

# Transcendentalism in American Literature

---

**Primorac, Ana**

**Undergraduate thesis / Završni rad**

**2011**

*Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj:* **Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku, Filozofski fakultet**

*Permanent link / Trajna poveznica:* <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:142:654575>

*Rights / Prava:* [In copyright](#)/[Zaštićeno autorskim pravom.](#)

*Download date / Datum preuzimanja:* **2024-08-17**



**FILOZOFSKI FAKULTET**  
SVEUČILIŠTE JOSIPA JURJA STROSSMAYERA U OSIJEKU

*Repository / Repozitorij:*

[FFOS-repository - Repository of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Osijek](#)



Sveučilište J. J. Strossmayera u Osijeku  
Filozofski fakultet  
Preddiplomski studij engleskog i njemačkog jezika i književnosti

Ana Primorac

## **Transcendentalism in American Literature**

Završni rad

Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Sanja Runtić

Komentor: mr. sc. Jadranka Zlomislić

Osijek, 2011

## CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Abstract.....  | 1  |
| Introduction.....  | 2  |
| 1. Major Tenets of Transcendentalism.....                | 3  |
| 2. Influences on the Transcendentalism.....              | 6  |
| 3. Transcendental influence on the American Society..... | 9  |
| 4. Henry David Thoreau.....                              | 12 |
| 5. Ralph Waldo Emerson.....                              | 15 |
| Works Cited.....   | 19 |

## ABSTRACT

This paper describes one of the shortest, but very prolific movements in the history of American literature – Transcendentalism. Transcendentalism came into existence in the first half of the nineteenth century as an endeavour to create, and develop a real American literature. However, transcendentalism has lived to see changes in society as well as in the course of philosophical, and religious thought of the time in which it occurred. In order to really understand the main tenets of the movement, it is important to get to know better the changes which influenced transcendentalism itself. Another essential element of this research is to explain how the whole literary movement influenced not only the American society, but also the overall history of the human knowledge. Finally, it represents in more detail two great authors, and thinkers of transcendentalism – Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Their immense contribution to the understanding of the spiritual concept hidden behind this movement is worth of every respect, and admiration.

**Keywords:** transcendentalism, self-reliance, individuality, the Over-Soul

## INTRODUCTION

One cannot state that one is familiar with the history of American literature without paying special attention to Transcendentalism, a literary, philosophical, and religious –movement which influenced not only the nineteenth century, when it occurred, but also some of the most important figures of the next century. People like Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr. found their strength, and inspiration in the works of Transcendentalist authors such as Fuller, Alcott, Emerson, or Thoreau. In the first chapter the major tenets of transcendentalism will be described in more detail. Some of them are individuality, and introspective approach to one's spiritual side, a very strong connection to the nature, and through it to God himself, as well as to the divine spirit which unites everything – the Over-Soul. The next one, however, explains the influences which shaped the movement, and turned it into a very recognizable feature of the nineteenth century literature in America. From Plato's belief in the ideal of the existence, or British Romanticists whose sense for individuality defined the whole philosophy found behind the transcendentalism to German Romanticists such as Schiller, and Goethe, finally concluding with the teachings of Confucius, and Hindu sacred books, it has always been very elaborate to illustrate the complexity of the impacts that formed this whole literary trend. On the other hand, this research paper discusses the transcendentalists' influence on the American society, as well. Those gathered around the Transcendental Club, and active in the magazine *The Dial* really tried to inbreathe a new way of thinking into the nation yearning for changes. They held lectures, opened many libraries, fought for women's rights, and against slavery, giving an example to the generations that followed. The last two parts specify life, and work of the two most prominent thinkers of that period – Henry David Thoreau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Thoreau was a strong defender of individualism, preaching the life unburdened by the materialistic principles, or any other form of social system which could threat human spirit to develop freely without being concerned with constant labor, or profits. His great teacher and friend Ralph Waldo Emerson has emphasized the individual's task to pursue his own path, and personal happiness even more. For him, the self-reliant man was the groundwork for a better, more creative and independent world.

