

## American Transcendentalist's Conceptions of Self: Comparison Among Emerson, Thoreau And Whitman

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### Abstract

*American Transcendentalism was a unique movement in the country's history as it had a vitalizing effect on the development of American identity and fostered the development of American democracy, liberalism, art and literature. Its basic tenet is the belief on the dignity of human as the manifestation of the divine. Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman, the three main exponents, share this basic tenet. They believe that individual virtue and happiness depend on self-realization which is achieved through self reliance on one's intuition and imagination, rather than on social conventions and religious dogma. However, these three figures disagree on what specific course of actions to actualize individual virtue and happiness. Thoreau believes that to achieve the highest virtue, one must detach oneself from one's dependency on materiality and practice simple, solitary life in nature. Different from Thoreau, Whitman views that flesh was also necessary for self-actualization, and thus must not be neglected. Emerson's position, on the other hand, is somewhat caught between the two. Different from Thoreau who emphasizes the primacy of one's duty to oneself to attain highest virtue through solitary life in nature, Emerson concept's of self realization is balanced by the duty to others through voluntary participation in social reform. Unlike Whitman who celebrates carnality as the source of human virtue, Emerson's view is more austere.*

**Keywords:** Transcendentalism, American transcendentalism, ralph waldo emerson, henry david thoreau, walt Whitman.

### 1. Introduction

American Transcendentalism was a religious, philosophical, and literary movement that flourished in the 1830s and continued through the 1840s and 1850s. This movement flourished during the height of American Romanticism and was often considered as a part of and a form of radical Romantic movement in America. According to Phillips and Ladd, American Transcendentalism shares many of the same characteristics with European Romanticism, such as a deep appreciation of nature; a preference of emotion over reason; a belief in the self and the potential of the individual; a predilection for the artist in particular and the creative spirit in general; and a distrust of classical forms and traditions (Jerry and

Andrew Ladd, 2006, p. 34). Even though it shared several characteristics with European Romanticism, Transcendentalism was a unique movement in America because it arose out of the distinctive American experience and shared the same values as the nineteenth-century Americans, especially in its optimism, faith in the individual, and belief in democracy, which was developed further by that movement.

Transcendentalism flourished during the time of industrialization, economic, technology, communication and territory expansion, westward migration, a growing national self awareness, irreconcilable disagreement on the issue of slavery and increasing political, social, and regional polarization and inequalities, especially

between the industrial North and the agricultural South. Transcendentalism flowered in America because of the dissatisfaction with the emotional and spiritual sterility at that time (Larry J. and Tibbie, 1979, p.148). Transcendentalism flowered as the reaction against the negative impact of industrialization and materialism at that time because it was seen as the primary cause of dehumanization. Transcendentalism promoted humanistic philosophy that put the individual right at the center of the universe and promoted respect for human capabilities. Transcendentalism also flourished because of the dissatisfaction with the spiritual inadequacy of orthodox religion at that time. The dominant religion and its institution were seen as inhibiting factor in personal spiritual growth. Transcendentalists envisioned true religion as a personal rather than an institutional connection with the divine. The rise of Transcendentalism was also influenced by the increasing interest in and availability of European and Asian literature and philosophy. Influenced by all these factors, Transcendentalism flowered in America by promoting its main tenet that human beings as the manifestation of the divine could, as stated by Phillips and Ladd, “elevate themselves beyond their baser animal instincts, attain a higher consciousness, and take part in the spirit of the divine (Jerry and Andrew Ladd, 2006, p. 34).”

Transcendentalism, with its main tenet on the dignity of human as the manifestation of the divine, becomes one of the most important

intellectual movements in America because of its vitalizing effect on the development of American identity and optimism as a great and big nation. It also fosters the development of American democracy, liberalism, individualism, art and literature. The main exponents of this intellectual movement are Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman. These three figures share similar basic tenet of Transcendentalism, yet these three disagree on what specific course of action to actualize human virtue and happiness. The differences between these three figures can be found in their concept of the Self. This essay explores the similarities and differences among these three figures on the concept of the Self.

## 2. Discussion

### a. Comparing American Transcendentalist's Conceptions of Self among Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman

Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman, as the main exponents of American Transcendentalism, hold similar concept of the Self which also becomes the basic tenet of Transcendentalism. They believe on the dignity of human beings as the manifestation of the divine. Man is intimately connected with and a reflection of God, they optimistically believe that man can find the divine through and in himself. Emerson (1950, p. 145) asserts this by citing Persius' epigram for his essay *Self-Reliance*, “*Ne te quaesiveris extra*” –do not seek yourself outside yourself. Emerson in his essay *Nature*

also states that, "...man has access to the entire mind of the Creator, is himself the creator in the finite (Emerson, 1950, pp.35-36)." On the unity of man with nature and God, Emerson (1950, p.262) explains it further in his essay *Oversoul* as follows,

"that great nature in which we rest...that Unity, that Over-Soul... every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other...We live in succession, in division. in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul."

