

THE CONCEPT OF TRANSCENDENTALISM IN HENRY DAVID THOREAU'S WALDEN

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ABSTRACT: *Abstract Henry David Thoreau (1817- 1862) is an American thinker, essayist and prose writer. He is considered a naturalist and transcendentalist philosopher. After graduating from Harvard University, Thoreau joined different professions in which he worked as a teacher in a private school, a land surveyor and an inventor in his father's pencil factory. Then, he gave up all these professions deciding to live his life according to his strict accurate principles. He managed to enjoy his simple life depending on a little money. Thoreau had been deeply influenced by Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), the father of American Transcendentalism. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate Thoreau's transcendental opinions and ideas in his book Walden which is regarded as the best representative and the definitive text of the transcendental movement.*

Keywords: transcendentalism, nature, spiritual, inner life, intuition, inspiration, simplicity and self-reliance.

INTRODUCTION

The Concept of Transcendentalism in Thoreau's Walden
Walden or *Life in the Woods* (1854) is Thoreau's second book. It is one of the greatest works of American Literature. It is based on Thoreau's experience at Walden Pond from the 4th July, 1845 to the 6th September, 1847. It is the result of two years, two months and two days. It is a record of his life at a small cabin in the woods near Walden Pond on a plot of land owned by his friend Emerson. It is considered a fine autobiographical record [1].

Walden can be read on two levels. The first level has a surface meaning. It is an account of Thoreau's simple life alone in a small hut in the woods. He describes the beautiful nature with its plants, animals, birds and insects. He also gives his description of the weather and the change of the seasons. One of the critics praises Thoreau's perfect way of depicting the change of time saying:

The basic structure of the book maybe most clearly understood by the fact that Thoreau, for convenience, condenses his two years' experience at Walden into one, and describes it beginning with Summer and proceeding Fall and Winter to Spring. The turning seasons thus define a process of symbolic death and re-birth which, for Thoreau as for the romantics, represents the character of personal development [2]

On the second level, *Walden* has very deep meanings due to its being a completely transcendental work. Thoreau tries to "live through the visible to the invisible, through the temporal to the eternal."² He thinks that people can attain their happiness if they obey and follow the light within themselves. He rejects the materialistic things that people search in vain for and prefers to look for true happiness and lead sincere joyous life. Thus, *Walden* is considered a guide book to the higher life.

Thoreau is one of the main writers who belongs to the transcendental movement. As a matter of fact, transcendentalism is a philosophical and literary movement which appears in Concord and Boston. It is apparent in the intellectual and cultural life of New England from 1836 until before the Civil War. It is introduced by a group of writers including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Jones Very and

others. The transcendental movement is regarded as:

A reaction against the 18th-century rationalism and a manifestation of the general humanitarian trend of the 19th-century thought. The movement was based on a fundamental belief in the unity of the world and God. The soul of each individual was thought to be identical with the world- a microcosm of the world itself. The doctrine of self-reliance and individualism developed through the belief in the identification of the individual soul with God.³

In *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham define transcendentalism as a philosophical and literary movement which is, Neither a systematic nor a sharply definable philosophy, but rather an intellectual mode and emotional mood that was expressed by diverse, and in some instances rather eccentric, voices... Among the counterviews that were affirmed by Transcendentalists, especially Emerson, were confidence in the validity of a mode of knowledge that is grounded in feeling and intuition, and a consequent tendency to accept what, to logical reasoning, might seem contradictions; an ethics of individualism that stressed self-trust, self-reliance, and self-sufficiency; a turn away from modern society, with its getting and spending, to the scenes and objects of natural worlds, which were regarded both as physical entities and as correspondences to aspects of human spirit [4].

Transcendentalism is a word which has been variously interpreted. Orestes Brownson, an early transcendentalist, defines it as "the recognition in man of the capacity of knowing truth intuitively...an order of knowledge transcending the senses."⁵ In other words, the truth can be found through feeling and intuition rather than reason and logic. Thoreau provides his own interpretation claiming that "wisdom does not inspect, it beholds."⁶ According to Emerson who is considered the father of American Transcendentalism and the founder of the transcendental club in Concord, transcendentalism means the existence of a divine world beyond and above the world of the senses. He wants to clarify the idea that reality cannot be realized by reason but it can be felt by intuition [7].

The transcendental movement has its own features which distinguish it from other literary movements. Initially, the transcendental writers focus on the importance of nature.

