



Transcendentalism and Thoreau: A Critical Reading of Walden

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Henry David Thoreau, transcendentalism, Walden.

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ABSTRACT

There are quite a few varieties of transcendentalism among different transcendentalists. But the common ideas that bind them together are their rejection of Calvinism, idea of original sin, pessimism, depravity of man and all forms of authority. Transcendentalism, an idea against orthodoxy and Calvinistic tradition gained its ground especially in the writings of Henry David Thoreau. He was a man of unique sensibilities. He wanted to prove his words through his work. To prove his point he even went to the extent of taking refuge in solitariness and brought out his memorable creation 'Walden'. The present paper is an attempt to critically evaluate the essay in the light of transcendentalism.

Introduction

Transcendentalism arose as a revolt against the sterile Unitarian orthodoxy; it was a protest against the Calvinistic tradition. Some writers could not accept the notion of original sin, which made evil compulsory in human life. They also could not accept the idea of man as a tool on the hands of God. This rejection of both conventional idea and divinity paved the way for transcendentalism. Thoreau was a member of the Transcendental Club, which was formed in 1836. Transcendentalism relied on intuition, individualism and idealism.

Transcendentalism refers to self – sufficiency of the human mind and the creative power of man. It spoke for an order of truth that transcended by immediate perception, all external evidence. Thoreau believed in all this and saw the manifestation of God in Nature. He recommended a life close to nature full of economy and simplicity. Thoreau himself wrote in his Journal in 1853, "I am a mystic transcendentalist and a natural philosopher to boot." It was as a transcendentalist and a natural philosopher that he laid stress upon solitary communion with the infinite and believed a thing right if his intuition said that was right. His peculiar life and the high literary merits of his writings have made him undoubtedly the most interesting among the transcendentalists.

Thoreau occupies a unique position among transcendentalists. Thoreau's transcendentalism differs considerably from that of Emerson. He alienated himself from the church in order to keep on his religious quest with freedom. He lived out Emerson's doctrines of non – conformity and self – reliance and the individuality that Thoreau practiced even beyond that which Emerson advocated. Without bothering himself about the signs and symbols, revealed by nature, he plunged into the depths of nature. At every step in his life, he established commendable self – reliance. He said in a letter to Charles C. Morse in 1860: "I am in the lecture field, but my subjects are not scientific, rather transcendental and aesthetic." He did not preach transcendentalism, because he lived it and discovered it for himself. Thoreau held the concept of the immanence of God in nature and in man.

Walden recapitulates the universe in miniature. Here we

find that individuality of a human being can at once be self – asserting and self – transcending. The individual is represented in this work as a unique, independent being. In *Walden*, the masterful record of his life he said: "There are now – a – days professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. To be philosophers is not merely to have subtle thoughts, or even to found a school but to love wisdom as to live a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically but practically" He fulfilled this goal; he was transcendentalist in his practical sense.

To a great degree, the character of Thoreau's life and the very production of *Walden* were results of his birth date. In 1817 the transcendentalist movement, for which Thoreau was destined to be one of the major exponents, was born. Thoreau incidentally was also born in 1870. It would become, by the late 1830's the intellectual force that charged Thoreau's imagination and channeled his energies into a vocation of writing and lecturing the possibilities of an ideal existence for man. The New England transcendentalists' vitally new and exciting vision of man's capabilities was at the core of *Walden*.

It was Emerson's proposal of the possibility of total, ecstatic self – fulfillment through conscious endeavor that fired Thoreau's imagination. Years later it was what he offered to his readers in *Walden*: "I do not mean to prescribe rules to strong and valiant natures.... But mainly to the mass of men who are discontented and idly complain of the hardness of their lot or of the times when they might improve them." When in 1836 Emerson published his essay "Nature" it became almost at once the bible of transcendentalism. Thoreau read it with closest attention and years afterwards undertook the Walden experiment "not to live cheaply nor to live dearly there, but to transact some private business with the fewest obstacles." And that private business was undoubtedly a transcendental affair. By the time when *Walden* was published in 1854, transcendentalism was a dying movement; but its greatest document was unique in type.

In *Walden*, Thoreau offers an example of one possible approach to realizing one's divinity, to fulfilling one's potential for ideal existence in the real world. Like Emerson, he advises his readers to exercise their minds and create an idea

of themselves as they might ideally be, and then find the means of making that idea, or dream, come true. Thoreau made this explicit when in chapter 'Economy' he wrote: "When one man has reduced a fact of the imagination to be a fact of his understanding, I foresee that all men will at length establish their lives on that basis."

