



Purity and the Self-Made Man in Emerson's Transcendentalist Philosophy

Dr Meryem MENGOUCHI
Department of English, LLC Lab
University of Tlemcen

Received: 15 March 2024

Accepted: 17 March 2024

Abstract ;

The philosophy of Transcendentalism by Ralph Waldo Emerson preaches intuition, humanism, non-conformity, originality of thought and goodness. It is a philosophy that is based on human spontaneity and innocence, which stipulates that man in total wilderness and isolation is able to reach the highest level of purity, to connect with God , yet society is a source of evil and corruption because it deprives individuals from being their true selves. This philosophy also presented the concept of self-reliance which later became significant for the American individual in his search for identity. Emerson clarifies that all these concepts are related by the one feature of non-conformity and purity of the soul.

Article info

Received
15 March 2024
Accepted
17 March 2024

Keyword:

- ✓ *Keyword :*
Emerson
- ✓ *Keyword :*
Transcendental
ism
- ✓ *KeywordSelf- :*
reliance

1. Introduction

Transcendentalism is a philosophy built on idealism and glorification of the natural world and human instinct over rationalism and materialism. Just like Romanticism, it glorifies nature as a refuge and puts man at the centre of the universe. Yet, it idealizes self-reliance and meditation to connect man to God. It came in the nineteenth century when America was in search for an American identity and it affected its character. The principle of self-reliance became strongly connected to the American Dream in the Americans quest for fulfillment and success. The transcendentalist as depicted in Emerson's different works is characterized by a strong faith in God, non-conformity and rejection of man-made systems, in opposition to intuition, purity of thought, and the exaltation of nature.

Transcendental individualism approaches society as a source of corruption that conspires against Man and his well-being. The Transcendentalist philosophers sought to criticize society's submission to these rules and to seek individualism and freedom in the natural world. Their experiments with solitude and wilderness inspired them their idealistic thoughts on the definition of Man and his relationship with God.

2. Transcendentalism

Transcendentalist philosophy started in the United States as a religious and political movement and as a branch of Romanticism that emphasized individualism, isolation, intuition, and idealism as basic principles. Yet, transcendentalism is built upon a certain radical idealism that is deeply connected to the construction of the true American identity and self. This philosophy was developed by Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his vision of the idealistic lifestyle of the common American. His philosophy emphasized self-reliance as a key concept and as the American's most important concern.

The American philosopher and author Ralph Waldo Emerson was born in 1803 and died in 1882, was famous for his works in the fields of philosophy, religion, and in literature. He is the father of the Transcendentalist philosophy which stems from Romanticism (Goodman). Unlike its parent philosophy, Transcendentalism dwells on a meditation on life which connects man to God. He published his ideas in a series of essays and books, merely *Nature* (1836), "Self-Reliance" (1841a) published in his *Essays*, an essay that englobes the most important principles of his philosophy, and "The American Scholar" (1837), which describes the roles and expectations of a true intellectual. His ideas centre around the use of personal experience in judgement rather than knowledge of previous facts, individualism and the emphasis on the oversoul, the ability to overcome oneself, as well as self-reliance in opposition to conformity in all the fields of life.

Thus Transcendentalism is defined as man's ability to think for himself intuitively and without external influence. Intuition allows him to reflect on what is true, and gaining knowledge "transcending the reach of senses" (Campbell, 1841, p.484). This philosophy became highly connected to the American Dream in its conception of the ideal American individual. This idealist philosophy advocates that all men share goodness with nature (Brooks, 2012). It brought change to the different fields of life including politics, religion, and the arts. This movement affected the American cultural and political scene, deeply influencing the definition of the American Dream (Brooks, 2012, p.1).

Transcendentalism preached the principles of nobility in total isolation and individualism against conformity which it considered a corruption of the mind. The philosophy creates a line between intuition which is the only guide to man during his isolation to reach an elevated level of isolation (the novel savage), and social conformity which it considered a source of evil.

Transcendentalism became the main philosophy that represented the American ideology during the nineteenth century. The period of the search of identity and the dream of wealth and prosperity, as well as the motivations to move west and to create a life of dignity were best combined in the ideal of self-reliance. The concept emphasized man's ability to survive on his own without external help or interference (also individualistic), which has led them into a life of adventure and pursuit of success. Emerson considered society as a disruption in the life of man, he comments on conformism saying: "Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater" (Emerson, 2007, p.3). For example, the character Jay Gatsby in Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* embodies this character who is in search of wealth as a self-made man but whose ambitions fail because of the modern world (as a point of difference from the Romantic age during which the Transcendental thought appeared).