They believe in the importance of living closer to nature. For them, nature is their Bible in which everything in it; including the trees, flowers, birds, rivers...etc., has its own significant meaning. They indicate that through the external beauty of nature, man can be conscious of the spiritual beauty of the world. Through this beauty, man can find himself. If man can live in close intimacy with nature far away from the materialistic aspects of society, he can enjoy the beauty of life peacefully. On the other hand, the transcendental writers emphasize the importance of enjoying life with its simplicity. For them, food, shelter and clothes are the main necessities of life. Thus, poverty should not be the reason behind spoiling their life.

They also show great interest in the individuals who are considered part of the society and part of the natural world. They think that the individuals should lead themselves depending on their own experiences. They should create new ways to improve their life without waiting for the society to create their lifestyles. Thus, they focus on the importance of self-trust, self-reliance and self-sufficiency.

The transcendental writers also emphasize the value of the spiritual life in which man can get real knowledge through feeling and intuition transcending the senses. "If man comes to nature in a mood of 'wise passivity' and allows influences from nature to enter into his soul, he can see into 'the heart of things'."⁸ In this regard, the transcendentalists concentrate on the oneness of God, Man and Nature. They believe that man is a part of nature. At the same time, God can be found everywhere even in man and nature. Emerson stresses the prominence of this unity saying that "sea, earth, air, sounds, silence, plant, quadruped, bird. By one music enchanted, one deity stirred [9].

The transcendentalists also pay great attention to necessity of living sublime life in which everyone's life should be above the animal level. As a matter of fact, they praise the spiritual life with its divinity convicting the animal inside human being. At the same time and through this movement, they provide ethical interpretation of life. They give their readers moral lessons and ethical rules. Thus, the transcendental writers are considered great moralists.

Walden is considered the best representative of transcendentalism since it shares most of the common transcendental features of this movement. In it, Thoreau gives an account of his experience at Walden Pond during the period from 1845 to 1847. His experience reveals his character as well as his views and opinions in life. To trace these features, one can easily notice the significance of nature as a basic element obviously in each chapter of the book.

Thoreau is regarded a great lover of nature in American Literature. He appreciates enjoying simple life very close to nature. He describes nature with great interest giving the minute details of his staying in the woods at Walden Pond. Thus, nature for him becomes the source of inspiration and imagination. In this regard, Thoreau reminds us of the Romantic Poets especially William Wordsworth in which they are both fascinated by the beauty of nature. Thus, Ellery Channing; Thoreau's friend and neighbour, calls Thoreau "The poet-naturalist."¹⁰ It is worth mentioning that Thoreau's fascination in nature is very vivid in all the chapters of

Walden especially in chapter IV '**The Sound**' when he gives his readers a beautiful image about his staying in a small neat hut which is made of wood. He enjoys listening to the sounds of different animals and birds both at night and during the day. He also gets pleasure from listening to the sound of the church bell on Sundays. He mentions:

My house was on the side of a hill, immediately on the edge of the larger wood, in the midst of a young forest of pitch pines and hickories, and half a dozen rods from the pond, to which a narrow footpath led down the hill. In my front yard grew the strawberry, blackberry, and life-everlasting, johnswort and golden-rod, shrub-oaks and sand-cherry, blueberry and ground-nut. Near the end of May, the sand-cherry, (*Cerasus pumila*,) adorned the sides of the path with its delicate flowers arranged in umbels cylindrically about its short stems, which last, in the fall, weighed down with good sized and handsome cherries, fell over in wreaths like rays on every side [11].

From another point of view, Thoreau regards himself as a part of nature. He does not feel lonely being away from society. On the contrary, he finds relief in this quiet place since he is in good intimacy with nature. For him, nature is the best friend and the good companion. In his relationship with nature, he feels the real meaning of friendship. In chapter V '**Solitude**', Thoreau refers to his close relationship with nature saying, " I go and come with a strange liberty in nature, a part of herself" (*W*, 97). In addition to that, Thoreau sheds light on the significance of nature. He thinks that nature is a preacher who teaches him everything about the world and mankind. He realizes that nature is the best school since it provides him with experiences, knowledge and moral lesson. He learns that food, shelter and clothes are the main necessities of having a welfare life. He comes to a conclusion that money and wealth are the main reasons which prevent man from enjoying the beautiful sight of nature.

