

Something Borrowed, Something New:  
The Successful Marriage Between European Ideals and  
American Exceptionalism in Transcendentalist Literature

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## Abstract

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Today Transcendentalism is one of the most studied bodies of work in American literature. Prior to the Transcendentalist movement America was perceived as a country devoid of the capabilities, artistry, and material to create a body of reputable literature. This thesis analyzes the aspects of Transcendentalist literature that attributed to its long-lasting success domestically and abroad. To understand the success of American Transcendentalist literature, it is essential to acknowledge the aspects of Transcendentalism that were borrowed from other European and classical works, and the uniqueness of American themes and ideals presented in the text. This thesis argues that the synthesis of well-studied motifs and inspiration with distinctly American ideals allowed Transcendentalism to gain popularity and contribute significantly to a national body of literature.

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The phrase “American literature” was perceived as somewhat of an oxymoron prior to the American Transcendentalist movement of the early to mid-nineteenth century. America was viewed critically and internationally as a country devoid of a worthy body of literature by European standards. At the turn of the nineteenth century, authors and “literary historians were answering to the voices of European high culture who denied the existence of worthy literary productions in the young United States” (Myerson 2). There was a widespread belief that America was lacking great thinkers and could not possess the artistry and mastery of language that its European counterparts exhibited. This denial of America’s literary respectability was largely accepted by critics and thinkers throughout Europe.

There were many contributing factors to the view of America as a country devoid of substantive literature. First, there was a profound belief that the environment in America bred physically and mentally deficient individuals. In fact,

the theme of so many diatribes was, quite simply, the notion of the presumed inferiority of the nature of America, and especially its fauna, including man, in comparison with the Old World’s, and the whole Western Hemisphere found itself condemned: a rudimentary theme, clearly, but one that bred prolifically, producing innumerable variations and reverberating with multiple echoes, in philosophy, in anthropology, in the satire of society, in the natural sciences, obviously, and most surprisingly, in poetry. (Gerbi xi)

Because of this biological degenerative view of America, Europe’s leading thinkers assumed that Americans were incapable of producing art or higher thought. Thus, the creation of an “American literature” was considered virtually impossible and many early efforts were renounced and ignored accordingly.

Second, most of the works that were produced in early America were either historical or puritanical. Historical works in early American literature documented life in the New World. These works often took the form of letters and political documents and were largely lacking the artistry and command over phrasing that permeated European literature. Many “printed documents lushly describing the ‘new world,’ and offering propaganda to stir Europeans’ individual imaginations and national ambition emerged immediately after Columbus’ first voyage” (“Beginnings to 1820”). Most of these texts produced in early America “were communications between the colonists and their government at home in Europe” and were thus “meant to inform or influence policy decisions made at a distance or to justify actions taken” (“Beginnings to 1820”). These works were then disregarded as American literature because of their focus on history, politics, and propaganda rather than art, theme or content. Many European readers and critics understood these works to be “unsuitable or ‘sub-literary’ belletristic texts (at least by the European standards of the day) because of appeals to their worth as historical documents possessing extrinsic value” (Myerson 3). Thus, the efforts to establish a worthy body of national literature were renounced by Europeans because of their failure at self-containment and their lack of artistry.

Another category of Early American Literature that was neglected by European readers was Puritan literature. The Puritans’ plight of religious reform was not taken seriously in England, thus they migrated to a settlement in Boston with “a wish to purify Christian belief and practice” (“Beginnings to 1820”). In America, they created a body of literature to support their religious beliefs. Puritanical works aimed to instruct the reader and guide one to devout faith. The creation of these works was attributed to God rather

than the individual author. European readers, already critical of the Puritans, neglected to consider this body of work as literature because it did not meet European ideals of high art and craftsmanship and, most importantly, because the author was declared to be God instead of the individual author. Because American works of literature were purported to be inspired by God and have extrinsic value, Europeans believed that the existing body of literature produced in America did not possess artistry or worth as a self-contained entity.

Additionally, there was confusion over what and who was considered to be American. Since many writers that were American citizens were born in Europe or had European parentage, it was difficult to establish a concrete definition of what was considered American. Most of these early American texts were written by “Europeans rather than the Native peoples of the Americas” and were thus “claimed as Europe’s own” (“Beginnings to 1820”). This ambiguity in the definition of American productions was further complicated by the fact that many American-born artists and writers traveled to Europe to study or produce their work. Thus, notable and respectable works of American literature were often claimed by the Old World and thought of as European literature.

All of these views of America as a less apt producer of good literature, in comparison with its European counterparts, were profoundly challenged and eventually overturned by the emergence of Transcendental literature. While there are several contributing factors to the positive reception and reputation of American Transcendentalist works in Europe, ultimately, the success of Transcendental literature internationally can be attributed to the synthesis of old European ideas and traditions with uniquely American ideals and positions. The blend of old philosophy, and themes from

European literature with uniquely American ideals and positions simultaneously established a sense of scholarship and tradition by harkening back to high ancient culture and European literary style while also creating a point of accessibility and familiarity for European readers. Transcendentalism blended these familiar, accessible, and well-studied ideas with themes and experiences that were unique to America, thus presenting a novel form of writings and creating an internationally substantive and well-received literary movement.