## 1. MAJOR TENETS OF TRANSCEDENTALISM

“To try to grasp the spirit of Transcendentalism is, by definition to try to grasp the ungraspable – which is precisely what Transcendentalism sought to do“ ( Ruland 117). This quote is the most suitable one to describe the tendencies of a literary movement called transcendentalism which came to existence in the nineteenth century in America. Actually, “to grasp the ungraspable“ was not only the major goal of the writers who created their works in the period between 1830s and 1850s, but also a leading thought that inspired people dedicated to religion, or philosophy to take a journey into a completely new area of human mind inspired by the ideas of freedom, and individuality of each of God's creatures. In fact, those enlightened by the new teaching emphasizing the primacy of the spiritual over the material world, started writing their own works in a similar way. The main goal for the writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Walt Whitman, Martin van Burren, and Amos Bronson Alcott was to create a true American literature based on the principles of self-reliance, individualism, and the general attempt to live according to the universal ethical principles, stressing the importance of an individual in society. As a matter of fact, “Transcendentalism spoke to the value of inward spiritual promptings and the need for a private relation between the Self and the Universe“ ( Ruland 118), always trying to explain the importance of a personal quest which every person has to take on as a part of responsibility given to us from our heavenly Father. The transcendentalists, especially Emerson and Thoreau as the most known representatives of this movement whose purpose has never been to become institutionalized, incorporated the truths they lived by deeply into the overall American identity as such. “Man Thinking“, and not just a helpless creature depending on God's will, is one of the main characteristics of the real American spirit. Unfortunately, the fact that people became obsessed with the material wealth leaving no time for developing their inner nature by the means of introspection, and, in that way, connecting to the divine, disappointed the nineteenth century thinkers. It is every man's duty to persistently and devotedly seek his path to the, what Emerson calls, “Over-Soul“– a spirit which unites God, Nature, and a Man as a final product of God's union with the Nature. Nature has become a symbol for an oasis where one is able to purify one's thoughts and refresh the relationship to the previously mentioned Over-Soul. The transcendental was the only reality worth of exploring, or even living. This type of self-improvement should not be mistaken with the selfishness. A man who tries to follow his inner nature, a beauty incorporated into his being, is not an egoist, or an egocentric escapist, but a traveler – a person constantly developing his or her character, and striving to achieve a higher level in understanding the “Over-Soul“. On

the other hand, “the relation between self and community, coming in and going out, the single separate person and the *en masse* , as Withman put it, were a lasting transcendental question“ (Ruland 128). For the transcendentalists, the centre of everything is an individual whose biggest task is to cognate his/ her own mission in this world, not paying respect to the norms created only to strangle the freedom of the human spirit as such. Emerson’s “independence of solitude” is the highest ideal one should accept, and according to which one should live, without paying attention what other people think. It is, as if this transcendental wave introduced some kind of new religion whose first postulate was to love oneself. As David M. Robinson says:

The construction of mysticism in liberal theology among the Transcendentalists and their Free Religious Association Successors helped to shape the new pervasive interest in “spirituality as a noninstitutional and antitheological way of expressing a highly individualistic religious sensibility. (23)

Thus, the only law one must unconditionally obey is the one which concerns the freedom of our strivings as human beings. Each person should take an active part in his or her life, to show the liveliness inhaled in the spirit of the individual in order to be able to make a certain progress, and finally move from Reason to Understanding. Being a passive by-stander with no interest in the personal, as well as the development of the whole community is strictly forbidden. However, this demands a great openness to the universal norms of personal insight, individuality, and intuitive powers given to a man. To perceive the truth the way we see it was the greatest of all duties, as well as privileges. Transcendentalists formed their own circles where they discussed the principles they lived by. The so called “capital city” of the whole movement was a little town Concord outside Boston in the state of Massachusetts where Emerson settled when he came back from his European journey. On the other hand, Transcendentalism wanted to create a self-taught man whose intellectual energy would be strong enough to cause the stirring in society which has really deteriorated due to slavery, unfair treatment of women, and neglecting the human rights to the Native Americans. It relies upon the belief in the cooperation, and understanding between the people, presupposing this to the Christianity as such. Transcendentalism opted for originality of thought, and expression as well. To imitate others in any way was to neglect one’s true nature, and capability of doing something innovative and special, to leave a trace in the history due to personal efforts of the each individual. Unfortunately, “humans ignored the internal impressions of the heart, the

conduit to the divine. Ignorance of spirit was the root cause of all falsehood” (Robinson 400). To some extent, it seemed to the critics of Transcendentalism they tried to create some kind of utopian society, but with no usual abiding laws which were made to suffocate man’s creative powers, and freedom that goes beyond the physical, or empirical reason. So, the name “transcendentalists” was originally coined as a pejorative term for all those “apostles of newness” who decided to live according to the purest moral dictates, discovering and worshipping the truth as the highest aspiration of human reason. Some of the representatives of the more pessimistic stream of American Romanticists, such as the “father” of the gothic story Edgar Allan Poe, were also very skeptical about the tenets of this movement. He even called them “Boston Frogpondium“. Although very keen on their teaching, the transcendentalists were also aware of the fact that their alternative way of life was neither viable for a longer period of time, nor was it pasturable for all the representatives of the movement to live in an improvised cabin near a pond like Thoreau. Still, it was very important to them to show to all the critics how they actually practice the attitudes they are constantly putting a great emphasis on in their works, and speeches often delivered in the country. In their speeches they wanted to shed some light on the role of a poet himself. The following is stated when discussing the position of a visionary poet who has the imaginative powers which are strong enough to bring the reader, or a listener closer to the Over-Soul:

The poet may seem to create meaning but actually sees through the surfaces that veil it. This stress on seeing, vision, points to one of the many puns transcendentalism used to reconstitute language itself: the poet is a see-er, a prophet who helps us see through our eye, the “I” of our self-reliance...  
(Ruland 122)

Consequently, the most significant aim of this literary, religious, philosophical as well as social movement was to develop a critical type of thinking, often sharply criticizing all the public institutions which could hinder an individual’s necessity to follow the ultimate truth, and to interpret it in a completely innovative, and personal way. The truth itself is different for each person, which means that, as those whose soul has been incorporated into, and influenced by the divine spirit, every human being has inherited the right to create the individual conception of the world surrounding him as well as the laws he should respect.  
(Ruland 123)



## 2. INFLUENCES ON THE TRANSCEDENTALISM

The beginnings of the transcendental thought in America are tightly connected to the European philosophy at that time. The first person courageous enough to take a trip to Europe in order to explore the ideas of the minds he truly admired was Emerson himself. He resigned his position as a Unitarian minister devoting his life, as later many others did too, to the “liberation of oneself”. Their thinking was different from the Unitarian ideas lying upon the fact that God is not a Trinity, but one being which extends his love and salvation to the human race. The transcendentalists refused the philosophy of John Locke, one of the most influential Enlightenment thinkers who stated that a human mind is devoid of conscience at birth (tabula rasa) as well as that all the experience is derived from the senses. This worldview has been deeply ingrained into the American nineteenth century society for a long time. The philosophy of David Hume as well as Bishop Berkley is also in many aspects similar to Locke’s. However, the carriers of the movement were strong supporters of an idealistic Neoplatonism. Plato in his teaching denies the real world as the most suitable or reliable one. He puts the man’s intuition above all which is materialistic, perceivable with an eye. Our world is a mere copy, a shadow of the ideal world where all the forms exist freely, in an absolute reality. Whoever thinks that this world is the ultimate reality is blind, emphasizes Plato. The influence on the Transcendentalism is here more than obvious. Namely, the most valuable principle which marked the whole “transcendental era” was the highest duty of each person, and that is to search for the individual truth within ourselves. Of course, this cannot be fulfilled without God’s help. The Creator himself has provided us the necessary instructions for finding the inner happiness by manifesting his spirit in the nature because “Nature was not merely a challenge to man’s powers of domination and exploration, it spoke directly to the self, to the individual mind and soul” (Ruland 119). Yet, as obvious, the institutionalized religion was here not accepted as the highest law in favor of the belief that a man is an incarnation of God. In that respect he has the right to, as mentioned many times before, pursue his individual happiness. Later on, this unique individualism which wonderfully describes the trichotomy between a man, nature and God in that “the knowledge of the self is knowledge of the cosmos, more particularly of God” (McIlhenny 489) has served as the basis for the spreading of British Romanticism as one of the most powerful influences which helped in shaping the transcendental way of thinking. Through Emerson’s friendship with Thomas Carlyle, and his research into the work of some other British poets such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Wordsworth, the philosophy which stresses the importance of the individual who, with his talents, stands above society as a collective, came to its peak. Also, the Romantics

believed strongly in the superiority of the intuition to the mind itself. They often criticized the Enlightenment as it put too much of an emphasis on the Ratio, neglecting the abilities of the spirit and heart that stay in a huge opposition to reason (Gray 130). At the approximately same time the Romanticism has occurred in Germany with the works of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich Schiller, and Novalis. All these authors were important when discussing their contribution to the development of transcendental line of thought. For instance, Goethe was a true example of humanism, claiming that the Ratio itself is not enough when talking about forming the overly acceptable laws. His “cosmopolitan man of letters” is the ideal every person should aspire to. This endless curiosity is the major instinct that helps to feed one’s insatiable hunger for culture, and new transcendental experience. This model reminds us, to some extent, on the Renaissance man (“homo universale”) whose main purpose is to outmatch himself while developing all his talents. A man like Leonardo da Vinci (explorer, architect, scientist, sculptor and painter) was in the centre of all discussions, and an example of a true citizen of the world whose achievements were of great importance for the human race in general. On the other hand, Schiller appreciated a man whose emotions have been “educated” by reason, respecting the freedom which one deserves, and has the inalienable right to enjoy. His reasoning about the beauty having something to do with the moral (beauty stands as a representation of everything which is morally acceptable) also left a trace on the transcendentalists. However, the influence of the German philosopher Novalis was also very close to the overall idealistic concept of an individual who must strive to conform the nature to his own complex genius. Novalis tries in his writings to reconstruct the old ideal connection between a man, and the nature emphasizing the harmonically restored relationship which has been a motif present in the transcendental philosophy, and adopted from English and German Romanticists. The nature inspires us to do good deeds, makes society of morally enriched individuals who never deny their service to it. The best explanation for this “phenomenon” is given by the following quote in which the traces of Emerson’s love for nature appear:

