Writing Assignment #2: Thoreau and Kaczynski

# Prompt and AI Draft (Max 100 word prompt, 300 word AI draft)

## Prompt

Respond to the following prompt in about 300 words, using details from the specified texts to inform and back up your claims. This is the prompt you must respond to: “Some critics have argued that Theodore J. Kaczynski (aka the Unabomber) is the heir to Henry David Thoreau in terms of his radical environmental views. Like Thoreau, Kaczynski built himself a small cabin in the woods, retreated there for solitude, and wrote critiques of modern society; unlike Thoreau, these beliefs resulted in Kaczynski murdering three people and injuring 23 others in a nationwide mail-bombing campaign. To his mind, his victims were all people who had misused modern technology or destroyed the natural environment. Leaving aside the shocking and inexcusable violence, do you think that it is legitimate to see Kaczynski as the heir to Thoreau’s environmental views? (Do not just say that Thoreau would not condone the killings). It may help to compare the excerpts from Thoreau that we read with Kaczynski’s published manifesto.”

**164 words**

## AI Draft (https://chatgpt.com)

The comparison between Theodore J. Kaczynski, the Unabomber, and Henry David Thoreau is a complex one, especially when considering their environmental views. Both men sought refuge in nature, but their philosophies, methods, and ultimate impacts diverge dramatically. While some critics may argue that Kaczynski is a modern heir to Thoreau, this view overlooks key differences in both ideology and approach, despite superficial similarities.

Thoreau, in *Walden*, advocates for a life of simplicity and self-reliance, seeking to remove oneself from the distractions and corruptions of industrial society. His retreat to the woods was a conscious attempt to live deliberately, fostering a deep connection with nature. Thoreau's environmentalism is rooted in a belief that nature, in its raw form, provides clarity and moral guidance, while the encroachment of technology and industrialization distorts human values and relationships. However, Thoreau’s critique of modern life is not one of violent confrontation, but of personal introspection and moral resistance.

Kaczynski, in contrast, frames his environmental critique in radically different terms. His manifesto, *Industrial Society and Its Future*, condemns the technological system and its destruction of the natural world, but he advocates for violent revolution as a means to dismantle this system. Kaczynski’s belief that individuals who contribute to the technological-industrial complex deserve to be punished by death starkly contrasts Thoreau’s non-violent resistance and moral self-examination. Thoreau would likely see violence as a moral failure, as his principle of civil disobedience emphasizes non-violent, conscientious objection against injustice.

While both men share concerns about the damaging effects of technology on nature and human well-being, Kaczynski’s radical and violent methods are antithetical to Thoreau’s principles. Therefore, it is not legitimate to consider Kaczynski an heir to Thoreau’s environmental philosophy. Thoreau’s message was one of peaceful resistance and personal transformation, while Kaczynski’s was one of violent retribution.

**297 words**

# Reflection (Min 200 words)

The AI draft does a decent, but not great, job of delineating the basic comparison between Thoreau’s and Kaczynski’s critiques of industrial society, and it clearly rejects the notion that the Unabomber can be seen as Thoreau’s heir. It highlights the shared impulse to retreat into nature and critique modern life, and it contrasts Thoreau’s nonviolent “moral resistance” with Kaczynski’s “violent retribution.” Structurally, it follows a logical progression—defining Thoreau’s position, then Kaczynski’s, and finally drawing a conclusion.

However, the essay lacks an explicit, arguable thesis statement up front; the central claim only becomes clear in the final sentence. It never acknowledges the strongest counterargument—that there are real thematic affinities in their environmental critiques, beyond mere superficial resemblance. The treatment of both texts is too general: there are no specific quotations from *Walden* (i.e. Thoreau’s statement “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately”) or from Kaczynski’s *Industrial Society and Its Future* (i.e. his opening assertion that “the Industrial Revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race”). Without these quotations and any close analysis of them, the argument feels weak and unsupported.

Additionally, several phrases (“some critics,” “superficial similarities,” “deserve to be punished”) are vague or value-laden without grounding in the texts. To strengthen the essay, it will need a clear thesis statement at the start, recognition of why one might plausibly see Kaczynski as an heir (to set up a counterargument), and then systematic refutation using well-chosen quotations and careful reading. More precise language and deeper engagement with the primary sources will make the case more compelling and rigorous.