#### A Familiar Foundation: Classical and European Influences on American Transcendentalism

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Transcendentalism established a sense of scholarship by utilizing canonical themes and philosophies that would have been familiar to the European reader. This rendered Transcendentalism accessible to European critics and readers by creating a sense of familiarity and also harkened back to ancient traditions that were considered the high water mark of civilization. Fundamentally, Transcendentalist literature called back to ancient philosophical ideas of beauty, truth, reason, and abstraction. “The Transcendentalists’ classical education is reflected in their continued interest in the Classics long after their formal schooling had ended, when they often widened their reading beyond the curriculum” (The Oxford Handbook 4). Transcendentalists, beginning with Emerson, the father of American Transcendentalism, were avid students of ancient Greek Philosophy, particularly that of Plato. Ideas reflective of Plato’s *Theory of Forms* and Marcus’ Aurelius’ *Meditations* can be found throughout transcendentalist works.

Although Emerson attempted to distinguish American thought from European tradition, ideas from Plato permeate his writings. “Ironically, in *Nature*, ‘The American Scholar,’ and his other writings of the time, Emerson drew on major philosophical and aesthetic ideas circulating in Europe to write as a literary reformer exhorting Americans to break their dependency on the ‘courtly muses of Europe’” (Levine et al. 13). These aesthetic prosperities and themes include the interaction between fact and abstraction and correspondence between beauty and truth. “The representative man whom [Emerson] most revered was Plato. For Plato had been able to bridge the gap between two poles of thought, reconcile fact and abstraction, the Many and the One, society and solitude. Emerson wanted a like method for himself” (Mathiessen 3). In order to reconcile fact and abstraction, Emerson sought to return to nature, and study the self. By studying his internal self and appreciating the beauty and purity of nature, he attempted to reconcile the physical world with the abstract world. Emerson “believed in a correspondence between the world and the spirit, that nature is an image in which humans can perceive the divine” (“Ralph Waldo Emerson”). In *Nature*, Emerson claims, “This universal soul, he calls Reason: it is not mine or thine or his, but we are its; we are its property and men. And the blue sky in which the private earth is buried, the sky with its eternal calm, and full of everlasting orbs, is the type of Reason” (Emerson, *Nature*). Thus, Emerson does not condemn reason. Nor does he separate reason and the physical world from divinity and truth. Rather, he argues that reason and the physical universe aid one in perceiving and appreciating the metaphysical world. Thus, Emerson adopts Plato’s ideas on the interaction between reason and abstraction.

Emerson's belief in the correspondence between beauty in the natural world and divinity is also extremely similar to ideas expressed in Plato's *Timaeus* where Plato describes the formation of the universe and the creation of beauty. "As Plato tells it, the beautiful orderliness of the universe is not only the manifestation of Intellect; it is also the model for rational souls to understand and to emulate" (Zeyl). Emerson and his fellow Transcendentalists borrowed the idea that one can perceive divinity through beauty in their treatment of nature. In Emerson's essay, *Nature*, he writes,

The ancient Greeks called the world [kosmos], beauty. Such is the constitution of all things, or such the plastic power of the human eye, that the primary forms, as the sky, the mountain, the tree, the animal, give us delight in and for themselves, a pleasure arising from outline, color, motion and grouping. (Emerson, *Nature*)

Emerson's argument that the natural is beautiful because of its form and unique role within the universe echo Plato's belief that all things in the universe are appealing due to their orderliness and the level of intelligent creation that they exhibit. Emerson later writes, "Beauty is the mark God sets upon virtue," and "Truth, goodness, and beauty, are but different names of the same All" (Emerson, *Nature*). These ideas are reflective of Plato's Theory of Forms in which Plato argues that the physical world is an imperfect reflection of the non-physical reality. Similarly, in his *1855 Introduction to Leaves of Grass*, Whitman writes, "the fruition of beauty is no chance of hit or miss ... it is inevitable as life ... it is as exact and plumb as gravitation" (Whitman, *Introduction*). This exactness and divine purpose of Beauty corresponds with Plato and Emerson's ideas of beauty as a reflection of truth. Beauty, Plato argues, is found in the objects and phenomena that best imitate and model this perfect reality. Similarly, in *Nature* Emerson argues that Beauty is found in virtue and in beauty one may glimpse truth. Thus pleasure

arising from beauty in the natural world brings one closer to virtue, truth, and consequently the divine.

Yet even as the ideas of Plato provided a basis for Emerson's philosophical ideals, Emerson distinguishes himself from a philosopher by stating that "Whilst thus the poet animates nature with his own thoughts, he differs from the philosopher only herein, that the one proposes Beauty as his main end; the other Truth" (Emerson, *Nature*). Emerson separates himself from Plato on the basis that he observes and appreciates beauty without attempting to define it or dissect its meaning. Similarly, Thoreau attempts to describe the Beauty that he sees in nature without attempting to contemplate its purpose or higher truth. In sole admiration he describes it:

this pond is so remarkable for its depth and purity as to merit a particular description. It is a clear and deep green well, half a mile long and a mile and three quarters in circumference, and contains about sixty-one and a half acres; a perennial spring in the midst of pine and oak woods, without any visible inlet or outlet except by the clouds and evaporation. (Thoreau, *Walden*)

Thus, while Transcendentalists like Emerson borrowed ideas from philosophers including Plato, they also distinguished themselves by attempting only to experience and write about beauty rather than to define it or search out the ultimate truth behind beauty.

