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Transcendentalism: How Idealism Transformed the American Dream

Transcendentalism arose as a philosophical movement against the restrictive conventions of eighteenth-century thought, emphasizing the spiritual above the empirical. The burgeoning population in the United States during the early 19th century brought to the forefront territorial expansion, market materialism, utopian reforms, urban cosmopolitanism, transnational exchanges, scientific innovations, and cultural amalgamations, often causing disarray and social atomization. In the 1830s, Transcendentalists from around Concord, Massachusetts began questioning the general state of society, and they eventually inspired the widespread spiritual revitalization of American culture by emphasizing their belief that intuition surpasses rationalism (ushistory.org). The Transcendental movement led to many positive changes in 19th-century America and made it possible for people to achieve their own American Dream, as cultural revolutions augmented the lives of those who were previously unwittingly constricted by societal and religious conventions. Thus Transcendentalism, a form of idealism with its belief in the inherent goodness of both man and nature, was a movement of true reform in government, religion, and the arts, with a message that imbued America's ever-changing cultural and political landscape, reflecting the change of times – and the ever-changing nature of the American Dream.

Transcendentalists, perhaps recognizing the bewilderingly stagnant state of spiritualism and culture in society, pursued their democratic aspirations in the face of (what they perceived to be) an impending American Nightmare. Believing in the importance and efficacy of human

endeavor, as opposed to the bleak Puritan ethos of the inescapable impairment of mere mortals' moral principles, Transcendentalists were able to create an American Dream for a great number of people by bringing about changes in government and emphasizing ethics (Orestes Augustus Brownson). Some Transcendentalists were devoted to improving the lives of their fellow men, others, to the civilizing effects of heightened perceptiveness of their contemporaries.

Transcendentalists thus also achieved their own American Dream by bringing about artistic and cultural reform (pbs.org).

Transcendentalist suspicions of society and its institutions – particularly organized religion and political parties – were rooted in the quite radical political and religious thoughts of the age, from late 18th-century Europe where the French Revolution re-ignited the wick of the candle of culture extinguished by extreme rational thought in the 1700's at the exclusion of feeling and spirit. In 1794, Thomas Paine published his book *The Age of Reason*, in which he brought to the fore Deism, his religious philosophy. With effective rhetoric, his Deism successfully delivered a biting criticism to the tenets of religions, particularly Calvinism as practiced by Puritans. Proclaiming that all religious institutions such as churches were “set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit” (Paine 6), his radical ideas were shocking to church-going Americans with strict religious traditions. Conversely, Paine's thoughts appealed to Americans who likewise devoted themselves to the logic fostered by the Enlightenment period who struggled to associate Calvinist doctrines with rationality (The Regents of the University of California).

Significantly, Paine disagreed with the Calvinist belief that a select number of humans are elected by God, thereby predetermining a life where they would be saved (or damned) already in infancy. Rather than believing in “infant damnation” and its associated idea that individuals cannot achieve salvation regardless of their positive actions, Paine states that humans

are beneficent, that all individuals hold the reins to their lives, and that they may reach salvation by means of acting with corresponding kindness and morality. Additionally, as a Deist, Paine believed that God had created the world and all the laws which keep it aligned with His vision. Not adhering to the Calvinist idea that the knowledge of what is morally correct can solely be obtained by means of divine revelation (as stated in the Bible), Paine asserted his certainty that the laws of the world could be understood by using logic.

Unitarians (a new Protestant faction at the time) strongly agreed with the philosophy of Deism, and furthermore dismissed the Holy Trinity of Father-Son-Holy Spirit that most Christians worshipped. Unitarians believed in a single deity, the Supreme Being. They also respected free will (an important aspect later to the Transcendentalist movement), achieving salvation by means of goodwill, and the intrinsic beneficence of human beings (University of California).

Gradually, as doubts in Calvinism surfaced then become widespread, others began to express their dissatisfaction with Puritan religion, returning to the Episcopal faith (Puritans originally intended to “purify” the Church of England of remnants of Roman Catholicism). At the turn of the nineteenth century, the Romantic Movement fostered impractical romantic ideals and attitudes during a time when the religiously doubtful (or confused) multitudes felt the need for a more gentle balance between reason and spirit. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant expressed doubts that rationality could fix all the upheavals humans faced, as expressed in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, published in 1781. Compassionate writers often altered in form Kant’s rather abstruse ideas (and prose) into simpler, more literary works that were intended to evoke visceral reactions in the reader, as well as stimulating his intellectual quest for answers (University of California).