The service to the soul offered by nature was, as Emerson saw it, aesthetic, intellectual and, above all, moral. As for the aesthetic, Emerson shared with Coleridge, the English Romantic poets and the German idealist philosophers the belief that each individual can order his or her environment into a harmonious whole. And just as the poet or the artist takes a scene and rearrange

it into a harmony of words or color, so every person, in the act of seeing, can take a scene and rearrange it into harmony in their soul, or mind. Everyone can be a poet of deed, if not of a word. (Gray 132)

The poets are those who have the moral obligation, and necessary gifts “to promote understanding of those truths on which a culture – and the individuals who made it up – depended for their survival” (Gray 132). In other words, the transcendentalists believed that a poet was a crucial personality whose abilities should serve to stimulate the moral and intellectual uplift in each society. He does in words what every one of us can do in action. The language itself is here understood as the moral instrument which powers the man’s reason and helps him to perceive the vitality of its spiritual significance. By using the accurate language it seems as if we are coming closer to the unique truth which is also morally the most acceptable one.

When talking about the morality, one cannot neglect the contribution of the great German philosopher Immanuel Kant whose principles filled with enthusiasm the representatives of the transcendental movement in many different aspects. Transcendentalism as a term itself was coined by Kant who in his teaching emphasizes the importance of the moral law which goes beyond the man’s personal happiness. This higher moral law is the principle of the reason itself, every person’s moral obligation. All the ideas of knowledge which go beyond what our senses can reach, Kant named transcendental forms. The transcendental, the ulterior is the only fundamental reality, and the truth so often mentioned transcends this known physical world. Kant’s conception of religion has also strong roots in the transcendental philosophy. He sees the Bible as a book which serves as an overall moral guide, a source of natural morality for every Christian who tries to achieve a higher level of self improvement. It is not important for Kant whether or not the events discussed in the Bible actually happened as long as a basic moral code the whole religion stands for is the one worth living according to. In his writings he refers to the teachings of the Swedish scientist, theologian and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg. Swedenborg influenced the transcendentalists claiming that there is a unique and infinite power present in the universe – God himself. Of course, his concept is very similar to the one of the Over - Soul – a spirit uniting the Creator, the Man, and the Universe. Lastly, Hindu sacred books such as Bhagavadgita and Vishnu Purana also inspired some of the authors to follow the path of the spiritual truth which is the basis of the transcendental movement. Also, the greatest Chinese thinker Confucius, with his philosophy spreading the thoughts of personal morality, social justice and honesty, thrilled all

those thinkers and writers who made serious effort in improving society while pursuing personal happiness (Gray 130).

### 3. TRANSCEDENTAL INFLUENCE ON THE AMERICAN SOCIETY

Whatever movement develops in the history of literature, it is extremely important to understand its influence on society in which it occurred. Some thinkers known in their own circles as the Symposium or the Transcendental Club met often informally in order to discuss theology, philosophy, and literature of that time. Henry David Thoreau's home was the place where this group of highly intellectual young thinkers from Boston, and Concord, deeply influenced by the idealistic thought, had its discussions. Actually, Transcendentalism was present in every aspect of the American life. It influenced Alcott and Elizabeth Peabody who were engaged in the educational questions, Brownson and Theodore Parker occupied with religious propositions of that era, Margaret Fuller – a female author familiar with the position of women in America as well as the carriers of the whole idealistic idea of social and political reform – Thoreau and Emerson. Of course, anything worthy enough to be preserved for the future generations was issued in the transcendental magazine called *The Dial* (1840 – 44) in which essays on these topics took place. This was the most popular literary quarterly of the mid-century. Later on, it has been recognized as one of the most influential political magazines which has served as a great inspiration to the originators of the Modernist literature. Almost each of the authors previously mentioned has edited *The Dial* at some point in their career. Although sharply criticized by some, the importance of it proves the fact that Emerson called it a “Journal in a new spirit”. Crucial was the role of a writer whose task is not only to describe the conditions present in society, but also to become involved in the events which shaped it. On the other hand, in the public lectures given throughout the whole country, and across the Atlantic, the transcendentalists spread their message of individuality, self-reliance, equality and introspection always stressing the possibility of common advancement. The basis for their teachings was the already well known skepticism which pressed forward the transcendentalists to open their hearts, and minds to the universal law of Nature. The old well-known dogmas have been seriously questioned. In other words, America needed a spiritual awakening in terms of recognizing the possibilities offered by a completely new wave of moralists. Under the influence of these thoughts many of them even established some of the alternative living communities. The best examples are Bronson Alcott's school set up at Fruitlands, at Harvard, and George Ripley's Brook Farm situated nine miles outside Boston which “lasted” from 1841 to 1848, much longer than Alcott's experiment. Namely, he gave

up after only seven months of life in this type of “communal enterprise” (Gray 135). However, when talking about Ripley’s undertaking, this was a real discovery for all like-minded authors who have decided to join him in this venture. Nathaniel Hawthorne, one of the representatives of the more pessimistic stream of the English Romanticism, even wrote his great work *The Blithedale Romance* while living there.