Transcendentalist literature also hearkens back to the classical theories of Marcus Aurelius in its discussion of nature and treatment of "the whole." "If the first axiom of the Transcendentalist thought was that the individual is potentially divine, the second was that the individual is valuable only sub specie aeternatis, in his universal aspects" (Buell 269). This idea is borrowed from the ideas that Marcus Aurelius discusses in *Meditations*. In *Meditations*, Aurelius argues that the natural world is interconnected and created

through divinity. In the provincial world that Aurelius presents no event can occur without having a profound effect on the network of life and, thus, all things possess purpose and nature. Emerson echoes this interconnectedness and idea of the world as a whole entity in *Nature*, when he writes, “Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE” (Emerson, *Nature*). In *Self-Reliance*, Emerson exhorts, “Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events” (Emerson, *Self-Reliance*). This assertion is in keeping with Aurelius’ belief expressed in *Meditations* that “Thou hast subsisted as part of the whole. Thou shalt vanish again into that which begat thee” (Aurelius 75). Later, Aurelius writes, “cease not to think of the Universe as one living Being, possessed of a single Substance and a single soul” (Aurelius 91). Therefore, “all existing things are joint causes of all things that come into existence; and how intertwined in the fabric is the thread and how closely woven the web” (Aurelius 91). Emerson adopts this view of the web in his poem “Each and All.” He writes, “Nor knowest thou what argument / thy life to thy neighbor’s creed has lent / all are needed by each one;/ Nothing is fair or good alone” (Emerson, “Each and All”). By suggesting that all people and experiences are needed because of their relationship and influence on others, Emerson echoes the interconnectedness of all things in the universe and the interaction between nature and the soul that Aurelius describes. Because everything is related to the whole in Aurelius’ philosophy, there can only be two categories of life: nature and the soul. Even the soul is

inextricably bound to the natural world. Thus, Emerson builds upon Aurelius idea of “the whole,” nature and the soul.

By incorporating philosophical theories from Plato and Marcus Aurelius, Transcendental writers aligned themselves with the positive reputation of these thinkers and exhibited their knowledge and scholarship of classic texts. This displayed mastery of higher thought and tradition. Had they stopped there, though, the Transcendentalists would have simply written the next chapter in European literature. However, by adapting the use of these philosophers with a new focus on the self, the rural American setting, and American politics the Transcendentalists created unique thought and literature that was intriguing to a European audience.

Transcendentalism also established credibility through its emulation and adoption of ideas from German philosophers such as Kant. In fact, “it was not from the Middle Ages, but from the philosophy of Kant, in which is described as one department, that ‘Transcendental’ obtained its signification and use as a recognized English word. With Kant the Transcendental department concerned itself with those fundamental beliefs and ideas that are independent of the human mind” (Orr). In order to reach this inner mind, Transcendentalists retreated into nature and focused on self-study. Emerson, undeniably influenced by Plato but dissatisfied by his inability to reconcile reason with higher thought, could accept “Kant’s distinction between the Reason and the Understanding, he felt himself secure in the realm of higher laws” (Matthiessen 3). Adopting Kant’s view, he formed, along with Henry Hedge, George Putnam and George Ripley, the Transcendental Club (Richardson). In many ways, Kant’s theories provided the foundation for the Transcendentalist Club and its thinkers. In Emerson’s 1842 piece “The

Transcendentalist” he writes, “It is well known to most of my audience that the Idealism of the present day acquired the name Transcendental, from the use of that term by Immanuel Kant” (Emerson, “The Transcendentalist”). Emerson goes on to praise Kant's profundity and precision and notes that Kant's influence has become so pervasive "that whatever belongs to the class of intuitive thought is popularly called at the present day Transcendental. (Emerson, “The Transcendentalist”). As Scholar Robert D. Richardson phrased it, few of the Transcendentalists “gathered in 1836 would not have disagreed with Alcott’s saying that Transcendentalism means there is more in the mind than enters it through the senses” (Richardson). Henry Hedge, who went on to form the Transcendentalist club with Emerson, was particularly interested in this Kantian idea of a Copernican Revolution in philosophy. He wrote, “[S]ince the supposition that our intuitions depend on the nature of the world without, will not answer, assume that the world without depends on the nature of our intuitions.” This “key to the whole critical philosophy,” Hedge continues, explains the possibility of “a priori knowledge” (Hedge, *Christian Examiner*). Therefore, in their adoption of Kantian ideals, Transcendentalists built upon pre-existing German philosophies.

Additionally, British Romanticism indisputably influenced American Transcendentalism. Largely, it was the success of the Romantic movement in Europe, and resulting fame of its authors that both influenced American authors and primed European and American readers and critics for American Transcendentalist literature. In many ways, the return to nature and childhood experiences that is emphasized in Transcendental literature is a Romantic notion. “Transcendentalists, like their European counterparts [the Romantics,] were critical of the business civilization they saw growing

up around them” (Smith 303). With the emergence of industrialization and a devout interest paid in rationalism, Transcendentalists and Romantics alike, sought to discover meaning in the natural world where reason could be re-naturalized.