The New England Transcendentalists derived their initial vision largely under the influence of Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing, a Harvard-educated theologian, whose religious thoughts and teaching were in stark opposition to traditional American Calvinist orthodoxy. Channing himself preferred a natural, loving relationship with God, and opposed Calvinism for "... proclaiming a God who is to be dreaded. We are told to love and imitate God, but also that God does things we would consider most cruel in any human parent, 'were he to bring his children into life totally depraved and then to pursue them with endless punishment'" (Parker). By forging this relationship, Channing hoped that human potential could compare to that of God.

Starting in the 1830's, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau helped establish a new philosophy inspired by Romanticism, called Transcendentalism. Transcendentalists, such as Thoreau, protested against the general state of society and inspired a widespread spiritual revitalization of American culture by emphasizing the Transcendentalist belief that intuition ultimately trumps rationalism. Reform movements influenced by the Transcendentalist ideals included suffrage for women, better conditions for workers, temperance for all, modifications of dress and diet, the rise of religious freedoms, and important educational innovations, all of which emerged during the epoch of Transcendentalism (Finseth, Ian Frederick). Escaping the dehumanizing effects of the Industrial Revolution and obsolete social ideals, Transcendentalists, through literature, art, religion, and reforms, came to emphasize the importance of contemplation and removing oneself from the subservient, consumerist existence. They often propounded their positions by sharply critiquing the shallow lifestyle of their fellow townspeople.

Transcendentalism emphasizes that man can exert his free will and become aware of the potentialities of the human condition by means of transcending the material and the empirical. Transcendentalists, with regard to religion, believed in the efficacy of the individual, as opposed

to the bleaker Puritan idea that humans are unassailably devoid of moral principles. For Transcendentalists, truth transcends anything that can be discovered through the senses. Additionally, they believed that all individuals possessed an inner spiritual awareness that could illumine the greatest truths, thus nearing God (whom they referred to as Oversoul).

Ralph Waldo Emerson, a world-renowned Transcendentalist, first formulated his philosophy after studying at Harvard College to become a Unitarian minister. Upon realization of the uninspiring nature of the Unitarian pulpit, Emerson began preaching philosophy of the Oversoul and the non-contrived, ever-changing nature of the world in his influential “American Scholar” lectures that inspired Americans to develop their own literary and artistic styles and tradition, for he thought Americans ought to stop looking to European masters for inspiration and instruction.

Emerson began trumpeting independence of the mind and individual self-reliance, writing his famous essay *Self Reliance* in 1841. Only in such elevated state could individuals, relying on their natural instincts and trusting their own thinking, could break free of societal conventions – and only by going against the pernicious conformism of their peers (a conformism which he felt corrupted and poisoned even the purest of character) could they become true men of principles and attain peace. “A political victory, a rise of rents, the recovery of your sick, or the return of your absent friend, or some other favorable event, raises your spirits, and you think good days are preparing for you. Do not believe it. Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles.” (Emerson 1841). Emerson’s radically new thinking prompted many others of his era to question the blind adherence to the prevailing political, religious and cultural ideas. In many respects, Transcendentalism was the first notable American intellectual movement: when so much of American thought seemed second-hand and antiquated, leading Transcendentalist thinkers helped found a new national

culture through the development of American literature, arts, and culture – forging a new national identity.

A fellow Transcendentalist and dear friend of Emerson, Henry David Thoreau was also a prominent promoter of the Transcendentalist philosophy. In his book *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau provides a window into his two-year-long experiment during which he distances himself from the world of men, settling in a cabin he built off the shores of Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts. Population growth in early 19th century brought to the fore the issues of territorial expansion, market materialism, urban cosmopolitanism, scientific innovations, and cultural amalgamations, causing confusion and leading to social atomization. Thoreau simultaneously expressed his disapproval of the general state of society and of passive individual behavior, and helped instigate a widespread spiritual revitalization by emphasizing his theory that intuition surpassed rationalism, and individual character based on principles superseded conformism and the subjugation of self. Many vital Reform movements (the rise of religious freedoms, important educational innovations, and even suffrage for women and improved conditions for workers) that emerged during the epoch of Transcendentalism owe much to the brilliant and influential retrospective of Thoreau's time spent at Walden Pond, which serves as a manifestation of Transcendentalism and the social context that had a prominent influence on his writing.