**268 words**

# Revision and Expansion of AI Draft (Min 700 words)

The comparison between Theodore J. Kaczynski, the Unabomber, and Henry David Thoreau is a complex one, especially when considering their environmental views. While this framing draws attention to superficial parallels—two men in cabins decrying industry—it fails to stake an argumentative claim. Although both thinkers retreated into the wilderness and lamented the dehumanizing effects of industrialization, I believe that Kaczynski’s embrace of violence and his conception of technological critique place him fundamentally outside Thoreau’s intellectual legacy.

Thoreau, in *Walden*, advocates for a life of simplicity and self-reliance, seeking to remove oneself from the distractions and corruptions of industrial society. Thoreau famously declared, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life” (*Walden*). This deliberate experiment modeled personal transformation rather than societal imposition; he did not seek to dismantle by force but to illustrate an alternative ethos. His belief that “the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation” diagnoses spiritual malaise but offers solitude and reflection as remedies. Through minimal reliance on manufactured goods, Thoreau trusted that moral clarity and ecological harmony would follow, situating environmental critique within a vision of individual moral awakening rather than collective coercion. Thus, Thoreau’s critique of modern life is not one of violent confrontation, but of personal introspection and moral resistance.

Kaczynski, in contrast, frames his environmental critique in radically different terms. His manifesto, *Industrial Society and Its Future*, condemns the technological system and its destruction of the natural world, yet quickly shifts from diagnosis to prescription: “Revolution against the industrial system . . . may be the only way to halt, much less reverse, the process of social and psychological destruction.” He identifies technologists, academics, and corporate executives as legitimate targets, arguing that violence is necessary to shock society into change. Kaczynski’s belief that individuals who contribute to the technological-industrial complex deserve to be punished by death starkly contrasts Thoreau’s non-violent resistance and moral self-examination. Thoreau would likely see violence as a moral failure, as his principle of civil disobedience emphasizes non-violent, conscientious objection against injustice.

It is understandable why some scholars draw parallels: both built cabins, practiced solitude, and penned trenchant critiques of industrial modernity. Kaczynski’s Montana shack even echoes the hermitage at Walden Pond. A sympathetic reading might credit him with extending Thoreau’s critique into the political realm. Yet this cursory link collapses under scrutiny. Thoreau’s retreat was an act of self-discovery, intended to model voluntary social reform; Kaczynski’s was a staging ground for constructing bombs. A legitimate intellectual inheritance requires more than shared symbolism—it demands consistency in ethical orientation and method.

To further understand the divide, consider Thoreau’s articulation of nonviolent resistance in *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*, where he insists, “That government is best which governs least.” His critique of power flows from a belief in human conscience as the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong. In Walden, he writes that “the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation,” diagnosing spiritual malaise but offering solitude and reflection as remedies. Furthermore, Thoreau’s prose is suffused with metaphorical celebration—for instance, his observation that “Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads,” implying that nature’s moral lessons are immediate and accessible. By contrast, Kaczynski articulates no space for individual moral recuperation.

Moreover, Kaczynski’s moral universe is rigid: technological contributors are guilty by association. He writes, “My victims are all people who by their actions contributed to the continued functioning of the system.” This logic inverts Thoreau’s gratitude toward human agency; for Thoreau, the individual’s moral labor is always redeemable. In Walden, he celebrates each person’s capacity “to simplify my life,” suggesting that personal choices can counter systemic ills. Thoreau’s faith in conscientious objection and small-scale example stands in stark opposition to Kaczynski’s mandate for punitive eradication. By valuing reflection over reprisal, Thoreau envisions an inclusive, transformative resistance rather than the exclusive, fatal violence of the Unabomber.

In conclusion, while the rhetorical parallels between a forest hermit and a militant bomber may tempt a superficial analogy, a deeper reading reveals that Kaczynski’s radical and violent ideology of terror is antithetical to Thoreau’s principles of peaceful introspection and moral self-discipline. Therefore, it is not legitimate to consider Kaczynski an heir to Thoreau’s environmental philosophy. By grounding their environmental critique in fundamentally different ethical schemas—one emphasizing individual conscience, the other endorsing collective punishment—we maintain the integrity of Thoreau’s influence and guard against the dangerous conflation of radical thought with violent extremism.

**761 words**