The British Romantics directly influenced Ralph Waldo Emerson, the father of American Transcendentalism. After Emerson left the ministry, he embarked on a tour of Europe during which he met “Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas Carlyle and William Wordsworth, and was strongly influenced by the ideas of European Romanticism” (McMichael and Leonard 938). Emerson admired this attempt to re-naturalize reason and brought the influence of the Romantics to his fellow Transcendentalists. The dissatisfaction with reason in an industrial world detached from nature, urged Transcendentalist thinkers to return to nature, just as it had their Romantic counterparts. For the Transcendentalists, “historical Christianity made them attach an unusually high theoretical value to nature as evidence and analogue of man’s relation to God. This attitude, in turn, was reinforced by the Romanticist cult of nature, particularly the vision of an organic universe” (Buell 147). This vision of an organic universe and respect for the natural world is evidenced in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Birthmark.” Like Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, the main character, Aylmer, attempts to perfect and conquer nature by removing his wife’s birthmark. Ultimately, his attempts are successful, but he kills his wife in the process. “My poor Aylmer,” she cries out, ““You have aimed loftily!—you have done nobly! Do not repent, that, with so high and pure a feeling, you have rejected the best that earth could offer. Aylmer—dearest Aylmer—I am dying!” (Hawthorne, “The Birthmark”). Like the Romantics that preceded him, Hawthorne admonishes tampering with the natural order by assigning it severe consequences.

Thus, by emphasizing the value of nature and seeking higher theoretical value in intuition and the individual, Transcendentalists borrowed from and added to both traditional Christian and recent secular Romantic thought.

Because America was in possession of large amounts of land and untapped nature, it was the perfect setting for the practice of Romantic principles. American Transcendentalists believed that “‘on the immediate which dwells in every man, and on the original intuition or absolute affirmation of it... all the certainty of our knowledge depends.’ Such a doctrine of knowledge lay behind the main elements of Romantic literature, and naturally made a particular appeal to isolated, provincial America” (Matthiessen 7). Transcendentalist writers like Emerson and Thoreau, and Whitman also concerned themselves with this image of the self by focusing on interiority, in order to understand the world beyond reason. As Thoreau said, “‘the best you can write will be the best you are. Every sentence is the result of a long probation. The author’s character is read from title-page to end” (Thoreau, *Journal*). By drawing on their own perception, and internal thought the Transcendentalists presented their character in their texts. In doing so they were limited to their experiences and could simply write the best that they were. Thus, Thoreau, like the British Romantics, urged writers to focus on their experience to present truths and works of art. Similarly, Whitman said of the poet, “if he breathes into anything that was before thought small it dilates with the grandeur and life of the universe. He is a seer ... he is individual ... he is complete in himself ... the others are as good as he, only he sees it and they do not” (Whitman, *Introduction*). Thus, through self-focus and completeness, the poet fashions himself as a seer and presenter of

the nature of all things. In this way, the internal focus and inspiration of Whitman and Thoreau mimic that of the British Romantics.

By focusing on the self in nature rather than the senses or urges, Transcendentalists adopted both principles from Kantian Philosophy and British Romanticism. “Given the times in which the Transcendentalists lived, their viewpoint is not at all surprising. The idea of art as an expression of character was a standard Romantic assumption” (Buell 67). In their writings, Emerson and his counterparts “argued for intuition as a guide to universal truths that could not be reached by reason alone” (“Ralph Waldo Emerson”). In *Nature*, Emerson claims that “few adult persons can see nature” because of their focus on reason divorced from the natural world (Emerson, “Nature”). For these individuals, “Nature then becomes to him the measure of his attainments. So much of nature as he is ignorant of, so much of his own mind he does not yet possess. And, in fine, the ancient precept, ‘know thyself,’ and the modern [Romantic] precept ‘Study nature,’ become at last one maxim” (Emerson, “The American Scholar”). Therefore, in their return to nature, focus on the world beyond reason, and use of art as self-expression, American Transcendentalists adopt and emulate the ideals of British Romantics to create a uniquely American contribution to the Romantic question of nature’s involvement in self-knowledge.

The Transcendentalists’ emulation and adaptation of this range of European ideas and literature functioned dually to solidify the reputation of Transcendentalist works. First, it illustrated the intelligence, literacy, and worldliness of Transcendental writers by borrowing themes and material from scholarly, high classes of art and thought. Second, it functioned to provide an access point for European readers and critics. Third, it illustrated

how writers could innovate upon these works and themes to fashion them in a way that was specific to the American experience. Themes from canonical, well-referenced, and studied works lent Transcendentalism an air of familiarity.

### Capturing the American Experience: Transcendentalism's presentation of American Life

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Even as they drew from great European literature, the Transcendentalists directly responded to the call for an American body of literature in the nineteenth century. The American Revolution “heralded the first cry for a new “national literature” independent of Great Britain. Works such as *the Federalist Papers*, *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography*, and *Letters from an American Farmer* emerged in the context of this call for an articulation of American identity” (“1820-1865,” Norton). These works established an American body of writing, however, it was highly political and autobiographical and, thus, still lacking the high art and craftsmanship of European works. It was not until the nineteenth century Transcendentalists emerged that comparable literary artistry was achieved in the eyes of Europeans.