In the *American Scholar*, Emerson lists a number of qualities that every American scholar must have for the well-being of the nation. His most important instruction is that all men act like one man. The philosophy was fuelled by an enthusiasm for the new nation and the search of the American identity and character, which presented itself as a big challenge for the newly independent Americans. Independence also meant a freedom of thinking and liberation from the British cultural norms, thus the Americans had to find their own path in their search of individualism. The country represented undiscovered treasures and territories that the Americans had to discover for their *pursuit of happiness*, this latter entailed the notion of self-dependence as a basic principle in the character of common American.

The philosophy of Transcendentalism preaches a strong faith in the values of individualism as the key in the quest for selfhood. It is thus through total isolation from outside influences and through finding a deep understanding of the true self that man reaches his highest level of nobility, and purity. Emerson (2003) states that the purity of thought can only be reached through nonconformity "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. He who would gather immortal

palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world" (p. 4). The latter is an idealist principle that refers to a man living in total isolation in his quest for the meaning of the self, and finally connects with the purest part of the soul through intuition (as opposed to outside influences and culture).

Purity in isolation is reached through a total reliance on intuition. This latter is presented in Emerson's thought as an opponent to conformity and as a symbol of individualism. In the transcendental thinking, there is truth in intuition more than in the social environment, thus it is the centre of the philosophy's interest. Through intuition, man is able to connect the deep self with the natural world as he reaches the goodness and purity of the human nature while dwelling in the natural world. In his book *Nature* (Emerson, 2009), "the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE" (Para. 4). Nature is considered as a source of goodness and purity (thus human nature is revealed in nature), while man-made society is a source of corruption and dishonesty.

The idea of intuition and idealism entails that man is able to overcome himself to reach a very high level of nobility while in total isolation from the outside world, what Emerson refers to as the corruption of conformity. Truth can be found in the deep self and in total connection with the purity of the human soul, as well as with the purity of nature. Emerson describes real isolation in nature as more than simply avoiding all human contact, but through a complete disconnection from the world of the mortals. He says

But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars. The rays that come from those heavenly worlds, will separate between him and what he touches. One might think the atmosphere was made transparent with this design, to give man, in the heavenly bodies, the perpetual presence of the sublime... But every night come out these envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile (Emerson, 2009, para. 5).

True isolation happens when man is in total connection with nature and is able to meditate on its peaceful aspect. The rays of the stars in his description connect the soul to the "heavenly worlds" which refer to God's presence. The author purposefully emphasizes their return every night as the messengers of beauty, yet also the messengers of God to connect the human soul to his power.

In Transcendentalist thought, there is a triangular connection between God, Man and Nature. Each connects to the other through the principle of purity and goodness. Man can relate to nature through his intuition. By trusting the inner self, the human being can distinguish between good and evil, right and wrong, with no recourse to society or to man-made institutions. He glorified nature as the only law he believes in, nullifying thus the position of religion. He considers all laws as mundane, "Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this", only what he truthfully believes in as his principle in life, what he calls "my constitution", is right in his perspective (Emerson, 1841a). This idea is echoed in German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's work who speaks of the Superman in his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. He stipulates that man can overcome himself in an idealist plan to be liberated from the social influences and to reach a better version of man.

References to the sanctity of the soul and the ability of man to live in a totally individualistic environment, based on intuition only, are also discussed in *Walden* (1854) by the American author and philosopher Henry David Thoreau. This latter was himself a disciple of Emerson and endorsed the concept of the noble savage by living in the isolation described earlier by Emerson to reach the better version of himself. In the book he reports the details of his experience living in the wilderness for two years before going back to civilization. In this book, he describes the experience as a rather beneficial one, and exposes the moralistic reflections that he develops during the period of his isolation.

The transcendentalists believe that man is made in the image of God, and through the power of nature God is manifested everywhere in nature (the transcendence of man in nature, the rays of the stars, the envoys of beauty). Emerson (cited in Hurth, 2003) asserts "It is the heart... which is the seat of the evidence. The kingdom of God is within you. And there its evidence is best explored" (p.486). Thus, what connects man, nature and God is the purity and innocence man gains in his isolation. Emerson saw God everywhere, he believed that God is closer to Man and is omnipresent, which he explains in the following statement:

The true doctrine of omnipresence is, that God reappears with all his parts in every moss and cobweb. The value of the universe contrives to throw itself into every point... Thus is the universe alive. All things are moral. That soul, which within us is a sentiment,

outside of us is a law. We feel its inspiration; out there in history we can see its fatal strength (Emerson, 1841b, para.16).