Thoreau also emphasizes the importance of individualism and self-reliance. He indicates that people can count on their own experiences and thoughts to go on living. He thinks that the individual is a part of society and a part of nature. Thus, he should trust himself and follow his personal morals instead of following the laws of society since he has the 'higher law' of nature. He thinks that the individuals should seek out God inside themselves. They can find God everywhere in living things. In his essay "Self-Reliance", Emerson states that man should "Trust thyself: every heart, vibrates, to that iron string."¹² The idea is clear when Thoreau mentions, "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away" (*W*, 242). This means that one should listen to the inner voice inside his soul and follow it ignoring the laws of other institutions in his real world.

In *Walden*, Thoreau finds peace and relief during his staying in the woods since he can think freely and understand nature deeply. He enjoys the life of solitude far away from the noise of the city. He does not believe in conformity. He wants to say that people should be independent and self-reliant so that they can value their interests and goals. Thoreau clarifies his point of view when he describes people whom he has met and

seen in Walden Pond and how they have a few possessions but a lot of freedom and comfort since they do not care for what they own. In fact, his experiment goes well "beyond economic self-sufficiency. He advocates independence from any kind of attachment- not only physical, but also intellectual and social. This attitude has often interpreted as epitomizing rugged individualism."¹³ Thoreau mentions that the "man goes alone can start to-day; but he who travels with another must wait till that other is ready, and it may be a long time before they get off" (*W*, 55).

In *Walden*, Thoreau gives his account about his journey seeking for spiritual understanding. Through his experience, he would like to indicate that the individual is capable of defying all the materialistic obstacles that are made by society. He writes his experience to inspire people to change their way of living. He has an optimistic point of view and optimism is one of the main features of the transcendentalism movement. Thoreau writes:

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. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. (*W*, 68)

It is obvious that Thoreau stresses the importance of what one does not what he thinks or says. He advises people to renew their life depending on their inner power. This power can shape up their life into better. "Every man is tasked to make his life, even in its details, worthy of the contemplation of his most elevated and critical hour. If we refused, or rather used up, such paltry information as we get, the oracles would distinctly inform us how this might be done" (*W*, 68). Thoreau believes in change. He tries to motivate people to start this radical change regardless where they live because the most important thing to know is what we are. He asks them to be ready and welcome the possibility of such a change in which "only that day dawns to which we are awake" (*W*, 248). Thoreau also states:

We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep. I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor. It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. (*W*, 68)

It is worth mentioning that Thoreau advocates the life of simplicity and austerity. He believes that the more one can be simple, the more he can be elated and content. Thus, he

disapproves of the commercial business of people describing them as machines that work day and night continuously without giving themselves any chance to have fun and enjoy their lives. Thoreau mentions:

Most men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them. Their fingers, from excessive toil, are too clumsy and tremble too much for that. Actually, the laboring man has not leisure for a true integrity day by day; he cannot afford to sustain the manliest relations to men; his labor would be depreciated in the market. He has no time to be anything but a machine. (*W*, 8)

For Thoreau as well as the other transcendental writers, poverty is not an obstacle to spoil people's life. Nevertheless, the main reason behind people's misery is their continuous chase to achieve money and be wealthy. These non-stop pursuits corrupt their lives leading them to be meaningless and fruitless. He considers money and wealth are nothing but obstacles to prevent people from having a peaceful life. Hence, one should be satisfied so that he can resist the temptation of the indulgence in the luxurious life. At the sometimes, one should appreciate the real value of the things he/she has regardless of their materialistic value. In this regard, one can notice how "Transcendentalism clashed with economic principles of the day. For the Transcendentalists, capitalism was inherently materialistic, and materialism was inherently wrong. Mankind must see the higher reality behind things, not worship the things themselves [14].

Thoreau supports the previous idea when he refers; in chapter one, to the lives of the ancient Greeks, Chinese, Hindus and Persians. He elucidates how those people were wise and intelligent to the extent that a lot of them were philosophers despite their poverty. Yet, they were rich from the inside with their morals, shrewdness and judiciousness. For them, poverty was neither a hindrance to prevent them from achieving fame and success nor a measurement to decide their real value. Thoreau describes their life saying:

Most of the luxuries, and many of the so called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hinderances to the elevation of mankind. With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meagre life than the poor. The ancient philosophers, Chinese, Hindoo, Persian, and Greek, were a class than which none has been poorer in outward riches, none so rich in inward. We know not much about them. It is remarkable that we know so much of them as we do. (*W*, 14)

