of success that shows how a strong willpower and a sense of self-reliance can have impact not only on the individual but also on society. He taught himself to read and write, escaped to New York by disguising himself as a sailor, and later became a newspaper editor, an abolitionist, and one of the most effective orators in American history. His life is a classic example of a “from rags to riches” story, and none of his gain did he get *for free*. Instead, he made himself his own person through hard work, which was rewarded by success; therefore, Douglass’s achievement confirms the American belief that fabulous wealth can be acquired through one’s own effort.

From the very beginning, Douglass missed parts of identity other people find crucial, like the date of his birth. At the time of his birth, the social status of slaves was the status of property, like livestock: “I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs” (Douglass 1). By reducing their slaves’ agency, a sense of self, and any reliable relationships and family bonds, the masters wanted to keep them ignorant and obedient, and it was one of “the increasing prescription and indignities that whites were heaping upon blacks” (Franklin 268). It was a common practice, for example, to take infants away from their mothers in order for the slaves to be more compliant to being sold and re-located with no sense of loss and thus no resistance – because they would be leaving behind nobody whom they cared about:

My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant. . . . It is a common custom, in the part of Maryland from which I ran away, to part children from their mothers at a very early age. Frequently, before the child has reached its twelfth month, its mother is taken from it. . . . For what this separation is done, I do not know, unless it be to hinder the development of the child’s affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child. (Douglass 2)

Douglass had many owners throughout his life, and he was introduced to reading and spelling by Sophia Auld, the wife of one of his temporary masters Hugh Auld: “Very soon

after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters” (Douglass 29), and that was “the first step [that] had been taken. Mistress, in teaching me the alphabet, had given me the inch, and no precaution could prevent me from taking the ell” (Douglass 33). He was determined to learn to read and write, but his master was against that, well aware that literate slaves could form their own opinions, spread them, and be exposed to abolitionist ideas: “Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. . . . If you teach that nigger how to read, . . . [h]e would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master” (Douglass 29). Literacy, Douglass concluded, was a sign of intellect that equals the masters and that “testified to his humanity” (Elliot 359), and was therefore a pathway to freedom. Having become literate, Douglass was exposed to abolitionist ideas when he read the *Columbian Orator* – a collection of abolitionist essays:

Among much of other interesting matter, I found in it a dialogue between a master and his slave. The slave was represented as having run away from his master three times. . . . In this dialogue, the whole argument in behalf of slavery was brought forward by the master, all of which was disposed of by the slave. . . . The conversation resulted in the voluntary emancipation of the slave on the part of the master. (Douglass 34)

However, Douglass later came to find his acquired skill to read more of a burden than a blessing because the more he read, the more he came to hate the slave-holders, and the more he found out about slavery, the more he grew to detest the state of society. A small mind, that is, a simple identity seems to keep one from the problems of a big mind and a fully developed identity: “As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. . . . In moments of agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity” (Douglass 35).

Douglass’ rebellious spirit was almost snuffed out when he was brought to Mr. Covey – an overseer known to discipline slaves and break them. After several occasions of severe punishment and abuse, he was indeed “broken in body, soul, and spirit. [His] natural elasticity was crushed, [his] intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about [his] eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon [him]; and behold a man transformed into a brute!” (Douglass 55). Yet, this test of Douglass’ willpower did not last as he resisted the man and fought back, after which Covey never dared to punish him

again. That confrontation reaffirmed Douglass' determination to become free and continue to persevere (63).

One noteworthy fact about Frederick Douglass' identity is that, after he had acquired his freedom, he had to change his name from Frederick Bailey (the name his mother gave him and her surname) to Frederick Johnson, and thus alter part of his identity in order to avoid being re-captured under the Fugitive Slave-Act. He was free to do so, which confirmed that he was his own master and could be called by the name he chose. Accordingly, when he arrived in New Bedford, he changed his name to Frederick Douglass. Interestingly, he never changed his first name, just because he could, because he believed that, even though one is one's own master and can choose who he/she is and forge one's own destiny, one must never forget who one was and where one came from. He affirms this presumption by stating: "I gave Mr. Johnson the privilege of choosing me a name, but told him he must not take from me the name of 'Frederick.' I must hold on to that, to preserve a sense of my identity" (Douglass 96).