Emerson believes that there is a transcendent divine spirit or mind shared by each and every human being and in all of nature. Each particular example of nature or of human beings is a reflection of the divine, and the whole of the universe can be inferred from each particular. Through the presence of divine spirit in human soul and nature, human beings can have direct relationship with God. By cultivating self-understanding and having harmonious relationship with nature, human beings can attain higher divine truth, virtue and happiness in their life.

Whitman (Warner, 2004, p.64) also holds similar view. In *Song of Myself* he states the intimacy of human beings with the divine spirit because human beings themselves are the manifestation of God:

And I say to mankind, Be not curious about God, For I who am curious about each am not curious about God,  
(No array of terms can say how much I am at peace about  
and about death.)  
I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God  
not in the least,  
Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than  
myself.  
Why should I wish to see God better than this day?  
I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and  
each moment then,  
In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face  
in the glass,  
I find letters from God dropt in the street, and every one is  
sign'd by God's name,  
And I leave them where they are, for I know that wheresoe'er  
I go,  
Others will punctually come for ever and ever.

Thoreau (2004, p.97) also holds a similar view in *Walden* by stating that,

"God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages. And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us. The universe constantly and obediently answers to our conceptions; whether we travel fast or slow, the track is laid for us. Let us spend our lives in conceiving."

Thoreau states the God can be felt in the present because it culminates within us and surround us. Besides that, Thoreau also states that to improve the awareness on the dignity and divinity of human beings, it is important to have a direct relationship with God through nature and by nurturing higher consciousness, intuition, imagination, and emotion, rather than reason, logical, and rational thought. Emerson and Whitman also share this view. For the three transcendentalists, the experience of the unity with the divine can be experienced through nature and that experience does not belong to the domain of logic or rational thought, but belongs to intuition and imagination. Intuition and imagination offer a surer road to truth than abstract logic or scientific method. This is another similarity shared by the three figures. In the following passage, Emerson (p.6) states how through his sensory awareness he is united with the God.

In the woods...I feel that nothing can be fall me in life, –no disgrace, no calamity..., which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground – my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space —all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God.

Whitman in the following stanza shows how through ‘ease’ observation that involves intuition and imagination, rather than the ‘scientific’ one, that one can experience the unity with the divine in one’s soul.

I loafe and invite my soul,  
I lean and loafe at my ease observing  
a spear of summer grass.  
My tongue, every atom of my blood,  
form’d from this soil,  
    this air,  
Born here of parents born here from  
parents the same, and  
    their parents the same,  
...  
As I see my soul reflected in Nature,  
As I see through a mist, One with  
inexpressible completeness,  
sanity, beauty.

Nature as the mediation to perceive the divine and dignity of human beings has been the main reason behind the high appreciation of Transcendentalists toward nature.

Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman similarly emphasize on the human’s dignity and power and the importance of human activity to bring about personal improvement and social change in harmony with God’s purposes. This belief on human dignity fosters the American people’s optimism and spirit to perceive America economical, political, technological and cultural progress at that time as the destiny of America toward a higher evolution of humankind. The further consequence of Transcendentalism tenet is that all people are equal in the eyes of God, and all have sufficient spiritual and intellectual power to raise themselves to a more meaningful or genuine existence and to attain divine truth. They argue that human beings are essentially good and divine; evil exists only when man is unaware of his essential goodness and divinity. In order to attain the genuine and divine self realization, the three

Transcendentalists share similar view on the importance of self-reliance in oneself.

Emerson (p.146) proposes that it is important to nurture what he calls as self-reliance or 'trust thyself' or "insist on yourself; never imitate (p.166)" by believing in our own thought, believing what is true for ourself in our private heart, speak our latent conviction for it shall be the universal sense; for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost (p.145). Self-reliance is the attitude of being free, independent and brave to think, act and express oneself based one's thoughts, ideas and imaginations or dreams without being constrained by community tradition or traditional doctrine. Emerson (p.148) states that attachment and conformity to social customs, religious dogma and orthodox truth inhibit the development and the practice of self-reliance,

"Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of everyone 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. The virtue in most requests is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs."