Also, the most famous woman, and the member of the Transcendental Club, educated by her father’s strict rules - Margaret Fuller was a true example of a person dedicated to the highest duties as a moralist as well as a very popular author of that time. Fuller influenced women’s suffrage movement in many aspects. She edited the transcendentalist magazine *The Dial* for two years. Afterwards, Fuller organized a series of classes for women and named these “Conversations” (Gray 135). The nineteenth century woman was thought to be created only to make the life of a man more comfortable. The so called “cult of domesticity” which obliged every woman to believe that her greatest life achievement was to get married, and have children, has been seriously doubted. Society expected women to be pious, pure, hard-working, submissive, passionless, caring less about their personal needs, and wishes. They were not allowed to pursue a career, or even a hobby. The universities as well as every other form of public activity, were not accessible to women, either. In other words, there was not much to expect for an average woman in a typically male world. Fuller, however, helped those women to understand their inner potential in the world which has not especially favored the fact that women are capable of doing the same type of public activities as men. The result of her first trip was her book *Summer on the Lake* in 1843 in which she shows great compassion when discussing the question of the Native Americans, who vanished from the Midwest at that period. This “poetic impression of the country at large” was, also, a great contribution to the struggle against slavery. As Gray concisely sums up Fuller’s philosophy:

The law of freedom, she argues, linking the cause of female emancipation to the abolition of slavery, she attacks all those who would try to reduce people to property, black or female, or insist they have to be limited to a particular sphere. (136)

In order to learn and develop the self-respect necessary for the further progress in the community which gave advantage to men, women needed to pursue better education because “if she develops properly finding her true vocation, whatever that may be, then ‘she will know how to love, and be worthy of being loved’” (Gray 137). In her opinion, a clear division

between the male, and female duties does not exist. The two genders were not created to oppose, or despise, but to supplement one another, regarding the fact that in each woman a certain amount of male energy is present, and vice versa. This author also dedicated her life to the abolition of slavery, and capital punishment, fighting against the injustice inflicted to the poor, immigrants, and ill. She saw America as a “promised land” where the equality, fraternity, and liberty mentioned in the Declaration of Independence could actually become reality lived in every community which tries to grow in the Transcendentalist spirit (Gray 136).

Additionally, it is impossible to explain the influence transcendentalists had on society without mentioning the alternative living communities they founded. The most devoted one among the pioneers of this type of communities is definitely Henry David Thoreau. His staying at Walden in a small cabin with no electricity, or other amenities where he spent his days writing, and thinking about the role of an individual in the world, was an inspiration for many others. With his way of living Thoreau proved that “he was, in his ideal view, man alone and sufficient” (Harding 46). During these two years Thoreau became a great defender of a self-reliant man whose wish to differ from the others lies in the fact that a real change can happen only within an individual mind. He concluded very fast that “most man live lives of quiet desperation” (Harding 46), being slaves to the capitalistic society which destroys a person’s individual need for improvement, and freedom. Thoreau’s rebellion against the Government which demanded from each citizen to pay taxes, so that the Mexican War could be continued, has been a great inspiration for a lot of thinkers and freedom fighters who marked the twentieth century. In his essays the morality of an individual was always pointed out as the base for understanding the truth hidden within each person. As Gray has nicely put it:

For Thoreau, there was a higher law which the individual had to obey even when the government of the day violated it. "The only obligation which I have the right to assume", Thoreau argues in the ‘Civil Disobedience’ is to do at any time what I think right’. If that meant breaking the laws of the day, then so be it: ‘under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also in prison’. (Gray 142)

Involved in the anti-slavery movement himself, Thoreau became a role model for all those considering passive resistance the best way of dealing with the injustice, and violence which, unfortunately, ruled many societies. Mahatma Gandhi in his fight for the independence of

India found his strength in Thoreau's works while being incarcerated due to the peaceful methods he used trying to explain the importance of the revolution against the Great Britain to his compatriots. Also, Martin Luther King Jr., an African-American leader of the Civil Rights movement, was inspired by Thoreau's thoughts on individual freedom, and society that appreciates, and allows to each of its members to develop the skills necessary in order to serve to the others. In other words, that is the only way in which progress as well as any other form of advancement, and happiness become possible (Harding 159).

