

Transcendentalism:  
A Critique of Today's World Through the Eyes of a Nineteenth Century  
Transcendentalist

Throughout history, human thought has shaped the processes and actions that make up the world we live in today. It has been at the root of every war as well as every treaty and negotiation. Human thought has fueled hatred and acceptance, wrath and peace, and it has endured through history despite each attempt to repress it. There have been intellectual movements throughout history in which human thought has influenced society's culture and how it approaches its members and problems. Two such time periods were the Enlightenment and the Second Great Awakening, the latter of which being when Transcendentalism first came to the forefront of human thought. Transcendentalism was a spiritual and philosophical movement that developed in the 1820s and 1830s with roots in Kantian philosophy and German Romanticism.<sup>1</sup> This philosophy argued for individualism and each person's ability to make sense of the Universe through their own Spirit and Reason. In today's world, Transcendentalist thought is often overlooked and is rarely taught or practiced. Regardless, modern society reflects the one in which Transcendentalists lived in the sense that they have both been marked by technological revolutions and the current societal issues are products of those that Transcendentalists once fought against. It is for this reason that we must look at what Transcendentalism is and how Transcendentalists responded to their society and its problems so that we may begin to do the same within our own society. To do this, it is necessary to look at Ralph Waldo Emerson's

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<sup>1</sup> *History.com* Editors, "Transcendentalism," HISTORY, August 21, 2018, [www.history.com/topics/19th-century/transcendentalism](http://www.history.com/topics/19th-century/transcendentalism).

essay, “The Transcendentalist,” which explains the origins of this way of thinking as well as what it was.<sup>2</sup>

Transcendentalist thought was influenced by rationalism, German Romanticism, and Kantian philosophy, which all contained ideas that were either upheld or challenged by Transcendentalism. To start, rationalism valued logical thinking and believed that one must base their perception of the world upon experiences and observations alone. Rationalist Rene Descartes said, “Anything which admits of the slightest doubt I will set aside just as if I had found it to be wholly false; and I will proceed in this way until I recognize something certain.”<sup>3</sup> Transcendentalists, however, argued that knowledge should not come from reason alone, but from spiritual and emotional thinking and natural human intuition. Secondly, German Romanticists created art that displayed a natural landscape as a way of illustrating the belief that nature was God and thus nature was innately divine.<sup>4</sup> These artworks often featured a human who was separate from nature.<sup>5</sup> German Romanticists felt that, because man values rational thinking, he can never be utterly spiritual and transcendental as nature can, and is thus prohibited from forming a strong connection to the divine spirit within nature and himself.<sup>6</sup>

Transcendentalists argued that mankind must attempt to transcend reason and the physical world in search of that deeper Soul or Spirit which can guide one to an understanding of the Universe. Immanuel Kant had similar ideas in his teachings, and in the 1700s he laid the

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<sup>2</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” American Transcendentalism Web, January 1842, [archive.vcu.edu/english/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson/essays/transcendentalist.html](http://archive.vcu.edu/english/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson/essays/transcendentalist.html).

<sup>3</sup> Descartes, R. (2017). *Meditations on First Philosophy* (J. Veitch, Trans.). Toronto: Our Open Media. Retrieved from <http://bradleymurray.ca>.

<sup>4</sup> Kira Gurmail-Kaufmann, “7 Things You Need to Know About German Romanticism,” Sotheby’s.com, November 29, 2018, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/articles/7-things-you-need-to-know-about-german-romanticism>.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, circa 1817, Kunsthalle Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany, Hamburger Kunsthalle: Startseite, <https://www.hamburger-kunsthalle.de/>.

