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## A STUDY ON HENRY DAVID THOREAU ENCOUNTER WITH TRANSCENDENTALISM

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### ABSTRACT

*Henry David Thoreau was outspoken on many important issues in his day among which were politics, religion, slavery, and education. As a teacher himself, if only briefly, Thoreau encountered ethical dilemmas in how education was administered, how education was inequitable, and how education fell short of the real learning that occurs when an individual has the opportunity to experience education fitting the simple models and lessons of nature. Education approaches of today based on high stakes testing, fitting humans into standard molds, and punishing teachers for their students' unwillingness to learn would all be prime targets for the critical attack of Mr. Thoreau if he were in today's world. This writer argues that Thoreau would judge the education system of today to be unethical to students for depriving them of a full education, and unethical to teachers for forcing conformity on them and suppressing their talents with narrow state mandated curricula. Transcendentalism was a movement in the early to mid 19th century that embraced new ideas in literature, religion, and culture. It was a protest to intellectualism and the doctrine of the Unitarian Church. It was a belief that people can reach a spiritual state by utilizing their intuition, and not by learned doctrines and religious teachings. Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) was an American from New England who was an author, poet, and natural philosopher. Thoreau was a leading figure in the Transcendentalist movement which held on staying at Walden Pond, that the human connection with nature is necessary for intellectual and moral stability. Through his writings, Thoreau was able to impart his beliefs on how people should live in order to transcend the materialistic world.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Henry David Thoreau, Encounter, Transcendentalism, nature, humans, education system.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Today in the United States multiculturalism has greatly influenced many aspects of American life including media, economic policies, art and literature. In the world of

today multiculturalism has global implications and in the varieties of literature written in English especially by the people of different cultures who have settled down in America, the multi-cultural dimension is noteworthy and gives newer vistas of creative exploration.

The Civil War which terminated with the defeat of the Confederacy left its bruises on the life of the nation. The normal life was disrupted at all levels. In order to survive, the nation had to be prepared, mentally and physically, to wade through a stream of violent and dynamic changes. The profound changes that rocked the American way of life were all-pervasive and touched all levels of life — political, social, economic and intellectual.

During the half century from the Civil War, America struggled hard to restore its unity

and solidarity, which were pushed to the brink of ruin by sectional conflict, tyrannical misrule and such other evils. The atmosphere of strife and conflict persisted, and it was not until 1877 that the nation limped its way to stability and order. The occasional voices of discord and distrust that were heard now and then were enfeebled and finally drowned by the higher voices of writers like Whitman, Lowell and Lanier.

Once the nation attained the climate of peace and stability, it could embark upon its ambitious programme of economic reconstruction. It was also a period of rapid industrial expansion. The nation embarked upon its giant programme of exploitation of natural resources, especially in iron, coal and oil. Improve machinery, cheap labour and marvels of science further encouraged the plans of the nation. The growth of railroads, which was a typical achievement of the age, solved the problem of transportation of industrial and agricultural commodities. These entire economic achievements lead to growing urbanization.

In the wake of the unprecedented growth of industrialization and urbanization, new

social evils began to raise their heads. The American society began to worship wealth, and everywhere there was an unscrupulous scramble for wealth and power- People were guided in their lives by one motto and that was to get-rich-quick, by fair means or foul. Religion lost its hold no life. It was reduced to a set of antiquated doctrines which could not be trusted, because they could not be tested. Science came to lord it over every aspect of life. Science came to be regarded as the new evangel and Darwin's theory of evolution was not only hailed as the new Bible, but was enthusiastically advocated and propagated with great zeal and gusto. In short, with the rapid growth of science and technology, with the shift to new values from the old, omnipresent moral turpitude and political opportunism, America began to experience a sort of crisis in the conscience. In such an age of turbulent changes, American intellectuals attempted to express the shifting values and multiple complexities of life. Most of the writers steadily moved from romanticism to realism, and from realism to naturalism it was an easy step. The present study emphasizes on the clarification and evolution as the background and history of American literature with reference to Transcendentalism as reflected in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and

Henry David Thoreau the great writers and thinkers of America.

**REVIEW OF LITERATURE:** Besides Emerson and Thoreau, four other distinguished Americans of the period Alcott the Teacher, Whittier the Quaker, Melville the Rover and Whitman the Mystic showed an interest in the Indian philosophic thought and in turn were influenced by it. But Emerson and Thoreau are invariably paired as the two leading Transcendentalists. Thoreau was the younger of the two. He was also the more energetic and impulsive and the more frankly admiring of Vedic thought. There is no record that he read any Indian literature while at Harvard but in Emerson's library he found and read with passion Sir William Jones' translation of The Laws of Manu and was fascinated. In his Journal, he wrote: "That title (Manu)... comes to me with such a volume of sound as if it had swept unobstructed over the plains of Hindustan... They are the laws of you and me, a fragrance wafted from those old times, and no more to be refuted than the wind. When my imagination travels eastward and backward to those remote years of the gods, I seem to draw near to the habitation of the morning, and the dawn at length has a place.