#### 4. HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Henry David Thoreau was born in Concord, Massachusetts, on July 12, 1817. He finished Harvard College in 1837, and returned to the "metropolis" of transcendental movement – his hometown Concord. He had concluded that teaching was not his true vocation, and decided to dedicate himself to writing. Under the great influence of Ralph Waldo Emerson, he wrote his first essays for the well-known transcendental periodical *The Dial*. The year 1845 was considered to be a turning point in his career, and life, in general. It is then that he built a cabin at Walden Pond, not far away from Concord, and started to work on his two most important books – *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and *Walden*. During his stay at Walden, Thoreau was arrested for not paying the taxes. His reasons for the obvious disrespect of the government's laws he describes in his political tract "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience". His behavior was an obvious protest against Negro slavery, and the war led against Mexico at that time. Thoreau did not want to pay taxes to the government which supported this type of oppression. All he wanted was to arouse conscience by his townsmen, and make them aware of the fact that one should not be an accomplice in the injustice which the state does to the weak and disempowered (Gray 138). After two years spent living in his improvised cabin surrounded by the romantic woods, Thoreau returned to his village Concord where he worked at his father's company. He died at the age of forty-four, on May 6, 1862. Described as an eccentric, and an imitator of his friend Emerson, Thoreau lived his life by the laws of the pure individuality, and simplicity. His book *Walden* is the best evidence for the special relationship with the nature he deeply cherished. With his witty and rich language, the author shows us all the complexity, and beauty of the relation between a human and mother nature. It is possible for one to experience this spiritual rebirth under the condition that a person renounces upon the materialistic sphere which suffocates the natural zeal each individual was born with. Walden itself is a great metaphor for his inner uplift as a man who

has realized the importance of the introspective search each individual has to undertake for himself. The following quote explains this union of a man, and the nature even better:

The correspondence, Thoreau points out intermittently throughout *Walden*, is intimate and extensive, making Walden Pond a type of his own spirit, or soul. Negotiating the depth of Walden Pond, Thoreau is negotiating his own possible deepness; contemplating its mysteries, he is also contemplating the mystery of his own individual soul. *Walden* is Thoreau, in the sense that, as he hoped when he ‘went to the woods’, in discovering and fronting its essential facts he discovers and confronts his own – he learns of himself in learning about nature. To conserve nature, as Thoreau saw it and explains it throughout his writings, is to preserve human nature; to care for it, to cultivate it is to care for and cultivate the human spirit; to save it is to save ourselves (Gray 142).

Thoreau even gave a lecture about his experience at the Concord Lyceum on February 10, 1847. Those listening to this speech, and noticing his enthusiasm when talking about his experimental life form were really thrilled by what they had heard. His lecture was a basis for the final version of *Walden* (Harding 153). The book, however, conceals in itself many different interpretations. Firstly, it could be read as an adventure novel with Thoreau as a type of nineteenth-century Robinson Crusoe whose enterprise motivated many anonymous adventurers in building up their own cabin at some place in the wilderness. Even though his intention was not to influence as many people as he did, Thoreau has, inadvertently, set in motion a great number of free-minded people who followed his philosophy. On the other hand, his work is possible to understand as an encyclopedia of flora and fauna which he observed while spending his days at Walden Pond. He describes the beauty, and variety of species he saw in a purely artistic way. Thoreau’s style reminds the literary critics of the earliest examples of modern American prose (Harding 153). Also, he uses his humor as the means of criticizing society in which he lived. Men waste too much of their precious time trying to “keep up with the Jones's”, worrying excessively about the everyday problems, lost in their materialistic aspirations. Henry David Thoreau, however, does not want to criticize, but offers a modest solution for a man burdened with various concerns. This thinker is not against conformity of the modern life. Thus, Thoreau was not a primitivist who decided to



abandon the civilization, or live as a hermit in the woods, but a kind of a prophet, a man who showed by his own example which the major tenets of the transcendental thought are (SOURCE?). In that respect his stay at Walden Pond should be understood as an example of a simple, and uncharged life which each one of us could lead, no matter where he lived. Each person is invited to live the life he has envisioned, not concerning much about what other people think. His way of thinking, and living could be summed up as follows:

If we feel overwhelmed by the complexities of present-day society, there is a way out. “Simplify, simplify, simplify” is his byword. Society may be complex, but our lives need not be if we only have the intelligence to select from that complexity, that which is important to us, and if we only have the courage to ignore the rest no matter what our contemporaries think or say of us.