Emerson thinks that the traditional dogma and formal reasoning will give no real insight into divine truth as expressed in the multiple manifestations of the Oversoul. Therefore, to attain diviner virtue and happiness, Emerson insists that, "whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist." Human beings must remain receptive and faithful to what Emerson

(p.145) calls as, "gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages," or their own intuition and understanding, rather than receive dogmatic truth. Individual freedom must not to be put aside by the constricting beliefs and customs, to common values or established institutions.

For Emerson (p.150), self-reliance is the first step toward genuine self-realization. Self realization lies on what people choose to do or to work based on, "all that concerns them, not what the other people think. Emerson (p.150) declares that "...do your work, and I shall know you. Do your work, and you shall reinforce yourself." Emerson acknowledges that it is a hard thing to do, "because you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it." Yet Emerson thinks that it is a challenge that must be overcome to be true to ourself because "the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude." Emerson (p.8), states that nature has provided everything to be used by human beings to attain higher and respectable self realization.

Beasts, fire, water, stones, and corn serve him. The field is at once his floor, his work-yard, his playground, his garden, and his bed.

"More servants wait on man Than he'll take notice of."

Furthermore, Emerson (p.42), confidently declares that,

"Know then that the world exists for you. For you is the phenomenon perfect. What we are, that only can we see. All that Adam had, all that

Caesar could, you have and can do. Adam called his house, heaven and earth; Caesar called his house, Rome; you perhaps call yours, a cobbler's trade; a hundred acres of ploughed land; or a scholar's garret. Yet line for line and point for point your dominion is as great as theirs, though without fine names. Build therefore your own world. As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its great proportions."

Self realization for Emerson depends on how human beings occupy their own work they have chosen for themselves to work out the best from the nature for their personal improvement and social change in harmony with God's purposes. The one who is intellectually, morally, and spiritually independent to achieve self-realization and understand the world around him and of his place and role in it and in the universe is called by Emerson as 'representative man'.

Thoreau's assertion on the self reliance in term of trust to one's intuition and liberation from social customs and orthodox truth is similar to Emerson's, but what distinguished him from Emerson is that he practices self reliance in a quite radical way. Inspired by Emerson's essay *Self-Reliance*, Thoreau practices it in a quite radical way by living in solitude in Walden Pond. From that experience Thoreau comes to a different conception about the self and self-reliance. In *Walden*, 'Economy' Thoreau (2004, p.14) insists that the way to practice self-reliance is by practicing simple lifestyle, by having needs and wants few to foster the realization of spiritual aims. In his opinion, "Most of the

luxuries, and many of the so called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind." For Thoreau self-reliance means the ability of human beings to be free from their material dependency. To cultivate self-reliance, people have to strip away luxuries and comforts down to the bare essentials. Instead of devoting one's energy to the material fulfillment, it is more important to devote oneself to spiritual achievement and genuine self expression. Thoreau, in contrast to Emerson, sees his contemporary civilization in a more negative light because he sees that the progress in human civilization just partially glorifies the material prosperity and worldly progress rather than spirituality. Thoreau deplores the mind numbing manual labor that turns human beings into machine of production and inhibits the freedom to live intensely with higher awareness, to cultivate themselves, and to explore nature and divinity. His critique on the emotional and spiritual sterility as the impact of his industrialization, mechanization and materialism can be seen in following passage:

...so with a hundred "modern improvements"; there is an illusion about them; there is not always a positive advance...Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end...We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate (Thoreau, 2004, p.52).

Actually, the laboring man has not leisure for a true integrity day by day; he cannot afford to sustain the manliest relations to men; his labor would be depreciated in the market. He has no time to be anything but a machine. How can he remember well his ignorance -- which his growth requires -- who has so often to use his knowledge? We should feed and clothe him gratuitously sometimes, and recruit him with our cordials, before we judge of him. The finest qualities of our nature, like the bloom on fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate handling. Yet we do not treat ourselves nor one another thus tenderly.

Besides the ability to alienate oneself from the attachment to material comfort, Thoreau (p.136) also proposes self-reliance by living in solitude in nature because he sees society with its customs and institutions as hindrances for simplicity and cultivation of richer inner life as he expresses in following passage:

Society is commonly too cheap. We meet at very short intervals, not having had time to acquire any new value for each other. We meet at meals three times a day...We have had to agree on a certain set of rules, called etiquette and politeness, to make this frequent meeting tolerable and that we need not come to open war. We meet at the post-office, and at the sociable, and about the fireside every night; we live thick and are in each other's way, and stumble over one another, and I think that we thus lose some respect for one another. Certainly less frequency would suffice for all important and hearty communications. Consider the girls in a factory -- never alone, hardly in their dreams. It would be better if there were but one inhabitant to a square mile, as where I live. The

value of a man is not in his skin, that we should touch him.