He had no specific religion because of his belief that God is reflected in every human being and in every place around human beings. Humanity is based on goodness and thus self-reliance is also a reliance on God himself (*Harvard SL*). Human law is thus what leads to goodness and a moralistic governing of life since humans are connected to God intuitively.

Walden, later inspired the book and film *Into the Wild* which depicts the life of Chris McCandless who abandoned his social life in the city and moved to the wilderness in search for peace. Chris was originally inspired by Thoreau to start his transcendental experience; he lived 110 days in the wilderness before his death.

Chris endorses the principle of the self-made man when he leaves all technology and civilized life behind to move to the wilderness for a pleasant life. His principle in life becomes non materialistic. He chases idealism in a world of nature only. This experience leads him to approach happiness differently as he lectures his friend Ron on the meaning of happiness "You are wrong if you think Joy emanates only or principally from human relationships. God has placed it all around us. It is in everything and anything we might experience... It is simply waiting out there for you to grasp it, and all you have to do is reach for it" (Krakauer, 2007, p.57-58). His Transcendentalist approach to life convinces him that happiness can be found everywhere and it is up to Man himself to enjoy everything around him to feel it. His approach to happiness is connected to his love of God and seems to be a question of satisfaction with the surrounding environment rather than a cause to be chased.

Yet, as Chris approaches his death he writes "Happiness only real when shared" (*Into The Wild* 2013, [02:05 – 02:29]). The line shows his regret of family life and relatives despite the fact that he enjoyed his life in wilderness. The final scene in the film shows two different messages he writes on two boards with his voice saying "to call each thing by its right name". The scene shows the first board showing an epitaph that he wrote for himself "The Wild, Alexander Supertramp, May 1992" to mark his near death. Alexander, the person he has chosen to be after he escaped to the wilderness and abandoned his civilized life behind. The second board which volunarily coincides with the line "each thing by its name" shows his real name; Chistopher Johnson McCandless, and says "I HAVE HAD A HAPPY LIFE AND THANK THE LORD. GOOD BYE AND MAY GOD

BLESS ALL!" (*Into The Wild*, 2021, [00:37 – 00:52]), which includes the entire life of Chris, before he abandoned the city and even later since it represented a farewell to humanity.

His approach to happiness as a quality that only gains truthfulness when shared comes from the different experiences he has had while traveling across the country and meeting people from different backgrounds, whom he had marked by his character. He celebrated the ideal of the here and now which constitutes one of Emerson's Transcendentalist principles.

The past is considered as an experience to learn from but not something to dwell in. Emerson considers the past as

The other terror that scares us from self-trust is our consistency; a reverence for our past act or word, because the eyes of others have no other data for computing our orbit than our past acts, and we are loath to disappoint them. [...] Speak what you think now in hard words, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said to-day. — 'Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood.' — Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? ... To be great is to be misunderstood (Emerson 1841a, p. 6-7).

What matters the most in life for the transcendentalist is the here and now, that is the actual moment, even if this includes misunderstanding or changing one's views through time. Chris' approach to happiness emphasizes the importance of the here and now in his life when he says that it must be shared. He ignores all obstacles or misunderstandings that may have happened in his past because the present time must be enjoyed in itself. He further expands the idea of happiness in the here and now when he writes on his board that Christopher Johnson McCandless had a happy life. Chris had chosen to live the life he thought he belonged to and was careless of any dangers or problems his plan had entailed.

In "The American Scholar", Emerson thinks of the past as an important source of knowledge to the scholar "The next great influence into the spirit of the scholar, is, the mind of the Past, – in whatever form, whether of literature, of art, of institutions, that mind is inscribed. Books are the best type of the influence of the past, and perhaps we shall get at the truth, – learn the amount of this influence more conveniently, – by considering their value alone" (Emerson, 2003, p. 3)

Thus, the main principles of Transcendentalism can be summarized in the following lines:

- Intuition is the source of goodness and purity in man. Man-made systems will not teach individuals to be good, they can find the right path if they meditate on nature and creation then figure out the right way to behave.
- Self-Reliance : life in the civilized environment is corrupting to the mind, yet nobility can be reached in total isolation where intuition is the only guide.
- The value of nature: The omnipresence of God allows man to be closer to him. By meditating in nature man is approaching God.
- Man is made close to God. He is sacred and innately pure which connects him to God.
- The rejection of materialism and of technology in favour of the natural world.
- The past is a source of knowledge, only the present matters.