In direct response to this call, Emerson declared that America had “listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe” (Emerson, “The American Scholar”). If America's authors were to establish a unique body of literature, he argued, they would have to assert their uniqueness as Americans and find inspiration and tradition within their own country. In *Nature* Emerson asks “why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not by the history of

theirs...? There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws of worship” (Emerson, “Nature”). Emerson again calls for a national literature and body of thought in *American Scholar* when he muses,

Perhaps the time is already come when it ought to be, and will be something else; when the sluggard intellect of this continent will look from under its iron lids and fill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close. (Emerson, “The American Scholar)

To begin this new age of American literature, Emerson calls on the poets asking, “who can doubt that poetry will revive and lead a new age, as the star in the constellation Harp, which now flames in our zenith, astronomers announce, shall one day be the pole-star for a thousand years” (Emerson, “The American Scholar).

Influenced by this call to action, Transcendental poets and writers positioned themselves to write about distinctly American experiences, especially those concerning nature and the self and encouraged others to do the same. Emerson sought to create “an original relation to the universe” with “a poetry and a philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not to history of [Europe’s]” (Emerson, Nature). Walt Whitman called for a depiction of the unique American experience in literature as well, claiming that “of all nations the United States with veins full of poetical stuff most need poets and will doubtless have the greatest and use them the greatest” (Whitman, *Introduction*). In his introduction to *Leaves of Grass*, later known as “Song of Myself,” Whitman argues that the as a democratic nation with a surplus of natural resources and reprieve, America is positioned to produce a new and better class of poets. This want of an American class of authors is also expressed in Walt Whitman’s essay, *Democratic Vistas*. He claims, “Our fundamental want to-day in the United States, with

closest, amplest reference to present conditions, and to the future, is of a class and the clear idea of a class, of native authors, literatures, far different, far higher in grade than any yet known, sacerdotal” (Whitman, “Democratic Vistas”). Responding to this many calls for literary action, Transcendentalist poets established a body of literature that was based on distinctly American tenets.

One aspect of Transcendentalism that has a uniquely American context is the seclusion of the writerly colony in Concord Massachusetts. This placed the introspective focus of the Romantic writers into a uniquely American context. The Transcendentalists presented the American rural experience by representing the converging group of New England thinkers who had moved out of the city and into rural towns like Concord Massachusetts. Many nineteenth-century American writers made the move away from the literary hubs of Boston and New York, to retreat into natural towns such as Concord. “What drew man out in Concord, what constituted a major resource unknown to cities, was the beauty of his surroundings” (Matthiessen 158). Removed from city life in these natural, beautiful towns, these men and women turned to “introspection, thanks to the want of other entertainment, [which] played almost the part of a social resource for lonely men and women in New England” (Matthiessen 8). Thus, in many ways, the emphasis on seclusion and the self in Transcendentalist literature arose as a symptom of the shift of writers and thinkers from city-dwellers to rural individuals. This rural life is evidenced in many Transcendentalist writings. In *Nature*, Emerson wrote that “the tradesman, the attorney comes out of the din and craft of the street, and sees the sky and the woods, and is a man again” (Emerson, *Nature*). Emerson frequently wrote about the beautiful and redeeming qualities of rural America, claiming,

The inhabitants of cities suppose that the country landscape is pleasant only half the year. I please myself with observing the graces of the winter scenery, and believe that we are as much touched by it as by the genial influences of summer. To the attentive eye, each moment of the year has its own beauty, and in the same field, it beholds, every hour, a picture which was never seen before, and which shall never be seen again. (Emerson, *Nature*).

In the essay, he later argues that country life allows a more advanced thinker to develop by stating that there is an “advantage which the country-life possesses for a powerful mind, over the artificial and curtailed life of cities. We know more from nature than we can at will communicate” (Emerson, *Nature*). By drawing himself out into Concord, Emerson was able to describe the beauty, advantages, and renewing energies of rural America and promote America’s unique country life.

Henry David Thoreau also withdrew to a rural cabin in Concord. As Emerson described, Thoreau, “hermit and stoic as he was, he was really fond of sympathy, and threw himself heartily and childlike into the company of young people whom he loved, and whom he delighted to entertain, as he only could, with the varied and endless anecdotes of his experiences by field and river” (Emerson, *Thoreau*). This company was found in the writers and thinkers congregated in Concord, Massachusetts. This seclusion in Concord is the setting for Thoreau’s most famous work, *Walden*. In the opening paragraph of *Walden* he writes, “I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only” (Thoreau, *Walden*). Because the Transcendental writers converged in the countryside at Concord, their works are concerned with the unique situations, experiences, and landscapes of rural America.

As the Transcendentalist movement began to take wind, writers and thinkers like “Emerson then came out of his seclusion in Concord to assume command of the

movement it had made considerable progress” (Orr). In doing so, they established a “converging group of New England thinkers” (Matthiessen 12). These thinkers represented the level of thought achieved by leading a rural life in America. No longer was philosophy or literature confined to major cities like London, Boston, or New York. The Transcendentalists began to converge to write about a uniquely American theme: the untapped world of rural America. Emerson “bought a house in Concord, Massachusetts, and there he associated with Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, and others who belonged to the informal Transcendentalist Club, organized for the ‘exchange of thought among those interested in the new views in philosophy, theology, and literature’” (McMichael and Leonard 938). Retreating into nature, this group of writers focused their attention onto nature and the self.