<sup>6</sup> Gurmail-Kaufmann, “German Romanticism.”

groundwork for what Transcendentalism would later become. Kant is best known for his ideas of categorical imperative and transcendental idealism. Kant's categorical imperative states, "Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law [of nature]."<sup>7</sup> Kant's notion that one must only act or behave in the manner that they would expect of the rest of the world relates to the Transcendentalist idea that one ought to act based on their own moral law. Moral law, according to transcendentalism, derives from one's ability to discern right and wrong through their understanding of the Universe, even if their moral law differs from societal laws. The second of Kant's teachings was transcendental idealism, which focused on "mind-dependence."<sup>8</sup> Kant's argument was that objects we see are not necessarily objects in and of themselves, but rather they are in existence because our minds allow them to be; Kant referred to these as our natural intuitions. This relates to the Transcendentalist teaching that the world comes out of us and our own thoughts rather than being a separate, distinct entity on its own. It also combats the beliefs of rationalists that say our knowledge comes only from our observation of the world.

Though the beliefs of Kant and German Romanticism heavily contributed to Transcendentalism, the time period and society that Transcendentalists occupied impacted their thinking as well. During the early 19th century, nascent capitalism and the Industrial Revolution made the western world more materialistic. As urbanism expanded upon the convergence of the Communication Revolution, Market Revolution, and Transportation revolution, Transcendentalists began seeking out lives that revolved around individualism and simple living,

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<sup>7</sup> "Q1: Could I rationally act on my maxim in PSW?", Kantian Ethics, accessed June 15, 2020, [www.csus.edu/indiv/g/gaskilld/ethics/kantian%20ethics.htm](http://www.csus.edu/indiv/g/gaskilld/ethics/kantian%20ethics.htm).

<sup>8</sup> Tim Jankowiak, "Immanuel Kant," Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed June 15, 2020, [www.iep.utm.edu/kantview/#SH2d](http://www.iep.utm.edu/kantview/#SH2d).

two things they considered necessary to deciphering their own Souls and making sense of the Universe. Transcendentalists feared that spirituality would be corrupted by the greed that the materialistic world created.

Transcendentalism also blossomed because of the Second Great Awakening, the time period that encompassed many religious and social reform movements, including the fights for women's rights, abolition of slavery, and temperance.<sup>9</sup> Many Transcendentalists were compelled to pursue these movements due to class divides that industrialization, immigration, and westward expansion created because they believed in the equality between all humans and wished to see it reflected in society. For example, a leading Transcendentalist, Margaret Fuller, advocated for women's rights and established herself as a proto-feminist for her activism. Others fought against slavery as they felt that each person deserved the opportunity to explore their spirituality and understanding of the world as is only possible when you are free to do as you choose.

Finally, many aspects of Transcendentalism were derived from the time period's spreading Unitarianism. It was during this period that Protestantism was being widely taught, meaning the evangelical beliefs in the divinity of Christ and the necessity of performing good deeds in order to earn salvation.<sup>10</sup> Those who opposed these beliefs were inspired to begin teaching their own, and hence Unitarianism took root and spread throughout the country. Unitarianism revolved around the rejection of the Holy Trinity, believing that only God was divine and should thus be given all honor. Transcendentalism came out of this, though it differed slightly in its views of human thought. While Unitarianism adopted John Locke's theory of

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<sup>9</sup> "Temperance Movement," Alcohol, Prohibition, Consumption, and Liquor - JRank Articles, accessed June 28, 2020, <https://law.jrank.org/pages/10714/Temperance-Movement.html>. Temperance is the abstinence from alcohol consumption. People believed this would promote a healthier relationship with religion and society.

<sup>10</sup> Finney, Charles Grandison. "Salvation Difficult to the Christian - Impossible to the Sinner." Sermon, The Oberlin Evangelist, September 15, 1852.

empiricism<sup>11</sup>, meaning humans are born with no knowledge and must acquire it all from the outside world, Transcendentalists believed that the world comes out of what we are born knowing, or our natural “intuitions of the mind itself.”<sup>12</sup> Transcendentalist thought was influenced by several factors, from its origins in German Romanticism and Kantian philosophy, to its time period, during which the Second Great Awakening and the Industrial Revolution were taking place. Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay, “The Transcendentalist,” gives a comprehensive summary of the intricacies that make up Transcendentalist thought.