In the 'Conclusion' chapter of *Walden*, Thoreau again makes this point and reassures his readers that based upon his experience at Walden Pond he believes that an ideal mode of life is within everyone's grasp:

"I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in that direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.... If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put foundations under them."

Thoreau's philosophy was to have the cake and eat it as well. Writer of an earlier century might have used the expression, "bringing God into the market place" to approximate what Thoreau was suggesting. In the terminology of his own intellectual milieu, Thoreau advises his readers to recognize the Ideal and then design their lives accordingly so that the Ideal becomes the Real, so "the best of two worlds" may become "one world" wherein spiritual existence is the same as everyday existence.

Walden is the artistic depiction of the quest to realize such a state of life. Unlike Emerson who usually wrote in theory about an experience of the ideal, Thoreau provided his contemporaries and us with a concrete way to attain successfully such a quest for a higher mode of life. In *Walden* we vividly see Thoreau erect the "foundations" under his "castle in air": we see him create a way of life that enables him to make his dream of self – fulfillment come true.

Thus, as he attempts to rouse the spirit of dull John Field in *Walden*, Thoreau offers to us, his readers an example of how we might "wake up" and transcend our unsatisfactory lives. Fittingly for a transcendentalist, Thoreau offers us in *Walden* nothing less than the opportunity of realizing our own perfection and spirituality. In the chapter 'Higher laws' he says: "We are conscious of an animal in us, which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers. It is reptile and sensual, and perhaps cannot be wholly expelled." He keeps asking us to aim for a higher life, to make our lives sublime, to raise ourselves above the animal level, to elevate and look beyond. To bring quality in our life is the highest of arts.

In the light of what has been said about Thoreau's transcendentalism one might rightly anticipate *Walden* to begin in depiction of how one man moved away from the state of being a "god in ruins" and moved toward a god – like state of fulfillment. Thus commences one of the most sophisticated and artistic "brags" in the history of American literature. And before the student decides to learn the book the work of a rapid egomaniac, a further word about the nature of "brag" should be offered.

In 'The American Scholar' Emerson described the three basic stages of a transcendentalists' life: first, he learns all that is of merit in the wisdom of the past; second, he establishes a harmonious relationship with nature through which he is able to discover ethical truths and communicate with the divine. With these two stages, the transcendentalist has developed his higher faculties; he has cultivated his life and "spiritualized" it. We find Thoreau go through two stages in his progress towards spiritual rebirth in *Walden*. After thus cultivating his own spirit, the transcendentalist does not selfishly remain content with himself. The third stage he must attempt, after self – renewal, is the renewal of society – at – large. After being nurtured by books and nature, he must attempt to share his spiritual gains with other men who have not yet achieved their perfect spiritual states.

Walden may be viewed as Thoreau's attempt at this third stage in the transcendental life. In it, we hear the "bragging" narrator reiterating the conviction that all men may achieve the exhilaration that he feels. He vividly shows his life; he brags of his achievement; and he tries by his example to renew "the dead dry life of society" Thus, when the narrator "brags" it is not only for him but also for all humanity. Like the other transcendentalists, Thoreau was a moralist also. One of the most distinctive features of *Walden* is the narrator constantly tries to alert his readers to their potential for spiritual growth.

The narrator's celebration of life and his call for all men to recognize the potential outstanding of life form the core idea, or unifying theme of *Walden*. This aspect of *Walden* should not vague the essential core of the book, the process by which Thoreau moves towards spiritual fulfillment. *Walden* is often said to be a nature poetry, a lesson taught to guide human beings towards his ultimate destination – the natural world that is close to the spiritual existence.

Conclusion

The transcendentalism of Thoreau evoked mixed reaction from critics. P.E. More took him to be one of Rousseau's "wild men" and also thought that he was moving towards neo – humanism. Granville Hicks remarked: "Nothing in American literature is more admirable than Henry Thoreau's devotion to his principles, but the principles are unfortunately, less significant than the devotion." John Macy believed that he was a powerful literary radical but a little too selfish. Van Brooks opined that he was a charming New England eccentric. The various responses to Thoreau's transcendentalism prove that it is very difficult to define his theory and accept it at its face value. Still Thoreau remains one of the most discussed philosopher and writer who had lived according to his own doctrine of life. He holds immense interest among the researchers and readers of literature even today.

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