3. CONCLUSION

Transcendentalism sought to liberate Man from imposed systems that corrupted his spontaneity. As a philosophy, it believed that society is corrupted and evil but human beings are innately good. Human nature is innocent and pure but is subjugated by social norms. This philosophy rejects materialism and technological hegemony because they induce man in a life he does not choose to be in. It is certain that the idealistic thoughts of this philosophy are radical to a certain extent yet they contributed in building the most important concept in the life of Americans which is the self-made man. By focusing on the idea of the oversoul and self-reliance, the concepts of individualism and survival have become the most significant for the American character.

Emerson's ideas seek to reveal an idealistic and highly moralist side of man. He bases his belief on the importance of authenticity of thought and the purity of the self. Such are found in isolation from the systems of society and in non-conformity. His accounts attack directly all forms of social submission. His different works are complementary, as each adds to the philosophy of the former to complete the philosopher's reflections. In his work *Nature* he speaks of the importance of meditation in nature and of the impact of true isolation. He relates the beauty and purity of nature to God's manifestations in the universe, stipulating thus that man can only connect with God when he meditates in such beauty away from all interference.

In "The American Scholar" and in "Self-Reliance" he speaks of the value of the past, experience, and of the present. While the Romantics usually express nostalgia for the past, Emerson's Transcendentalism views the past as a source of information and emphasizes the present

as the only thing that matters. Experience is important to learn from in his thought, but the present is worth living with no judgment of the past. For the intellectual the past is a source of knowledge that is found in books, but emphasis always falls in the present action. This principle is embodied in the film *Into the Wild* wherein the protagonist seeks tranquility in the wilderness and abandons everything behind. As he approaches death he realizes that happiness is in the moment that is lived and enjoyed, which he expresses in his iconic line that happiness is only real when it is shared.

5. Bibliography List :

1. Brooks, R. (2012), "Transcendentalism: How Idealism Transformed the American Dream". *American Studies* (Honors).
<http://amstud2011.pbworks.com/w/file/63341368/History%20Paper%20on%20Transcendentalism%203.pdf>
2. Campbell, A. (1841). *The Millennial Harbinger*, vol V No: XI, Pendleton, West Virginia
3. Emerson, R. W. (1841a). "Self-Reliance". *Dartmouth University*,
<https://math.dartmouth.edu/~doyle/docs/self/self.pdf> Accessed on: 13/12/2023
4. __. (1841b) "Compensation". *Essays. American transcendentalism Web*.
<https://archive.vcu.edu/english/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson/essays/compensation.html> Accessed on 25/01/2024
5. __. (2009). *Nature. Project Gutenberg*. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/29433/29433-h/29433-h.htm#6> Accessed on 20/01/2024
6. __. (2003). "The American Scholar". *University of Texas at Austin*. Accessed on 05/02/2024
<https://la.utexas.edu/users/hcleaver/330T/350kPEEEmersonAmerSchTable.pdf>.
7. Goodman, R. (N/A) "Emerson, Ralph Waldo" <https://www.unm.edu/~rgoodman/emerson.html>
date of access 13/12/2023
8. Harvard, SL. "Ralph Waldo Emerson's Theology". *Biographies, Harvard Square Library*.
<https://www.harvardsquarelibrary.org/biographies/ralph-waldo-emerson-theology/>
Accessed on 10/01/2024
9. Hurth, E. (2003). "Between Faith and Unbelief: Ralph Waldo Emerson on Man and God". *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, 48(4), 483–495.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41157889>

10. Krakauer, J. (2007). *Into the Wild*. Anchor Books, United Kingdom.
11. Thoreau, D H. (2016). *Walden*. Macmillan Collector's Library
12. Threads, (2021, Dec 31). *Into The Wild (2007) - End Scene* [Video]. Youtube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5UCIGWfT1vY>
13. Where the Story Ends, (2013, Feb 13). *Into The Wild (2007) - Ending "Happiness Is Only Real When Shared"* [Video]; Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2k-oo2TT-0>