#### 4. Thoreau's and Douglass' Actualisation of Individualism

Thoreau was so critical of society and its complacency that he chose to escape it. Therefore, he advises his readers to re-consider their acceptance of society's troubles, but he does not prescribe an escapist philosophy. In his essay *Civil Disobedience*, which was published in 1849, he advises us to resist an unjust government. He expresses deep contempt for the government and explains that he refused to pay his taxes because he did not want to financially support a government that endorsed slavery and the war with Mexico. He claims that Americans had become accomplices to injustice through their ineptitude and passivity:

What is the price-current of an honest man and patriot today? They hesitate, and they regret, and sometimes they petition; but they do nothing in earnest and with effect. They will wait, well disposed, for others to remedy the evil that they may no longer have it to regret. At most, they give up only a cheap vote, and a feeble countenance and Godspeed, to the right, as it goes by them. (Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience* 11)

Furthermore, Thoreau remarks that Americans, although they are in principle against slavery, would not do anything in opposition to it (*Civil Disobedience* 8). He also advises us that if we want to stop what we deem unjust, we must be prepared to die in opposition to it (*Civil Disobedience* 12). On the surface, this goes somewhat against Thoreau's philosophy developed in *Walden*, but Thoreau never prescribed escape from society when one is facing injustice. Therefore, we need to distinguish between the diagnosis of American society he gave in *Walden* and the diagnosis of society in *Civil Disobedience* and their respective remedies. The difference is that *Walden* is a personal struggle, while *Civil Disobedience* is a social struggle. The personal struggle he sought to resolve by distancing himself from society, i.e. everything external to himself, and deal with his internal needs. Those internal needs were innate and common to all people and were just blurred with and corrupted by unnecessary superficialities. His external struggle he wanted to resolve by confrontation rather than by escape, that is, by boycotting the system by resisting to comply with it. For both of his struggles the remedy is predicated on the same thing: to insist on oneself and one's own goals, regardless of what other people might say or think, following Emerson's advice to insist to be original and never imitate. In other words, Thoreau advocates Individualism as a solution to both individual and social issues.

In line with Thoreau's principles of *Civil Disobedience*, Frederick Douglass opposed

the society he saw was unjust. His personal struggle was similar to the one described in Thoreau's *Walden*, in the way that he was born and raised with only the most basic necessities for life. Yet, unlike Thoreau, Douglass did not have the possibility, nor did he have the intention to leave society behind and live free. Instead, he came to actualise the ideal of the American individualist in another way – by achieving success through hard work and fighting for his fellows.

After he had fled to the north, he took it as his personal mission to bring about change, just as Emerson prescribes in *Self-Reliance*, that is, to do the extraordinary thing in order to move society forward. He became a staunch abolitionist, and unlike his white abolitionist colleagues, he wanted to make Blacks equal members of American society. He wanted to push American society to adhere to its own ideals – individualism and self-reliance – by creating true equality of circumstances for all, not just some. After all, The Declaration of Independence itself was an expression of dissatisfaction with an unfair system – British colonialism – and therefore the need to fight for a more fair system. According to Douglass, that extended to all people of America, and therefore America had no right to treat some of its people, i.e. slaves, unfairly. Anything less than that would mean that American society was inconsistent with the values of self-reliance and individualism. Emancipation was not enough if Blacks were not seen as equal part-takers in public life, so he insisted that freedom for blacks required not only emancipation but also equality: social, economic, and political (Garraty 225).

Both of these authors have differing, yet comparable approaches towards the actualisation of a true American identity. Thoreau and Douglass were pioneers confronting the two *frontiers* in their own ways – the personal and the social one – whereby the personal is an internal, and the social an external *frontier*. Thoreau's conquest of the personal *frontier* was deeply philosophical and voluntary. He attempted to find out what makes true happiness and fulfilment in life and concluded not only that stripping away all that is superfluous suffices for having a good life but also that everything in addition to that corrupts us. His second *frontier* was to externalise those sentiments and incite people to be honest and stand for their principles. He offers two possible solutions for one's frustration with society that are complementary to each other (rather than mutually exclusive), one being unapologetic and unflinching resistance and defence of one's principles, the other a more personal solution, to slow down, stop being afraid of missing out and neglecting relationships which may be too

shallow to survive in the first place. The key to such a life is to stop finding problems with life, but rather to find and resolve problems with one's perspective of life.