Thoreau's experience at Walden Pond serves as an example to prove that man can have a happy life even if it is simple. He lives in a small wooden cabin which costs him just thirty dollars condemning people who waste their time building high expensive houses. He furnishes his house with wooden pieces which are made by himself including a bed, desk and three chairs. To earn his living, he depends on growing some kinds of vegetables like potatoes, corn and beans. In addition to that, he gets some money from engaging in other works like carpentry and surveying. He depends on fruits and vegetables considering this kind of food healthy and nutritious. He also reduces the meals "instead of three meals

a day, if it be necessary eat but one; instead of a hundred dishes, five; and reduce other things in proportion." (W, 69). In Chapter XIII "House-Warming", Thoreau gives a very beautiful description of his wander in the woods collecting different kinds of fruits including grapes, apples and chestnuts. He is attracted by the beauty of these fruits saying, "In October I went a-graping to the river meadows, and loaded myself with clusters more precious for their beauty and fragrance than for food." (W, 178). He also finds that chestnuts are a good substitute for bread. Apart from that, he observes that there are a lot of things in nature that can be good substitutions for something else in reality. He states that,

Many other substitutes might, perhaps, be found. Digging one day for fish-worms I discovered the ground-nut (*Apios tuberosa*) on its string, the potato of the aborigines, a sort of fabulous fruit, which I had begun to doubt if I had ever dug and eaten in childhood, as I had told, and had not dreamed it. I had often since seen its crumpled red velvety blossom supported by the stems of other plants without knowing it to be the same. Cultivation has well nigh exterminated it. It has a sweetish taste, much like that of a frostbitten potato, and I found it better boiled than roasted. (W, 178-79)

He goes on describing his daily activity in the morning when he goes to bathe in the pond. He mentions that "every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself." (W, 67). For him, taking a bath in the pond is one of the most things that he likes. It is just like a religious ritual that he likes to do every day. Thoreau indicates that,

I got up early and bathed in the pond; that was a religious exercise, and one of the best things which I did. They say that characters were engraven on the bathing tub of king Tching-thang to this effect: "Renew thyself completely each day; do it again, and again, and forever again." I can understand that. (W, 67)

In this regard, Walden Pond symbolizes the spiritual significance of nature which reminds him of nature's endless capacity to renew life and stirs him to higher aspirations. In his essay "Thoreau and the Natural Environment," Lawrence Buell refers to the concept of spirituality. He claims that in Thoreau's experience at Walden Pond, there is a focus on frugality and simplicity. In addition to that, there is a focus on the spiritual aspect. Buell clarifies the idea saying:

What could be more frugal than bathing in a pond? But, in the same sense, what could be more spiritual? Thoreau's practice of bathing in the early morning presents a very biblical image of baptism and heaven. One could almost imagine the morning sun beaming on Thoreau in Walden Pond as if it were the heavens opening on the Jordan River for John the Baptist himself.¹⁵

Thoreau prefers the life of silence and solitude. Yet, he is not against the company of people or against being in contact with them. In Walden Pond, he is visited by many people more than when he was in the city. He often asks his guests to sit on the grass outside because he does not have enough chairs for them. When anyone of his guests asks for a glass of water, he points to the pond. Sometimes, he shares his meal with his guests but when they are a lot, he never mentions

anything about food in front of them. People of different social classes including doctors, lawyers, shopkeepers, businessmen, young men and women, beggars and even slaves, like to visit him listening to his wise opinion and enjoying his simple and quiet life.

Thoreau wants to show his readers the importance of having a simple life. He calls for simplicity warning people of the danger of getting lost in the materialistic world. He thinks that people can be measured by their good deeds and not by what they possess. In chapter Two, Thoreau mentions that man's happiness cannot be estimated according to the number of things he has because one can be happy even with the fewest things he owns. He wants to say that simple life is more enjoyable than the complicated one which is full of materials and unnecessary things. He calls for "simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb nail." (W, 69).

It is obvious that Thoreau can be seen as a great moralist and a social reformer. He gives his readers moral interpretation of life. He denounces the commercial greed of people and their unbroken pursuit of wealth. He wants to motivate people in an attempt to attract their attention to the importance of having a simple life like him. Being a moralist is one of the main features of the transcendental movement.

In the conclusion of *Walden*, Thoreau gives his reasons behind leaving the woods and going back to the city. He ends his staying there saying, "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." (W, 240). He never thinks of staying there permanently because he wants to see and try the other aspects of life. He believes that life is a precious gift so that one should live it fully and enjoy its simplicity. After achieving this aim efficaciously, he finds out that it is the suitable time to return to the city with successful experiences after spending two years in Walden Woods.

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