The self-reflectivity and internal focus of the converging Transcendental writers both reflects the birth of individualism that was occurring in America at the time. Transcendentalism “emphasized the creative powers of the individual mind, the regenerative value of nature, the limits of historical associations and traditions, the stultifying effects of established institutions, and the mystical glories of infancy and childhood” (“1820-1865,” Norton). This emphasis on the capabilities and complexities of the individual is present in Emerson’s 1827 journal: “Peculiarities of the Present Age...It is said to be the age of the first person singular” (Emerson, *The Journals*). Indeed, this seems to capture the increasing spirit of individualism in America at the time. Many Transcendentalists, Emerson included, turned their focus on the self and wrote from personal experience.

Men grew reflective and intellectual. There was a new consciousness. The former generations acted under the belief that a shining social prosperity was the

beatitude of man, and sacrificed uniformly the citizen to the State. The modern mind believed that the nation existed for the individual, for the guardianship and education of every man. This idea, roughly written in revolutions and national movements, in the mind of the philosopher had far more precision; the individual is the world. (Matthiessen 6)

Transcendentalism's turn to the self is irrevocably indebted to individualism in America. One can observe the individualist focus on the self within the works of American Transcendentalism's most prominent authors. "Emerson invented the equation which all experiments assume,  $i = I$  (or self = Self, soul = Soul)," "Thoreau presented a version of himself as a representative man," "Whitman and Very regarded themselves as charismatic figures called to be spokesman, through their poetry, of the divine world" (Buell 312). In order to write about America and reconcile reason with the natural world, these writers focused their attention inwards. Emerson wrote that he could "see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through [him]; [he is] a particle of God" (Emerson, "Nature"). Emerson argued that as a particle of the whole, by studying and coming to know himself, he is coming to know God and the nature of the Universe. His "dedication to self-reliant individualism inspired his fellow Transcendentalist Bronson Alcott to observe, 'Emerson's church consists of one member—himself. He waits for the world to agree with him'" ("Ralph Waldo Emerson"). Thoreau also expressed individualism and self-focus remarking, "Is not the poet bound to write his own biography? Is there any other work for him but a good journal?" (The Portable Thoreau). This "interest in self was quickened by the influence of the Romantic movement, under whose auspices was first produced in America a literature worthy of the name, and which still remains our dominant tradition (Buell 266). Thoreau represented this turn to individualism and defended his first person narrative by stating,

In most books, the *I*, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking. I should not talk so much about myself if there were any body else whom I knew as well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience. (Thoreau, *Walden*)

Thoreau turned to his own experiences and wrote in the first-person, because it was all he could know well. This is indicative of the novel focus that American's placed on individuals at the time. Influenced by ideas of individualism and seclusion, and adopting principals of Romanticism, Transcendentalism transformed into a distinctively American mode of literature. One can argue that ““it was in Transcendentalist writing that the three traditions—spiritual self-examination, Romantic self-consciousness, and democratic individualism—converged for the first time in American history, with the result that the self became a more important entity for the Transcendentalists than for any of their forbearers” (Buell 267). Thus, Transcendentalism is inextricably bound to the Americanized principle of individualism.

The basis of Transcendentalism in American puritanism also marks the movement as uniquely American. In many ways, Transcendentalism was influenced by and grounded in the Puritan tradition in America. At the same time, Transcendentalists sought to distinguish themselves from the Puritan thought and religiosity of their predecessors.

As one critic has argued,

It is not surprising that Transcendentalism was Puritanism turned upside down, as a number of critics have pointed out; historically, it could hardly have been anything else. Transcendentalism drew on the vocabularies of European Romanticism and Oriental mysticism; but the only available local vocabulary was the one that the hopeful were so anxious to escape from, and a very effective way to discredit its inherited meaning was to serve it up in an unfamiliar context. (Lewis 286)

In many ways, Transcendentalism is a reaction to the failures of Puritanism in America. The failure of faith in Puritan America is depicted in Hawthorne's "Goodman Brown." One night Goodman Brown encounters the devil who claims to "have been as well acquainted with [his] family as with ever a one among the Puritans" (Hawthorne, "Goodman Brown"). Although Goodman Brown's family was historically Puritan and devoutly religious, they were well acquainted with sin. In the end of the story, a dejected Brown exclaims: "My Faith is gone! There is no good on earth; and sin is but a name. Come, devil! For to thee is this world given" (Hawthorne, "Goodman Brown"). Hawthorne utilizes Goodman Brown to address some of the failures of the Church and Puritanism in America. Other Transcendentalists sought to depart from the concepts of Puritanism and create a new body of literature and thought to redeem American spirituality. During the nineteenth century "the decadence of the Puritan spirit. The Stern Calvinism of New England, with its gloomy views of life and its severe intolerance, had in a great measure passed away [...] A new religious philosophy seemed to be wanting, and this philosophy the [Transcendentalism] aimed to supply" (Orr). This new Transcendental philosophy removed religion from the church and placed it into nature to promote admiration and self-reflection. Thus, Transcendentalism is in many ways a reaction to the constricting force of puritan ideals and concepts in America. Rather than living only to secure a happy afterlife like their predecessors, Transcendentalists urged their readers to take action and enjoy living. While the Transcendentalist were still a wholly religious people, they urged readers to take agency over their life, enjoy nature and create a lasting memory. In this way, they rejected the Puritan foundation of beliefs

in America. Walt Whitman expresses rebellion against these Puritan systems of belief in his *1855 Introduction to Leaves of Grass*. He writes:

Whatever would put God in a poem or system of philosophy as contending against some being or influence is also of no account. Sanity and ensemble characterize the great master ... spoilt in one principle all is spoilt. The great master has nothing to do with miracles. He sees health for himself in being one of the mass ... he sees the hiatus in singular eminence. to the perfect shape comes common ground. to be under the general law is great, for that is to correspond with it. The master knows that he is unspeakably great and that all are unspeakably great ... that nothing for instance is greater than to conceive children and bring them up well ... that to be is just as great as to perceive or tell.  
(Whitman, *Introduction*)

Thus, Whitman argues against predestination or the idea of a vengeful God that is presented through Puritanism. Instead he writes of a God that looks upon his creations with fondness and admiration. He believed that Transcendentalists could imitate this God by appreciating the beauty of nature as it were. With the emergence of the Transcendentalist poet, he argued,

There will soon be no more priests. Their work is done. They may wait awhile ... perhaps a generation or two ... dropping off by degrees. A superior breed shall take their place ... the gangs of kosmos and prophets *en masse* shall take their place. A new order shall arise and they shall be the priests of man, and every man shall be his own priest. The churches built under their umbrage shall be the churches of men and women. (Whitman, *Introduction*).

Whitman saw cause for Transcendentalism to replace organized religion as the superior mode of spirituality. By rejecting oppressive Puritanism the Transcendentalists sought to establish a new system of beliefs grounded in nature, appreciation, and the American experience.

However, as much as Transcendentalists would have liked to rebel completely against the Puritanism of their forerunners, in many ways their approach to thought and literature resembled that of the Puritans. There is “an overlooked and underestimated originating

energy for many of the Transcendentalists, New England's roots in Puritan culture from 17<sup>th</sup> Century onward" (The Oxford Handbook, 38). For instance, "in some ways the Transcendentalist view of the creative process resembles the attitude taken toward the workings of grace in the covenant theology of the Puritans. In each case, the individual is theoretically powerless and the spirit does the work" (Buell 58). The spiritual gift of inspiration that floods Puritanical works is similar to the thread of inspiration that the Transcendentalists claim as their own. Transcendentalists, withdrawing in nature, attempted not to search for inspiration for their works. Rather, they let inspiration befall them in nature and contemplation. As Whitman said, the Poet's "spirit responds to his country's spirit ... he incarnates its geography and natural life and rivers and lakes" (Whitman, *Introduction*). To the poet, "enter the essences of the real things and past and present events. For such the expression of the American poet is to be transcendent and new. It is to be indirect and not direct or descriptive or epic" (Whitman, *Introduction*). Thus, the transcendentalist poet does not search for inspiration, rather he allows himself to be a conduit for the inspiration and events that surround his existence.

Emerson adopts this philosophy in his essay *Self-Reliance*. He urges the reader to "trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events" (Emerson, "Self-Reliance"). This interconnectedness and idea of a provincial world is heavily influenced by the Puritans. Transcendentalists believed that they were a conduit for beauty and poetry in a similar way that Puritans believed that they were a conduit for God's word. By building off of and rebelling from ideas of puritan America, Transcendentalist literature captured traditions and beliefs unique to America at the time.

Transcendentalist literature also distinguished itself from European literature by concerning itself with the American social and political issues of the time. These include the treatment of ideas of Westward expansion, and the concept of Manifest destiny. After the acquisition of “land through the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo” and transformation of “Americans’ sense of the west, travel literature about westward expansion became a popular genre” (“1820-1865,” Norton). Initially, Transcendentalists like Emerson were supportive of the concept of westward expansion. For instance, in his 1844 essay, ‘The Poet,’ Emerson “showed an astute awareness of contemporary political disputes in its choice of regions where the American creative spirit might flourish” (Giles 68). He made a “move in 1844 to nominate Oregon and Texas as fitting candidates for American poetic treatment [which was] a critical correlative to contemporary expansionist movements in the political sphere” (Giles 68). Much of this drive for westward expansion by Transcendentalists arose from a wish to explore nature and create a sphere specifically for the development of American literature.

However, as the nineteenth century progressed, Transcendentalists began to grow wary of the exploitation and corruption that was inevitably tied to westward expansion. In Emerson’s work throughout the mid-nineteenth century, “we are often able to hear an actual speaking voice behind [his] words, notably in such directness as that ‘on affairs in Kansas (1856): ‘*Manifest Destiny, Democracy, Freedom*, fine names for an ugly thing. They call it otto of rose and lavender,—I call it bilge water’” (Emerson, “On Affairs in Kansas”). This candid treatment of Manifest Destiny is a common thread throughout Emerson’s work at the time, yet is not unique to him. Lowell wrote often of ‘destiny’ in his work by which he “clearly means the ‘manifest destiny’ of the exploitation of the

West, whose more sordid and unfortunate aspects Thoreau had prophesied two generations before their time of realization (Mathiessen 168). By presenting the reader with themes and concepts tied to westward expansion and Manifest Destiny, Transcendentalist writers present political and social concepts and issues that were unique to America at the time. In doing so, they capture the intrigue of international readers and critics while proving that Transcendentalist literature is a movement that is unique to America.