Thoreau, in all his literature, emphasizes the importance of contemplation and reflection. In *Walden*, Thoreau insightfully states in his first chapter, entitled *Economy*, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation... A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind” (Thoreau 5). Specifically, the words “stereotyped but unconscious despair” draw a clear distinction between the life that society creates for men and the few who do not conform. Such is the grimness of the vision with which Thoreau views commonplace American life as of the early nineteenth century. Thus, he truly

believes that an eternal truth inhabits humanity, which can transcend the government with its many restrictions and society with its many conventions – both of which restrict individuals from living deliberately. Later, arguing the philosophy of taking an unconventional route in life, Thoreau declares, “I learned this, at least, by my experimentation; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours” (Thoreau 256). Unlike most, who blindly accepted the conventional ways of 19th century society, Henry David Thoreau chose to pursue truth by freeing himself from the trivial ties to which humanity condemned itself. Interweaving personal experience and pointed rhetoric in, Thoreau’s writing illustrates how immensely the complex political, cultural, and social issues relevant to the time and place in which he wrote his novel affected him.

In context of the American Dream, another work by Thoreau, his essay *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*, is highly instructive. As Thoreau puts it, “I heartily accept the motto,—’That government is best which governs least’” (Thoreau, 1849). Railing against negative influences of society, culture, and civilization in nineteenth-century America, Thoreau writes about his experience of withdrawing his allegiance from the federal government (a government which at the time was protecting slavery and making war on Mexico) – by not paying his taxes. This act of defiance showed that the payment of taxes was a symbol for passive consent and active loyalty towards a government that pursued immoral plans of action.

For his non-violent non-cooperation, Thoreau was briefly jailed; however, his act was a template for Mahatma Gandhi in India, as he peacefully yet doggedly resisted to the British Raj through protests and hunger strikes, and for Martin Luther King, Jr., as he persisted in gaining civil rights for African-Americans whilst refraining from engaging in violent acts. Similarly, the

Occupy Wall Street Movement, peacefully but forcefully argues against corporations' excessive influence on the government and the economy – and against the ensuing social inequity.

Transcendentalists of the 19th century were seeking their own, original American Dream, in which all men could pursue a true sense of self by means of obtaining divine knowledge in Nature, without secular intermediaries ordained by any church. Transcendentalism provided individuals with the ability to discern what constituted morality under the support of a spiritual, non-oppressive philosophy. Successfully removing themselves from the strict, regimented society created by the Unitarians, Transcendentalists sought freedom from the chains of a domineering society and government. The smorgasbord of talent and original thinking of the era was staggering: in the period influenced by Transcendentalist thought, America produced men and women of letters such as Emerson, Thoreau, John Greenleaf Whittier, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman – and Nathaniel Hawthorne (an opponent of Transcendentalism) and Edgar Allan Poe (incidentally considered a strong opponent, by being a leading figure of American Gothicism or Dark Romanticism – even though Poe in his personal correspondence only derided fake, pretend-Transcendentalists). The Transcendentalist movement also included notable figures such as the naturalist-preservationist John Muir, women's rights advocate Margaret Fuller, pioneering educator Amos Bronson Alcott, and the Hudson River School that included painters Thomas Cole, Frederic Edwin Church, and Albert Bierstadt.

Taking a civil approach to disobedience, Transcendentalists clearly demonstrated their attitude toward the government. Notable scholar, activist, preacher, labor organizer, and writer Orestes Augustus Brownson philosophized on the significance of nonviolent noncooperation in his work, *The American Republic: Its Constitution, Tendencies, and Destiny*: “The tyrant may be lawfully resisted, for the tyrant, by force of the word itself, is a usurper, and without authority. Abuses of power may be resisted even by force when they become too great to be endured... and

when there is a reasonable prospect that resistance will prove effectual and substitute something better in their place” (Brownson 24). As Brownson’s eloquent quote illustrates, Transcendental thought was to fight in the political arena without being violent, thus resisting the tyrannical oppression of society “lawfully.” Brownson’s use of the word “tyrant” can be viewed as a representation of the government as he sees it: confining men to endless constraints. It is evident in Brownson’s writing that he felt radical changes ought to have been made to the way in which the aspects of civilization were controlled – the ways laws were formed, society was structured, and religion was mandated. Moreover, Brownson asserts that humans possess the ability to transcend materialism and become conscious of the potentialities of human freedom.