In “The Transcendentalist,” Emerson began by discussing materialists and idealists, and the differences between the two groups of people. Materialists rely solely on their senses and experiences in order to obtain facts and information that they know to be true about the world.<sup>13</sup> Idealists focus on the world that is outside of their senses by observing the spiritual and thoughtful side of themselves and interpreting what their senses perceive. Emerson wrote that an idealist may ask a materialist, “why he believes that an uniform experience will continue uniform, or on what grounds he founds his faith in figures, and he will perceive that his mental fabric is built up on just as strange and quaking foundations as his proud edifice of stone.”<sup>14</sup>

Ultimately, Transcendentalists, who are idealists, feel as if materialists limit their thinking too much for they are unable to look past what their senses provide them with. Idealists are capable of using their Spirit to gaze beyond the physical world and interpret what it is meant to represent in their thoughts. As Emerson wrote in his essay “Nature,” “Every natural fact is a

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<sup>11</sup> Russell Goodman, “Transcendentalism,” The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, August 30, 2019, [plato.stanford.edu/entries/transcendentalism/](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/transcendentalism/).

<sup>12</sup> Emerson, “The Transcendentalist.”

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 3.

symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of mind.”<sup>15</sup> Because Transcendentalists, unlike materialists, recognize this, materialists see themselves as part of a world that exists in and of itself, but idealists go beyond to ask what the world truly is. They come to the conclusion that it is their own thoughts, and that the world comes out of them rather than them coming out of it. As Emerson put it, “His experience inclines him to behold the procession of facts you call the world, as flowing perpetually outward from an invisible, unsounded centre in himself.”<sup>16</sup> This “Unknown Centre,” as Emerson called it, is the place where those natural intuitions that Kant described lie.<sup>17</sup>

In the early nineteenth century, even Emerson recognized that there had never been, as he put it, a “pure Transcendentalist,”<sup>18</sup> or someone whose life had been consumed solely by spiritualism, instead of rationalism or materialism. Emerson tried proving this by describing moments of clarity that Transcendentalists went through. It was in these brief moments that Transcendentalists were able to see the spirituality and transcendence that they lacked, and the human greed and selfishness that they and society possessed. Nature, unlike humans, is purely transcendental.<sup>19</sup> Emerson believed that humans must attempt to be as transcendental as nature, and the recommendation he provided was to remove oneself from society and become “self-dependent.”<sup>20</sup> It was at this time that Transcendentalists began to leave the rapidly growing cities to live in more isolated and natural places either on their own or in smaller, like-minded

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<sup>15</sup> Emerson, “Nature”.

<sup>16</sup> Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” para. 4.

<sup>17</sup> Both Kant and Emerson recognized that people have inherent knowledge and intuitions; Kant referred to them as Imperative forms and Emerson called them an Unknown Centre from which the world “flows,” and both of these ideas can be called transcendental idealism.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 9.

<sup>19</sup> The example that Emerson gave to prove this statement was bees; bees gather honey, not out of selfish or private means, but because it is in their nature. Therefore, their nature alone provides for them, and they are transcendental. *Ibid.*, para. 9.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 4.

communities. The point of this was to practice individualism and find their own Soul or Spirit away from the opinions of others and greed, selfishness, and distractions of the materialistic world.

The world outside of these communities, however, did not approve of the actions that Transcendentalists were taking, calling them lazy for not contributing to society by partaking in church, labor, or the social reform of the Second Great Awakening. During his essay, Emerson explained why Transcendentalists were not contributing to society, and urged people to reconsider their judgement. Emerson said that, although the social reform movements were in line with Transcendentalist thinking, the way that they were advertised was not.<sup>21</sup> Being such spiritual people, Transcendentalists did not approve of the fact that the movements, despite how they were advertised<sup>22</sup>, were self-serving rather than selfless. The Protestants who started these movements did so out of the hope that it would earn them salvation when they died.

Transcendentalists felt that the nature of the movements took away from the spirituality and good that they were trying to accomplish, and therefore felt uncomfortable taking part in them.

Nevertheless, Emerson did encourage the Transcendentalists to participate in the movements and make good of the problems that they possessed.<sup>23</sup> One example is Henry David Thoreau, a Transcendentalist who advocated for the abolition movement and urged people to partake in acts of civil disobedience as a way of inspiring change regarding societal problems.<sup>24</sup> As a result,

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., para. 20.