“The Vedas contain a sensible account of God. The veneration in which the Vedas are held is itself a remarkable feat. Their code embraced the whole moral life of the Hindus and in such a case there is no other truth than sincerity. Truth is such by reference to the heart of man within, not to any standard without.”<sup>1</sup> Thoreau, like other Transcendentalist had a breadth and catholicity of mind which brought him to the study of religions of India. From the beginning he was disillusioned with organized Christianity as he never went to Church and like Emerson showed great interest in Hinduism and its philosophy. In comparison to Hebraism, Thoreau found Hinduism superior in many ways. The following passage demonstrates Thoreau’s disenchantment with Hebraism and his love for Hinduism: In 1853 he wrote:

“The Hindoos are most serenely and thoughtfully religious than the Hebrews. They have perhaps a purer, more independent and impersonal knowledge of God. Their religious describe the first inquisitive and contemplative access to God; the Hebrew bible a conscientious return, a grosser and more personal repentance. Repentance is not a free and fair highway to God. A wise man will dispense with

repentance. It is shocking and passionate. God prefers that you approach him thoughtful, not penitent, though you are chief of sinners. It is only by forgetting yourself that you draw near to him. The calmness and gentleness with which the Hindoo philosophers approach and discourse on forbidden themes is admirable.”

In his Transcendental thoughts, the world at large conglomerate into one big divine family. He finds beside his Walden Pond "the servant of the Brahmin, priest of Brahma and Vishnu and Indra, who still sits in his temple on the Ganga reading the Vedas..." their buckets "grate together in the same well. The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganga".

Thoreau, the Concord sage, said, “The Vedanta teaches how by ‘forsaking religious rites’ the votary may obtain purification of mind.” And “One sentence of the Gita is worth the State of Massachusetts many times over.” “The reader is nowhere raised into and sustained in a bigger, purer or rarer region of thought than in the Bhagavad-Gita. The Gita's sanity and sublimity have impressed the minds of even soldiers and merchants.”

He also admitted that, “The religion and philosophy of the Hebrews are those of a wilder and ruder tribe, wanting the civility and intellectual refinements and subtlety of Vedic culture.” Thoreau's reading of literature on India and the Vedas was extensive: he took them seriously. I feel proud to quote here Thoreau's statement as an evidence of a true Transcendentalist “If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer” to reveal Thoreau's belief that every man must transcend the current sociological ideals.

**Educational Elitism:** It was clear to Thoreau that there was no equity or fairness in education because although education was a foundation for democratic society, it was just as surely a definer of classes in society. So not only was Thoreau a critic of what education does to the individual, he also lashed out at the system in general for its aristocratic foundation which affected entire groups of citizens. Although he was outside of education, no longer a teacher, he continued his critical ethical analysis of education. The failure of common education was by design, a deliberate failure for lower class, non-wealthy citizens. A journal entry reads as follows:

“We have a comparatively decent system of common schools, schools for infants only . . . but . . . no school for ourselves. It is time that we had uncommon schools that we did not leave off our education when we begin to be men.... It is time that villages were universities”.

And what kinds of men were being produced in the education system of Thoreau's time? By his measure, shells of academics were emerging, professors in name, but not knowledge. In Walden, he wrote: “To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. A role or title of philosopher is not a philosopher, but even so the bearer of the title could hold a position of status in an institution that, per Thoreau, was as flawed as it could be.

**A Natural Model:** By contrast, he wrote about the ritual of the Indians called husquenaughing, a practice expected of young men to initiate them to survival in nature, an education building their abilities to adapt to unknown situations. Salomon (1962) provides an example of education that Thoreau found working in fields of

huckleberries, that is, a combination of kindergarten, school house, and adult-education. “I served my apprenticeship and have since done considerable journey-work in the huckleberry field though I never paid for my schooling and clothing in that way. It was some of the best schooling I got, and paid for it”. What should be a naturally occurring path of intellectuality has been distorted by educators, and redefined to match their teaching needs. In his words: a teacher “makes a straight-cut ditch of a free and meandering brook”, an inferior construction by all accounts when compared to what nature had placed there. By a similar analogy, Salomon (1962) interpreted Thoreau to mean that learning can happen in a school, but it is more suited to emerging from serious conversation of reality rather than what has been modified or repackaged for study.

Life then is the same as education, not a study of it, but a living of it. Education should be not looking at academics, but being or doing academics. How can youths better learn to live than by at once trying the experiment of living? Methinks this would exercise their minds as much as mathematics. If I wished a boy to know something about the arts and sciences, for

instance, I would not pursue the common course, which is merely to send him into the neighborhood of some professor, where anything is professed and practiced but the art of life.

**Natural Life: Thoreau’s Worldly Transcendentalism:** An ecological perspective and holistic education are closely related; both see the elements of the world as deeply interconnected. In two recent books, Ian Mills and David Robinson elucidate this concept of interconnection in different and engaging ways. Mills, an Australian educator who has taught at universities in his home country as well as the U.S. and China, lived the first part of his life in the Australian outback and later was a monk, filmmaker, and broadcaster. His book uses Dante’s Divine Comedy as his framework, although he has changed the order of his journey; he begins with his vision of Paradiso, followed by Purgatoria and Inferno. Using this frame, Mills weaves together narrative, philosophy, and poetry to develop a vision of personal and global well-being.