It is noteworthy that the major Transcendentalists – Emerson, Fuller, Thoreau, Alcott, Brownson – spent years in the classroom as teachers, and all had found traditional education to be inadequate and numbing. As students they had been rebels, learning new ideas in philosophy from Kant and in theology from Spinoza, with their ceaseless exploration leading to their innovations as teachers. (alcott.net)

Having effectively placed the future of the American Dream in the hands of the multitudes, the Transcendentalists offer some strong criticism. In *Walden*, Thoreau expresses disillusionment with society and human nature. He believes wholeheartedly that the pursuit of success and wealth has paradoxically degraded the lives of those engaged in it, making them unappreciative of life’s simpler pleasures. Thoreau remains certain that, despite the accepted practices of the world, an individual has not truly lived until he has adopted a simpler lifestyle. Thoreau offers the insight “We are the subjects of an experiment which is not a little interesting to me. Can we not do without the society of our gossips a little while under these circumstances,—have our own thoughts to cheer us?” (Thoreau 107). Asserting that humanity has condemned itself to a life in which most aspire to become successful by ordinary means,

Thoreau remains distinguished for his wisdom and sound judgment as he separates himself from the society. Societal pressures often go unnoticed; however, Thoreau notices how the force of accepting conventional ways compels many a man to conform to a predetermined, common lifestyle. He claims that society entices men to a life unsuited for individualism. Allowing the reader the ability to identify larger patterns of literature, Thoreau's writing becomes relatable to the cycle of life, with scenes to which the knowledge, experiences, and images of the human condition can be applied. It is a prism through which Thoreau reflects on the meaning of the American Dream: the seemingly endless possibilities and choices lead many men astray.

As for the proper role of government, Transcendentalism sought to establish a less oppressive government founded on the democracy of Nature and Deism. For Transcendentalists, both nature and God symbolize totality, which natural reflection can confirm. The dissatisfaction of Transcendentalist philosophers and writers, Thoreau, Emerson, Paine, and others, with regard to governance meant urgent needs for reform, much of which was never implemented.

Correcting malpractices, Transcendentalists nonetheless helped establish a new national culture which honored the individual and recognized the pursuit of philosophical truth. Rather than restricting human potential, as an oppressive government would, the Transcendentalists emphasized self-reliance, individuality, and civil liberties. Above all, a major cause for these forward-thinking activists was putting an end to social and political injustice.

Political power was, during the rise of Transcendentalism, an ongoing set of compromises between the north and the south to maintain balance. Transcendentalists doggedly pursued the ideal of a nation without discrimination – and got so far as passing the Fugitive Slave Act by means of Thoreau's convincing speeches (Hanagan, Nora). Furthermore, Thoreau's *A Plea for Captain John Brown*, an essay occasioned by John Brown's repeated raid on Harper's Ferry stressed the importance of social equalities among the different races and people of the

nation. Thoreau responds to the incongruous notion of slavery existing in an otherwise free country: “I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as my government which is the slave’s government also” (Thoreau 67). John Brown, a radical abolitionist, along with a crowd of other men, seized the federal arsenal at Harper’s Ferry, in hopes of arming slaves and thus creating a violent rebellion against the south. However, federal forces led by Robert E. Lee repressed the revolt and Brown was jailed and hanged on December 2, 1859 as a result of being found guilty of murder, treason, and provoking a slave uprising. The raid and Brown’s subsequent execution propelled the American Civil War (Yale Law School).

By vehemently refuting claims made by contemporary media that Brown was insane, Thoreau was able to give a meaningful portrayal of a man who fought for abolition. He stated, “A man of rare common sense and directness of speech, as of action; a Transcendentalist above all, a man of ideas and principles,—that was what distinguished him” (Thoreau 264).

Proclaiming Brown was a man of high moral standing, Thoreau illustrates the concept that the brave and honorable are never in the majority. Thoreau represents John Brown as a man who had the character lay down his life in defense of injustice, hoping to better the human condition by attempting to lead an uprising which would abolish slavery. Even though his essay was not ill-intended, it was commonly criticized for praising violence by the general public, as he praised a man who was the leader of a violent revolt (even though Thoreau supported civil disobedience). Despite the contradiction apparent by Thoreau’s applauding John Brown’s actions, Thoreau called Brown a martyr, for he was a man who put his life on the line to help slaves gain basic rights. Abolitionists such as John Brown made Thoreau realize, as slavery persisted in the United States, that armed revolt might be a necessary – even valid – means of destroying corrupt institutions (Petruionis). The social context within which the story was written – during a time

when slavery was commonly accepted – further emphasizes how these remarkable, if unlawful, acts influenced Transcendentalist thinking and writing.