For Thoreau (p.131), "the most sweet and tender, the most innocent and encouraging society may be found in any natural object." Thoreau's appreciation to nature went far beyond Emerson's appreciation. If Emerson sees nature as the mediation to perceive the God and the one of the resources or object to be exploited by human beings for progress, then for Thoreau nature is more than that. Thoreau (p.111) appreciates nature for its own sake; he celebrates the sensual simple experience in nature, in addition to extract the knowledge of deeper realities from nature.

There were times when I could not afford to sacrifice the bloom of the present moment to any work...Sometimes...I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a reverie, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sing around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling in at my west window, or the noise of some traveller's wagon on the distant highway...

Nature is not seen by Thoreau as the object to be exploited for human desire. He fosters the simplicity in living by minimal or limited appropriation of nature to preserve it as Thoreau has practiced in his bean field.

...I planted about two acres and a half of light and sandy soil near it chiefly with beans, but also a small part with potatoes, corn, peas, and turnips... not being the owner, but merely a squatter, and not expecting to cultivate so much again, and I did not quite hoe it all once (p.54).

...that if one would live simply and eat only the crop which he raised, and raise no more than he ate, and not exchange it for an insufficient quantity of more luxurious and expensive things, he would need to cultivate only a few rods of ground, and that it would be cheaper to spade up that than to use oxen to plow it, and to select a fresh spot from time to time than to manure the old, and he could do all his necessary farm work as it were with his left hand at odd hours in the summer; and thus he would not be tied to an ox, or horse, or cow, or pig, as at present...I was more independent than any farmer in Concord, for I was not anchored to a house or farm, but could follow the bent of my genius, which is a very crooked one, every moment (p.55).

Thoreau's concept of self revolves around the notion of individual excellence relation with nature or love of nature. Thoreau states that human beings must foster ethical value that does not solely focus on their own interest but also acknowledge the intrinsic value of the non-human world as the manifestation of the divine. Thoreau (p.210), demands that human beings must foster the attitude hunters, fishermen and woodchoppers shows to nature, rather than the attitude of the scientist or philosopher who reifies nature as the object of their observation.

Fishermen, hunters, woodchoppers, and others, spending their lives in the fields and woods, in a peculiar sense a part of Nature themselves, are often in a more favorable mood for observing her, in the intervals of their pursuits, than philosophers or poets even, who approach her with expectation...We are most interested when science reports what those men already know practically or instinctively, for that

alone is a true humanity, or account of human experience.

Human beings should realize that they are interdependent with the nature. Self-cultivation should not sacrifice nature, but preserve it because the continuation of humankind depends on it. Hence for Thoreau, the self can find happiness and attain diviner truth by knowing, experiencing and being with nature rather than through consuming, owning or transforming it. By devoting ourselves to higher pursuit than moneymaking or material comfort, we act in our enlightened self interest that will also benefit many other species with which we share the earth. This ethical value can be fostered through simple living. From this concept of self, it can be said that Thoreau's Transcendentalism is nature-oriented rather than human-oriented. In this aspect, it can be noted another difference between Emerson and Thoreau on the concept of self-realization. For Emerson self realization can be achieved by utilizing the available natural resources for the progress of human civilization. Thoreau, in contrast, thinks that self realization can only be achieved through struggle and solitude of simple living in nature.

Whitman's concept on self reliance in terms of the trust in one's intuition is similar to Emerson which can be seen in the following stanza,

Stop this day and night with me and  
you shall possess the origin of all  
poems,  
You shall possess the good of the  
earth and sun, (there are millions of  
suns left,)

You shall no longer take things at  
second or third hand, nor  
look through the eyes of the dead, nor  
feed on the spectres in books,  
You shall not look through my eyes  
either, nor take things from me,  
You shall listen to all sides and filter  
them from your self.

Even though in general Whitman holds similar concept of self-reliance with Emerson, Whitman develops further that concept into self-liberation not only in terms of spirituality but also in terms of sexuality. For Whitman self-reliance means that there is a possibility of self development in which body, mind and soul all proceed toward spiritual ends without loss of the material functions of living, which are as divine as the immaterial.

I am the poet of the Body and I am  
the poet of the Soul,

I have said that the soul is not more  
than the body,  
And I have said that the body is not  
more than the soul,  
And nothing, not God, is greater to  
one than one's self is,

I believe in the flesh and the appetites,  
Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles,  
and each part and tag of  
me is a miracle.