(Harding 157)

The advancement in terms of science, and technology should be propagated, and used better as they were then in the nineteenth century, thinks Thoreau. In short, the main goal of progress which humans do in the variety of fields must be the transfer of great ideas. According to this, the real essence of *Walden* is to make our lives more meaningful, purposeful, and joyful. Thoreau is, we may say, the most optimistic author of all transcendentalists, believing that men can create heaven here on the earth. In order to achieve that, a certain spiritual renewal is necessary. In *Walden*, a symbol of this change is the oncoming spring whose warm sun melts the ice on the pond, and in that way announces the birth of the new life. The image of the spiritual re-birth has always been compared to the nature, and its seasons. Thoreau’s greatness relies on the fact that he undoubtedly believes in the potential of human spirit, its holiness as well as capability of uplifting from the consumerist superficiality in search for the eternal truth. As the experts on his life, and work once shortly defined his attitude towards the future of the human spiritual strivings:

Each time Thoreau reiterates the image of renewal he emphasizes his hope and belief that mankind will inevitably renew his spirit and be led on greater accomplishments – not physical accomplishments, necessarily, but spiritual. Such a belief is the very epitome of Transcendentalism. (Harding158)

In the period between 1849 and 1853 Thoreau made a few brief trips to Maine, and Cape Cod which served as an inspiration for his other works, such as *Excursions* (1863), *The Maine Woods* (1864), *Cape Cod* (1865) and *A Yankee in Canada* (1866). Thoreau really took seriously his passion for botanical science so that he continued collecting different specimen which he included in his another great work "Kalendar". In 1859 the author started assembling the materials for his study which he named "Wild Fruits". This manuscript, however, remained uncompleted. All in all, Thoreau's visions of self-reliance, and a strong individual who lives according to these principles made a strong influence on the whole transcendental movement. A man himself, as he states, is the only judge between the right and wrong, always having in mind the dignity of our fellow beings (Gray 143).

## 5. RALPH WALDO EMERSON

Emerson's whole work could be easily described with only one sentence: "His writing is the record of his own 'man thinking'" (Harding 37). Ralph Waldo Emerson was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1803 as the second of five sons of a Unitarian minister Rev. William Emerson. His other three siblings, unfortunately, did not survive the early childhood. After his father's death his pious mother together with Waldo's aunt Mary Moody Emerson affected his up-bringing very much. It did not take him long to realize that his father's calling will soon become his only desire, as well. Emerson has become one of the most fervent preachers of Unitarianism. However, in 1832 a certain crisis eventually occurred in his life. Much of the personal pain and loss also marked his future as one of the most prominent transcendental thinkers. His three brothers died of tuberculosis which he successfully battled for a longer period of time. Next year his wife Ellen Tucker also died. Disappointed and hopeless he set sail and went to Europe. On his one year long trip he observed different monuments and historical scenes, read Carlyle, and other Romantic poets, stating proudly that he will be a "naturalist". His work is based on the three major works: the prose-poem *Nature* (1836), "The American Scholar" (1837), and "The Divinity School Address" (1838) (Harding 40). His first work mentioned here - *Nature* was written in the Coolidge house on the Lexington Road. This was also one of the centers of the transcendental life in the first half of the nineteenth century. *Nature*, however, testifies about his attempt to prove that everything which has been studied by a man's mind can find its roots in the nature itself. For Emerson, to be in peace with ourselves means to embrace the tranquility offered to us by the nature. This does not mean that we should escape from the material world, or ignore the needs of the body. On the

contrary, one should never neglect our bodily necessities, but try to control them, always giving the primacy to the spirit. His major thoughts may be summarized as following:

Commodity, beauty, language, discipline – these are the services that Nature may render to Man. Poetry, philosophy, science, religion, and ethics are Man’s means of dealing with the dualism of the divine and the natural worlds that he thus discovers inside himself. In the full wisdom of Nature alone may his spirit hope to resolve this dualism into the act of worship. (Harding 41)

discovers inside himself. In the full wisdom of Nature alone may his spirit hope to resolve this dualism into the act of worship. (Harding 41)

Emerson’s intention is to seek the truth, constantly paying attention to the “moral sentiment” because the nature’s highest task is providing its moral service to man. Nature is the product of the Over-Soul, and so is each individual. Not only is God’s majestic work a symbol of morality, but it is also the key solution to man’s connection to Him. This great American poet, and thinker distinguished between two parties. One of them was called the Party of Memory, and the other The Party of Hope. While the first one dealt with the mistakes, and trespasses done in the past, the Party of Hope was optimistically oriented to the future progress (Gray 131). Of course, Ralph Waldo Emerson was a strong defender of the second party – the Party of Hope. This is why most of Emerson’s essays deal with the ethical questions. The best known essays on this topic are *Essays, First and Second Series* (1841, 1844) that could be read each for itself. Among them is also his very popular essay *Self-Reliance*. It shows a great aspiration towards the completely independent individual who does not find it necessary or important to conform to society whose norms are absurd and confined. A man should not so easily give away his freedom and personal beliefs just in order to respect and fulfill the requirements forged by a group of average people, the major concern of which is to obey, often, a very nonsensical range of laws. In other words, Emerson does not lay a great emphasis on that what others say or think, as long as one is faithful to his own beliefs, and thoughts. In *Self-Reliance* he says that we shall “live truly only if we see truly”, trying to build in the presence of the Over-Soul from which everything originates. In his essays a reader can notice “the matured Emersonian view of life which presented a suspended judgment, a calm of soul obtained by the balance between forces, an admission of both fate and free will, of both divine and human sanctions” (Harding 43).

