

IMPACT OF TRANSCENDENTALISM ON AMERICAN LITERATURE

MAHENDRA S. CHHANGANI

Associate Professor & Head

Department of English

Smt. Kesharbai Lahoti Mahavidyalaya,
Amravati

ABSTRACT

In the essay *Nature*, Emerson, while propounding the concept of transcendentalism asserts that it divides the world into two parts. "Nature" and "Soul". Explaining further he asserts that everything that was outside of a person including all other people, all art and natural world comes under 'Nature' whereas an individual person's consciousness constitutes the other half of the universe which Emerson termed as the 'Soul'. The term transcendentalism may appear to be quite philosophical or abstract, but it simply means going beyond one's capabilities in order to explore the inaccessible. The transcendentalists also exhibited the same spirit in their work. After the war of Revolution the people of America witnessed the unlocking of human potential in a broader way. The poets, writers, artists, and other creative personalities of the period were witness to that. In the year 1837, Ralph Waldo Emerson concluded his Harvard Phi Beta Kappa Address with the following words:

“We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds...A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men.”

Emerson's opinion carried a lot of clout with the contemporary intellectuals. The American intelligentsia received his words with keen interest and excitement. He motivated the writers and the creative artists of the period to turn to natural and creative art for finding solutions to the life's most baffling issues. Emerson's intelligent and creative commitment to the philosophy of transcendentalism inspired American idealism and the spirit of reform. Emerson contended not only for a new American culture independent of European influence, but also for the rejuvenation of an intellectual and artistic life. The writers, reformers, and artists belonging to the Emerson's school of thought christened the concept as "Transcendentalism." It holds that logical reasoning is the right key to understand reality. He further stresses that the faculties of the intuition and spirituality are very vital as they guide us towards the right path in the life.

Keywords: Transcendentalism, clout, contemporary, christened

Introduction:

Transcendentalism, by and large, promoted peace and aimed for developing the mind and soul. Transcendentalists disapproved the strict ritualism and rigid theology of the established religious institutions. They were of the view that these aspects spoil the purity or innocence of the individuals. They believed that human beings are at their best when truly self-reliant and independent, and it is only from such individuals that the true community could be formed. They expressed semi-religious feelings towards Nature as they were well convinced that divinity permeates all objects. They considered the instinct rather than the reason, as the highest human faculty, and felt that in order to comprehend divine, God, or the universe one must transcend i.e. go beyond the emotional and carnal descriptions of normal human thought. The core transcendental beliefs are:

“The spark of divinity lies within man; that everything in the world is a microcosm of existence: that the individual soul is identical to the world soul, or Over-Soul, as Emerson called it. This belief in the Inner Light led to an emphasis on the authority of the self—to Walt Whitman’s “I,” to the Emersonian doctrine of self-Reliance.”

Walt Whitman's Song of Myself:

In the poem *Song of Myself*, Whitman contemplates at length on most of the beliefs, practices, faith, traditions that are central to the core transcendental thought. His unrestrained praise of America and its people is testimony to it. He opens the poem with the passionate and declarative statement: ‘I celebrate myself and sing myself.’ This focus on the self is one of the chief characteristics of transcendentalists. However, this emphasis on the self is not a display of ego, but an attempt to comprehend the self and its relation to nature and society. The self is by no means isolated, and it is quite essential for each and everyone to explore his or her individuality.

The transcendentalists had no doubts regarding the Almighty’s omnipresence, but they treated God on a par with the ordinary mortals. It illustrates their belief that all things are equal. In the poem *Song of Myself*, Whitman unambiguously expresses his conviction for the transcendentalist concept that all creatures are a part of the same matter or energy and it is the essence not only of this poem but also of Whitman’s consciousness as a whole. He sought to surrender to the senses and celebrate them as this technique allows him to see the beauty in all things and makes him appreciate and enjoy everything from a blade of grass to the breaking waves. As a matter of fact, imperfections abound everywhere in the world, the universal self assures that the evil is the part of a natural design, and by virtue of the soul’s immortality everyone has a chance to make fortune and attain happiness in their next life. In section five of *Song of Myself*:

“And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own
 And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the
 women my sisters and lovers,
 And that a kelson of the creation is love.”

This passage exhibits the very essence of Transcendentalism. Here, Whitman under the influence of external nature projects the union of the souls and thus portrays a blissful consciousness of the universe, limitless self-

confidence, recognition of the common dignity of man and the serene tranquillity of 'I know.' Whitman's assumption that both the body and the spirit are the creations of God leads him to feel some kind of unity with every human being. He, thus, views all men as his brothers and all women as his sisters or lovers. He has now understood that love is the very base and support of the universe.

Transcendentalist Imagery:

The transcendentalist poetry is filled with striking sensory imagery that often blurs the line between the poet and nature. Emerson in a short poem 'Water' personifies nature in one of its forms water as a human being and precedes water before the reference to man using the term 'civilization'.

The water understands
Civilization well;
Well used, it decketh joy,
Adoreth, doubleth joy;
Ill used, it will destroy
In perfect time and measure.

The poet draws attention to the power of a natural element often taken for granted. Stressing on the significance of water he asserts that water is both – a gift and a threat depending on how it is used.

Conclusion:

Transcendentalism influenced the thinking of American Renaissance, the period before the Civil War. New literary and philosophical forms thrived during this period, and its vibrations were felt in the American society well into the twentieth century. The most creative minds of the period were inspired by its pragmatic ideology of confident self-identify, spiritual progress and social justice. They also felt attracted towards its aesthetics which celebrated in landscape and mindscape the immense grandeur of the American soul.

References:

1. *The American Renaissance & Transcendentalism*
www.westga.edu/~scarter/Transcendentalism>
2. *Transcendental Ideas; Definitions: An Overview of American Transcendentalism (1820-1860)*
www.westga.edu/~scarter/Transcendentalism>
3. *Leaves of Grass*— Edited by Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley: New York: New York University Press, 1965, Includes annexes, prefaces, "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd roads," "Old Age Echoes," excluded poems and fragments, and uncollected poems and fragments.
4. Emerson's Nature: A River Reading <https://transcendentalism.tamu.edu>