<sup>22</sup> "Emerson's Essays," CliffsNotes, accessed June 14, 2020, [www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/emersons-essays/summary-and-analysis-of-the-transcendentalist/paragraphs-15](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/emersons-essays/summary-and-analysis-of-the-transcendentalist/paragraphs-15).

<sup>23</sup> Emerson, "The Transcendentalist," para. 19.

<sup>24</sup> Henry David Thoreau was a part of the Underground Railroad and he was an avid writer when it came to the abolition movement and other social causes. For more information see "Life and Legacy," The Thoreau Society, accessed July 28, 2020, <https://www.thoreausociety.org/life-legacy>.

there were Transcendentalists who involved themselves in the movements which fought for equality among different groups of people, however they also maintained their belief in individualism and the search for Spirit and a deeper understanding of the Universe.

Emerson ended his essay by stating his hope that Transcendentalism would leave a lasting impression and that people in the future would adopt this spiritual and philosophical way of thinking so that they too could improve society through their understanding of the Universe and themselves. Emerson's hope, however, has not been realized, and the societal problems that Transcendentalists fought against continue to impact society. Despite Emerson's hope, Transcendentalist thought has failed to stand the test of time like its origins once had, and the ideas that it encompassed have not been able to develop into new ways of thinking. This is true even today when the current society is so similar to the one that Transcendentalists occupied; while we are not in an Industrial Revolution today, we are part of a Technological Revolution that encourages materialism. Like the early 1800s, people put value on the latest pieces of technology and property, and people are less likely to focus on their spiritual sides. In addition, the growth of technology and its influence discourages individuals from thinking for themselves, and it has created social and economic divides like the ones that grew during the Industrial Revolution.

While spiritualists influenced the world and maintained their beliefs during the 1800s, the same cannot be said for today, and the materialistic world we are living in has made it more difficult than ever to think spiritually or connect to the Universe as Transcendentalists strove to do. The growing urbanism has further encouraged materialism and it has normalized the destruction of nature. German Romanticism had created the belief among Transcendentalists



that nature has a divine spirit, and the modern destruction of it proves that Transcendentalist thought is given little value today, and it is part of the reason that there is a lack of spirituality and deeper understanding of one's person and the Universe in general. Finally, Transcendentalists took part in many social reform movements that covered issues still present in society today. Many Transcendentalists, such as Margaret Fuller, fought for women's rights and gender equality.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the advances that have been made in this area since then, the country does not have gender equality as seen through issues such as the wage gap, double standards for men and women, and fewer opportunities for women regarding education and employment. Another movement Transcendentalists joined was the abolition movement. While chattel slavery no longer exists in the country, individual and systemic racism have prohibited racial equality from being achieved. The racism in the country is a result of the slavery that Transcendentalists fought against and the Reconstruction era which failed to give economic and political power to former slaves, thus creating systems that continue to oppress people of color today. Though Transcendentalists disagreed with the presentation of these movements, they took part in them because they saw the equality between all people, and hoped to improve society so that everyone could connect to their own Spirit and find deeper understanding. Today, however, people are too consumed by materialism to connect to their spiritual side, and thus societal problems continue to grow beside the cities and technology that create the issues in the first place.

Transcendentalism was a spiritual movement that encouraged individualism and an

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<sup>25</sup> Margaret Fuller wrote *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, which encouraged women to seek education and expand their role in society. She was also the editor of the Transcendentalist magazine *The Dial* from 1840 to 1842. See Joel Athey, "Fuller, Margaret," *American National Biography*, February 2000, <https://www.anb.org/view/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.001.0001/anb-9780198606697-e-1602339>.

understanding of the world that comes from one's own natural intuitions. Transcendentalists believed in the equality between every human soul and fought for that equality to be reflected in society; the lack of spirituality that we see today plays a role in the societal problems afflicting the country, and it is necessary to look at the roots of these problems as well as the history of those who fought against them if they are going to be resolved.

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## Appendix

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