His other important prose works worth of further analysis are *Representative Men* (1850), *English Traits* (1856), and *The Conduct of Life* (1860) Each one of these emerged as the result of his more than 1, 500 lectures held in the States after his return from Europe. He started teaching on regular basis on the lyceum circuit, and while doing that, he became friends with other authors such as Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau, Bronson Alcott, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. It is, therefore, possible to say that the whole movement started at Emerson's home which was the most popular meeting-place of the Transcendental Club.

In "The American Scholar" Emerson insists upon the, so often mentioned, and even more frequently written about, 'Man Thinking', who does not find his only guidance in the books he reads, or some other institutionalized forms of acquiring knowledge, but learns directly from the life itself. This is how he describes in his own words the school of life which each individual should attend:

"Life is our dictionary. From this it follows that everything in life is a source of knowledge, even the humblest, everyday subject or event. 'I am not for the great, the remote, the romantic; what is doing in Italy or Arabia; what in Greek art or Provencal minstrelsy', he announces. "I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low'. From this it also follows that everyone can be a gatherer of knowledge, a scholar. The sources of knowledge are everywhere, and accessible to anyone who cares to attend. (Gray 134)

As a poet, Emerson is an author whose symbolism and creativity inspired many. His poetic work is deep, and always oriented to the nature. A poet himself is merely a student who is getting to know the techniques which can help one to realize the "lesson of wisdom", and lead him to the ultimate essential truth. He did not only follow the work of Coleridge, or German idealists, but he also enjoyed the worldview of all English metaphysical poets such as John Donne, George Herbert, or Henry Vaughn. As already mentioned, the century in which the transcendentalists spread their influence was the era of destroying old dogmas, and questioning the obsolescent beliefs that prevailed. The confusion, and the possibility of establishing the new order in society was that what attracted Emerson to start thinking and writing critically, to re-open some questions concerning the role of a man, and a poet, at the same time. Actually, Emerson is constantly praising the existence of the poet in this world. He is like a

Messiah who comes to the earth with the good news of salvation for its followers. The poet is, also, “adopted” by nature to sing about her beauties:

The poet has his special function in the order of nature; he is ‘the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty’. He is important to his age because ‘the experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet.’ (Harding 43)

Due to the fact that nature itself is seen by Emerson as a great symbol, almost as the music playing in the poet’s soul, he is more able to find the truth, and answers which lie deeply hidden in his poetry. The nature is for him the “manifestation of the spirit”. This spirit is present in each person, in God, and in the nature, as the unique representation of the Over-Soul. Emerson’s thinking is based on the premise that each singular being has an irreplaceable role in the great circle of life, impregnated by the “entire rhythm and pulse of nature” (Gray 131). To sum up, Emerson’s basic concept could be the best defined by his own words:

“The heart in thee is the heart of all’ as Emerson put it in ‘The Over-Soul’; ‘not a valve, not a wall, not an intersection in nature, but one blood rolls uninterruptedly an endless circulation through all men, as the water of the globe is all one sea and, truly seen, its tide is one.’ (Gray 130)

## Works Cited

Gray, Richard. A History of American Literature. Malden:Blackwell Publishing, 2004.

Harding, Walter. The Landmarks of American Writing. Ed. Hennig Cohen. New York:Basic Books, 1969.

McIlhenny, Ryan. "American Transcendentalism: A History, and the Transcendentalists".

***Journal of the Early Republic*, 30. 3 (2010):488-491**

[http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal\\_of\\_the\\_early\\_republic/toc/jer.30.3.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_the_early_republic/toc/jer.30.3.html) (12-04-2011)

Robinson, David M. "Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller, and Transcendentalism". *American Literary Scholarship* (2010) 2008(1): 3-28;

[http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/american\\_literary\\_scholarship/toc/als2000.1.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/american_literary_scholarship/toc/als2000.1.html) (12-04-2011)

Ruland, Richard, and Malcolm Bradbury. From Puritanism to Modernism. New York:Penguin Books, 1992.