The goal of Thoreau’s spiritual practice was to be “awake” and going to Walden Pond was part of this process. Walking or in nature or “sauntering” was central to this

process as he used this experience to observe and be with nature. Robinson cites Thoreau to show how sauntering is a serious spiritual practice: We should go forth on the shortest walk, perchance, in the spirit of undying adventure, never to return, prepared to send back our embalmed hearts only as relics to our desolate kingdoms. If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again. If you have paid your debts and made your will, and settled your affairs, and are a free man, then you are ready for a walk.

Walking, then, is a transformative practice that requires commitment and preparation and can be both an act of discovery of both the natural world and our deeper self. Thoreau, then, is part of long spiritual tradition of emptying ourselves of our daily concerns so that we can see everything afresh. America as he finds it “is nothing but work, work, work,” and an obsession that is “opposed ... to life itself”. Thoreau felt that we should nurture the inner life and not give ourselves over completely to worldly affairs. He wrote:

Shall the mind be a public arena, where the affairs of the street and the gossip of the tea-table chiefly are discussed? Or shall it be a

quarter of heaven itself, and hypaethral temple, consecrated to the service of the gods... It is important to preserve the mind's chastity in this respect.

One of the central themes of Robinson's is that as Thoreau matured he focused more and more on details but always within a larger holistic frame. Robinson argues that Thoreau was indebted to Emerson for the idea that “a particular fact can be known completely only as part of a much larger web of relations and interconnections”. Robinson identifies Thoreau's perspectives as “holistic.” In the last years of his life, Robinson believes, Thoreau was working on a “remarkable synthesis between philosophy, literature, and science in which a commitment to empirical observation and data gathering was the underpinning of a comprehensive theory of the process of nature's variation and development” Robinson's is a significant addition to the literature on Thoreau and he has clarified Thoreau's way of seeing and knowing. Thoreau focused on relationships and interconnections including his own relation to what he was observing. In short, he developed an epistemology which was far ahead of its time when positivism was the

emerging paradigm for learning and knowing.

**Social and literary context:** The year 1836 was the annus mirabilis of the movement, during which Emerson published perhaps his most famous work *Nature*, which is known as the “gospel” of Transcendentalism. In the same year, the Transcendental Club, also known as the Hedge Club, met for the first time in the Boston home of George Ripley, a Unitarian minister. Gathered with him were Frederick Henry Hedge, Amos Bronson Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Margaret Fuller and others. It was remarkably progressive to include women at that time. Alcott describes the club as “a company of earnest persons enjoying conversations on high themes and having much in common.” It was the first American movement, which influenced generations of American intellectuals. The members of the club founded a journal called *The Dial* which disseminated Transcendentalist thoughts and opinions for 4 years from 1840 to 1844.

The nineteenth century was a progressive period and many reforms occurred. Some of Transcendentalists were reformers by nature. They simply could not be satisfied

with the situation at that time. Slavery was wrong for Transcendentalists as it stood in the way of the spiritual evolution of the slaves. Some of Transcendentalists played a significant role in the abolition of slavery. Henry David Thoreau himself declared that it is a duty of every man to take an action against the state where they feel it is morally wrong. Another important reform which can be traced back to the transcendental philosophy is the women’s rights movement. Margaret Fuller alleged: “What woman needs is not as a woman to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, as an intellectual to discern, as a soul to live freely.” What Fuller emphasized was that everybody should have a chance to develop the full capacity of their nature. This is the character of transcendental thought and feeling on this subject. One argues that the Transcendentalists’ idea of woman is regarded more for its essential capacities and possibilities and respect for the ideal than for the actual woman.

**CONCLUSION:** Thoreau and Christopher McCandless were influenced by Transcendentalist philosophy. They were strongly individualistic and saw nature as a place where one can be cleansed from the impact of the consumer society. Thoreau

urges members of society to live purely and modestly because if we devote all our time to labor in order to obtain more possession we lose our personal freedom. McCandless also adopted this attitude as he declared that wealth is a fundamental evil which corrupts individuals. Nevertheless there is a difference between McCandless' and Thoreau's motive for retreating from society. McCandless decided to leave his former life and completely change his way of experiencing it. He was convinced that personal relationships are obstacles on his spiritual journey during which he wanted to cleanse himself and acquire the true freedom. McCandless abandoned society and condemned any efforts to change its members. On the other hand Thoreau's retreat did not mean rejection of society. His retreat was temporary. This statement is substantiated by Walden itself as he wanted to stimulate the members of society to improve themselves and brighten up their lives. He wanted to show them that there are other ways of spending their lives as well as deepen his understanding of himself through the purity of nature and to reveal what life can offer him. After all, McCandless came to the state of individual awakening and reached social transformation which meant he was ready to return to society and

perhaps integrate as one of its members. It is reflected in his solitary sojourn in the wilderness where he freed himself from the impact of society and its materialism in order to follow his thoughts and dreams. It was his quest for pursuing personal happiness. He became fully self-reliant as he saw it as the only way to live according his own convictions.

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