From the above stanzas, Whitman insists that the flesh is as important as the spiritual. Emerson's and Thoreau's transcendentalism tend to give higher value on the spiritual and soul and put the flesh or physical in secondary importance. As stated by Emerson (2004, p.39) that, "The foundations of man are not in matter, but in spirit." They believe that the ultimate nature of things is not to be found in the matter but in the spirit or mind. Whitman,

in contrast, emphasizes the importance of both. In *Song of Myself* Whitman tries to bridge the gap between materiality and spirituality. For Whitman there is a similarity in the state of religious ecstasy and desire to copulate. For him, the primary life force does not only constitute in spiritual, but also in the sexual drive. Whitman does not deny the pleasure of the flesh as has been done by Thoreau in a radical way through simple living in *Walden*. Whitman's exploration on human sexuality and love can be found in most of his stanzas in *Song of Myself*.

My lovers suffocate me,  
Crowding my lips, thick in the pores  
of my skin,  
Jostling me through streets and public  
halls, coming naked to  
me at night,  
Crying by day *Ahoy!* from the rocks  
of the river, swinging and  
chirping over my head,  
Calling my name from flower-beds,  
vines, tangled underbrush,  
Lighting on every moment of my life,  
Bussing my body with soft balsamic  
busses,  
Noiselessly passing handfuls out of  
their hearts and giving  
them to be mine.

Another aspect that distinguishes Whitman's concept of self from Emerson and Thoreau is that Whitman emphasizes less on the fixity and distinctiveness of individual identity. As the proponent of democracy, Whitman urges that one must be able to extend oneself sympathetically to include the experience of others or the strangers. Individual identity must be fluid, mobile and settled not only in one identity. Individual identity must be able to be other than it has

become and to become other than it presently is. One must be able to foster solidarity with one's fellowships despite the difference in race, gender, origin, culture, political and religious views. It is from this ground that democratic life in American can be fostered to achieve general welfare for everyone. The largeness of individual self is celebrated by Whitman in *Song of Myself* as follows:

Swiftly arose and spread around me  
the peace and knowledge  
that pass all the argument of the  
earth,  
And I know that the hand of God is  
the promise of my own,  
And I know that the spirit of God is  
the brother of my own,  
And that all the men ever born are  
also my brothers, and the  
women my sisters and lovers,  
And that a kelson of the creation is  
love,  
And limitless are leaves stiff or  
drooping in the fields,  
And brown ants in the little wells  
beneath them,  
And mossy scabs of the worm fence,  
heap'd stones, elder,  
mullein and poke-weed.  
Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then I contradict myself,  
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

From above stanzas, Whitman celebrates the largeness of one's self to feel the connection not only with God but also with the men, women, leaves, ants, and worm for one's self contains multitudes. Even though, Emerson and Thoreau also support human equality, it is Whitman that expands the concept of democratic self in his works and puts firmer grounds for Americans to build their democracy.

### 3. Conclusion

From the above discussion, it can be seen some similarities shared by Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman about the concept of self. First, three of them believe that human beings are the manifestation of the divine and thus they become spiritual center of the universe. It is through and in human beings themselves that the divine can be found. Second, three of them believe that individual virtue and happiness depend on self-realization. Self realization can be achieved through self reliance. They view that by relying on one's own intuition and imagination offer a surer road to truth than abstract logic, scientific method, social conventions, or religious dogmas. There are two differences between Emerson's, Whitman's and Thoreau's concept of Self. The first difference is in their view about the relation between human beings and human beings with nature. Whitman's transcendentalist works is more attentive to humankind than from Thoreau's which is more attentive to nature and very individualist. Emerson's transcendentalism is somewhat caught between the two. His view is not as individualistic and nature-oriented as Thoreau, but also not as democratic as Whitman. The second difference is on a course of action to actualize individual virtue and happiness. For Thoreau to achieve the highest virtue, one must devote one's energy solely for the spiritual. This can be done only by detaching oneself from one's dependency on materiality and practicing simple, solitary life which is best practiced in nature. Different from Thoreau, Whitman views that

to achieve the highest virtue, one must not neglect one's biological need and materiality. Both of the flesh and the spirit are good and necessary for self-actualization. Emerson's position, in the other hand, is somewhat caught between the two. Different from Thoreau who emphasizes the primacy of one's duty to oneself to attain highest virtue through solitary life in nature, Emerson concept's of self realization is balanced by the duty to others through voluntary participation in social reform. Unlike Whitman who celebrates carnality as the source of human virtue, Emerson's view is more austere.

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