Finally, by refusing to divorce itself from the American social and political experience, American Transcendentalists created a portrait of American democracy at the time. By “drawing from two very different traditions of thought [American politics and Romantic philosophy], they created a coherent view of man and the political order that was undeniably their own” (Smith 325). By drawing so wholly upon American tradition, Transcendentalists inevitably infused their work with signs, symptoms and ideas of American democracy. Writing of Thoreau, Emerson says, “no truer American existed than Thoreau. His preference of his country and condition was genuine, and his aversion from English and European manners and tastes almost reached contempt” (Emerson, *Thoreau*). This national pride and rejection of European traditions infuses Transcendental works. For instance, in *The American Scholar*, Emerson writes “each man shall feel the world is his, and man shall treat with man as a sovereign state with a sovereign state—tends to true union as well as greatness” (Emerson, “The American Scholar”). The Transcendentalist devoted countless essays and poems to this idea of American Democracy. Whitman imbues his *1855 Introduction to Leaves of Grass* with

nationalistic pride and ideas of American democracy. “the genius of the United States,” he writes,

Is not best or most in its executives or legislatures, nor in its ambassadors or authors or colleges or churches or parlors, nor even in its newspapers or inventors... but always most in the common people. Their manners, speech, dress, friendship—the freshness and candor of their physiognomy—the picturesque looseness of their carriage ... their deathless attachment to freedom—their aversion to anything indecorous or soft or mean—the practical acknowledgment of the citizens of one state by the citizens of all other states (Whitman, *Introduction*).

Whitman argues that America’s unique situation as a democratic nation renders it the perfect subject for poetry. “It awaits the gigantic and generous treatment worthy of it” (Whitman, *Introduction*). Transcendentalists were undeniably fascinated with and influenced by the effects of American democracy, the subject of many of their writings. For the Transcendentalists, firmly embedded in New England soil, these Transcendentalists cannot escape the influence of essential topics of revolution, democracy and government.

## Conclusion

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Through the synthesis of renowned works of thought and literature, and the incorporation uniquely American ideals and experiences, Transcendentalists were able to create a body of literature that was simultaneously familiar enough to be regarded as valid, and distinct enough to be called America’s own. First, American Transcendentalism gained credibility by emulating and adopting principles from literature and philosophy that would have been familiar to European readers. Transcendentalism borrowed its views on nature, the self, and forms from Ancient Greek

philosophers including Plato and Marcus Aurelius. This would have demonstrated to European readers that the Transcendentalists were not only meditative, but also well educated.

Transcendentalists also rendered their work accessible to the reading population in Europe by drawing ideas from popular European movements such as Kantian philosophy and British Romanticism. These European movements were widely known and extremely popular, even producing some celebrities, such as Lord Byron. By incorporating ideas such as the tension between reason and understanding, knowledge of the self, and finding refuge in nature, Transcendentalists acknowledged their European audience and cloaked their writings in familiarity.

Although familiar to European readers in some aspects, Transcendentalism also set itself apart and sought to stand on its own by depicting uniquely American experiences, ideals, and positions. This is evident through the inclusion of principles such as individualism and self-reflection, westward expansion, manifest destiny, Puritanism, and democracy. Through their writings Transcendentalists also represented the converging group of New England thinkers at the time and responded to the call for an American body of literature. By responding to an American necessity, through American viewpoints and ideals, they created a body of literature that could not be claimed as British or European. Transcendentalist writers produced works written by Americans, in America, about the American experience, thus prompting Europeans to engage and respond and, in turn, influencing European writers.

By creating an accessible and credible body of literature that was simultaneously rooted and innovative, Transcendentalists captured the attention of European readers and

critics. For perhaps the first time, it was acknowledged that America was capable of creating “worthy” literature. They conquered the belief that the Americas bred a degenerative race by evidencing astounding degrees of scholarship and innovation in their texts. At the same time, by harkening back to Puritanism, and the birth of democracy, Transcendentalists also proved that America was in no way deficient of tradition, despite the fact that it was a young country. Thus, the European market received Transcendentalism, for the most part, warmly and favorably.

To this day, American Transcendentalism is studied, revered, and given critical attention. Many describe the period of time in which the majority of Transcendentalists wrote as “The American Renaissance.” However, recent scholarship has presented challenges to a concrete understanding on the genesis of Transcendentalism. First, recent scholarship has attempted to isolate Transcendentalist works in a hemispheric context. This viewpoint neglects to acknowledge the many Classical and European influences that informed the Transcendentalist movement. Conversely, scholarship has arisen that overemphasizes the intercontinental and transatlantic nature of Transcendentalism, thus disregarding the many unique attributes and innovative details of the movement. This scholarship tends to disclaim the idea of American exceptionalism and overemphasize the role that England, as America’s mother country, played in the Transcendental scholarship. While this scholarship should be acknowledged, the influences and formulation of the American Transcendentalist movement are complex and nuanced. To understand the birth of Transcendentalism, one must take into account the European and Classical influences as well as the unique positions and situations that America afforded the writers.



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