Having lived through slavery, unlike Thoreau, Frederick Douglass *involuntarily* subsisted on life's basics, and in addition to that, he suffered under the enforcement of other people's will upon his own life. He had first-hand experience of the injustices of American society and how unfairly it treated him, but he never let himself be consumed by resentment and resignation. Instead of that, he managed to find his way out through perseverance and his own merit, and upon that he succeeded substantially in life. He was first dead set on gaining his freedom – that was his first *frontier*, and then, his logical next step, or his second *frontier*, was to be part of the movement to grant freedom to all slaves and allow the rest of the population to enjoy the values that Americans cherish so dearly.

## Conclusion

American identity is a broad topic, and individualism and self-reliance are just two facets of a much bigger picture, but they are the two pillars on which the rest of the American values stand. Those two values became the myth on which all success stories are founded, and that myth was forged in the rough and tumultuous times of the American pioneers living on the *frontier*. It was the raw and untamed environmental circumstances of the New World that created and shaped this way of thinking up to this day, long after the *frontier* was lifted.

This paper discussed the works of two American icons of history and literature as embodiments of said myth: Henry David Thoreau and Frederick Douglass. Thoreau made the leap into the unknown on the outside, by leaving civilisation and attempting to live the spartan lifestyle of his forefathers, and also on the inside, to discover what makes people truly happy in life. His conclusions were that life distilled only to the essentials has far more substance than life in superficial wealth could ever have. His other conclusion was to never make this escape when facing injustice and tyranny – it is our duty to stop the machine of oppression even with our own lives. Frederick Douglass was shaped by that same system of oppression, which ultimately pushed him to succeed in his personal endeavour to acquire freedom through perseverance and hard work, and also to succeed in making that freedom available for all slaves, i.e. to overcome the second *frontier*.

Theirs were the personal and social *frontiers*, which they overcame in their own unique ways. Thoreau's *Walden* is the declaration of independence of the individual from the state and from society and a document of the quest to find happiness. *Civil Disobedience* is the externalisation of the convictions established in *Walden* – an urge to refuse to support unjust systems one detests and be ready to give one's own life for one's principles. Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass an American Slave* is the document of an individual born and raised in the most basic conditions of life and oppressed by the unfair system of slavery, and his path to success through self-reliance and perseverance. It is also a declaration of independence from that system and proclamation of one's self-determined identity. Both Douglass and Thoreau became examples or beacons for all of American society to follow and become self-reliant individualists their culture worships.



## Works Cited

- Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of The Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*. Edited by George Stade, Barnes & Noble Classics, 1999.
- Elliott, Emory. *Colombia Literary History of the U.S*. Colombia UP. 1988.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Self-Reliance*. 1841. [math.dartmouth.edu/~doyle/docs/self/self.pdf](http://math.dartmouth.edu/~doyle/docs/self/self.pdf). Accessed 5 Jul. 2019.
- Franklin, John Hope. *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1980.
- Garraty, John A. *A Short History of the American Nation*. Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1979.
- Jackson Turner, Frederick. *The Frontier in American History*. 1893. Henry Holt and Company, 1935, [xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/turner/](http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/turner/). Accessed 5 Jul. 2019.
- Kennedy, John Fitzgerald. "The New Frontier." 1960. [www.sphstigers.org/ourpages/users/jasher/SSBootCampWebsite/NewFrontier.pdf](http://www.sphstigers.org/ourpages/users/jasher/SSBootCampWebsite/NewFrontier.pdf). Accessed 10 Jul. 2019.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*. 1849. [www.ibiblio.org/ebooks/Thoreau/Civil%20Disobedience.pdf](http://www.ibiblio.org/ebooks/Thoreau/Civil%20Disobedience.pdf). Accessed 9 Jul. 2019.
- . *Walden or, Life in the Woods*. 1854. [ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/t/thoreau/henry\\_david/walden/chapter1.html](http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/t/thoreau/henry_david/walden/chapter1.html). 27 Mar. 2016. Accessed 5 Jul. 2019.
- De Tocqueville, Alexis. *Democracy in America*. 1835–1840. 2 vols. Penguin Books, 2003.