Another way in which Transcendentalists gained influence was by means of movements in the arts. Writing, in particular, played a prominent role how Transcendentalist philosophy applied to the arts. The Transcendentalists helped establish a new American culture and advertised the fruit of their ideas in various forms of written expression. Writers, who were at once academic and insightful, such as the increasingly influential Margaret Fuller and novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe, were relished in the Transcendentalist period. Fuller played a major role in the formation of Transcendentalism and the feminine movement as editor of *The Dial*, a magazine launched by the Transcendentalists (Virginia Commonwealth University). Additionally, she published her book, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, to urge young women to seek “greater independence from the home and family and to obtain such freedom from education” (Fuller 23). Likewise, Harriet Beecher Stowe tried to free slaves from the unrelenting chains of traditional American society and helped the abolition movement thrive in the United States by relying on the common thread of the Human Condition to illustrate the horrible, woeful lives that slaves led (Mark). After publication in 1852, Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* “helped catalyze northern opposition to slavery both by dramatizing the plight of the slaves and by putting a *human face* on their suffering” (The History Teaching Institute).

Furthering this abolitionist cause, in 1854 Thoreau contributed a speech at an anti-slavery rally in Framingham, Massachusetts, where he spoke at depth about the ongoing problem of slavery in the North. Again, the issue was to be found within the government, and in his essay, *Slavery in Massachusetts*, Thoreau writes, with pointed rhetoric, “my thoughts are murder to the State, and involuntarily go plotting against her” (Thoreau 35). His political radicalism surfacing, Thoreau expresses his strong opinion that human justice ought to transcend societal corruption.

By revealing his fury with the government and narrow, orthodox Christian concepts which prevailed at the time, Thoreau bolstered a view of reason extracted from the philosophical tenets of Transcendentalism (Petruionis, Dr. Sandra Harbert).

Art reforms contributed to the additional emphasis of Transcendentalism in nineteenth-century America. The Hudson River School, an American art movement by a group of highly trained and talented painters, embodied the new ideals; the School emerged as a means by which aesthetic conventions would transcend a vision that emulated European styles and attain new heights by a style uniquely American. Pioneers and incredibly skilled followers of the movement, such as Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Cole, made elaborate, Transcendental, realistic, supernal scenes of the Hudson River landscape (pbs.org). A typical depiction included the river climbing downstream in a simmer, the quivering tendrils of birch trees mirroring themselves at the oxbow, following expanses of longleaf pinelands that stretch across distant rolling hills. The circular motif of the landscape is prominent in many Transcendental works, which demonstrates the fact that a paradisiacal scene can exist in nature, away from the world of the men and the oppression of the government. The paintings also represent the Transcendental desire for freedom from the chains of governance in that they illustrate an intuition of the truth in the landscape, where the individual can reunite with the Oversoul. The Hudson River School was highly significant, for it created a movement that drew no inspiration from European art and in a uniquely American way showed that philosophical truth persists in Nature.

Thus Transcendentalism, a form of idealism with its belief in the inherent goodness of both man and nature, was a far-reaching and highly influential movement of reform in society, religion, literature, and the arts. The cultural and political messages imbued into the various movements that constitute Transcendentalism are great in number and reflect transformations brought to the forefront of America's ever-changing socio-political and cultural landscape.

In the end, Transcendentalists contributed to many areas of society and culture, in their own ways all honoring that major cornerstone of the American Dream, the opening of the Declaration of Independence (US 1776): “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” In doing so, Transcendentalists shaped a new national identity, contributing to the abolition of slavery, equality of women, and fairness to all.

Emerson and Thoreau, Alcott and Brownson, Beecher Stowe and Fuller, Cole and Bierstadt – all were figures who played crucial roles in establishing a uniquely American cultural and political identity as the United States was approaching the 20th century. While the meaning of the “American Dream” has changed many times over the course of our nation’s history, the influence of Transcendentalist thought can be felt to this day, even in our latest, 21st-century version of the American Dream.

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Transcendentalism was a 19th-century American literary and philosophical movement based in New England. Henry David Thoreau, American essayist, poet, and Transcendentalist. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (LC-DIG-pmsca-42177). Heavily indebted to the Transcendentalists' organic philosophy, aesthetics, and democratic aspirations were the pragmatism of William James and John Dewey, the environmental planning of Benton MacKaye and Lewis Mumford, the architecture (and writings) of Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright, and the American "modernism" in the arts promoted by Alfred Stieglitz.

How the American Dream Works. by Patrick J. Kiger. The Origins of the American Dream. Prev NEXT. As America evolved and grew throughout the 19th century, so did the notion that America was different from other countries: It was a land of unparalleled opportunity, where anything could be achieved if a person dared to dream big enough. Alexis de Tocqueville, a Frenchman who visited the new nation in the 1830s, called this belief "the charm of anticipated success" [source: Cullen]. American transcendentalist philosopher Henry David Thoreau, in his 1854 book "Walden," articulated it this way: "If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors t