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Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching Ralph Waldo Emerson's & Henry David Thoreau's

Transcendentalism: Essential Essays of Emerson & Thoreau

from

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by

Tom Zolpar



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General Introduction to the Work

What Is Transcendentalism?

IT IS AMAZINGLY DIFFICULT—almost impossible—to come to a succinct and clear definition of Transcendentalism because there is no one set of beliefs—philosophical, spiritual, or ethical—that all transcendentalists embraced.

Indeed, the very emphasis of transcendentalism on the Individual and the Individual's ability to discern Truth makes any attempt to codify it into a simple nutshell statement an oxymoron. In “The Transcendentalist,” Emerson defined transcendentalism as “Idealism as it appears in 1842.” This “idealism” was a call to individuals to turn their backs on the materialistic, industrial, and corporate aspects of the world and to explore the mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects. In exploring these aspects, however, the individual was further called upon to reject the ideas of the past: old doctrines and dogmas that had, in the opinion of the Transcendentalists, been the cause of war and oppression. Rather, the individual was to examine his or her own innermost being and arrive at his or her own intuitive knowledge of truth.

Indeed, one of the goals of the Transcendentalists was to rethink theories of how the mind perceived and understood the world, the Divine, and itself. The prevailing thought of the day taught that such Truth existed outside of the mind and could be learned only through experience and reason. The Transcendentalists—like their European literary counterparts, the Romantics—believed that Truth lay within each individual and could be known intuitively.

So adamant were Emerson and Thoreau that each individual must intuit his or her own truth that neither desired “followers” or “disciples.” Both admonished their would-be disciples to find their *own* way rather than imitate the beliefs and lives of the authors. Each must follow his or her own instincts and not conform to the dictates of society. Although society would always attempt to influence the individual towards conformity, the individual must always struggle to remain true to his or her self and to his or her identity.

This is not to say, however, that there weren't a few principles on which the early Transcendentalists essentially agreed. Many of Emerson's and Thoreau's ideas about individual reason, the rule of conscience, and self-governance were more similar than different and rooted in a preference for nature over the human realm and intuition over reason and experience. These ideals were largely a reaction to the eighteenth-century empiricism (the Age of Reason, the Enlightenment) that gave rise to the Industrial Revolution and the resultant despoilation and pollution of the countryside and the creation of a new form of urban poverty, all in the name of “progress.”

There are strong hints of *vitalism* and *pantheism* in Transcendentalism—the philosophies that the “life spark” is larger than can be explained by biology alone, and the God dwells *in* all things. Emerson

Marxist Theory Applied to *Transcendentalism*



Notes on the Marxist Approach

The Marxist approach to literature is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. His major argument was that whoever controlled the means of production in society controlled the society—whoever owned the factories “owned” the culture. This idea is called “dialectical materialism,” and Marx felt that the history of the world was leading toward a communist society. From his point of view, the means of production (i.e., the basis of power in society) would be placed in the hands of the masses, who actually operated them, not in the hands of those few who owned them. It was a perverted version of this philosophy that was at the heart of the Soviet Union. Marxism was also the rallying cry of the poor and oppressed all over the world.

To read a work from a Marxist perspective, one must understand that Marxism asserts that literature is a reflection of culture, and that culture can be affected by literature (Marxists believed literature could instigate revolution). Marxism is linked to Freudian theory by its concentration on the subconscious—Freud dealt with the individual subconscious, while Marx dealt with the political subconscious. Marx believed that oppression exists in the political subconscious of a society—social pecking orders are inherent to any group of people.

Four main areas of study:

- economic power
- materialism versus spirituality
- class conflict
- art, literature, and ideologies



Activity One

Examining *Walden* for Evidence of Commodification

1. Divide the class into five groups, or a number of groups divisible by five.
2. Assign each group, or allow each to choose, one of the following chapters from Thoreau's *Walden*:
 - "Where I Lived and What I Lived For"
 - "The Village"
 - "The Ponds"
 - "Higher Laws"
 - "Conclusion"
3. Have each group peruse its chapter and answer the following questions:
 - What evidence of commerce or trade is there in this chapter?
 - What specific goods are bought and sold in this chapter?
 - Does Thoreau mention these goods as necessities or luxury items?
 - What is Thoreau's overall attitude toward the exchange of goods and the goods exchanged? Could this attitude be discussed in terms of commodification (e.g., "Thoreau apparently does not recognize that the sale and purchase of _____ in "The Village" is a classic example of commodification.")
4. Reconvene the class and have each group report its findings.
5. As a class, discuss the following:
 - In what trade or commerce does Thoreau admit to engaging?
 - What goods does Thoreau admit to possessing?
 - What goods—or types of goods—does Thoreau claim to value?
 - How would a Marxist describe Thoreau's attitude toward his "possessions"?

Psychoanalytic/Freudian Criticism Applied to *Transcendentalism*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

The term “psychological” (also “psychoanalytical” or “Freudian Theory”) seems to encompass two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son’s desire for his mother, the father’s envy of the son and rivalry for the mother’s attention, the daughter’s desire for her father, the mother’s envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father’s attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person’s subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.



Transcendentalism: Psychoanalytic Activity One

A Brief Explanation of Unitarianism and Timeline of Its Development

- Unitarianism is a theology that asserts that God exists as a single entity. This is in direct opposition to Christian denominations that hold to the belief in the Trinity (and are, therefore, called “Trinitarian”).
- Unitarians believed that their theology more closely reflected the actual teachings of Jesus and the theology of the early Church. The theological doctrine of the Trinity was not established until 325 C.E.
- Unitarians were strictly monotheistic and believed that Jesus was a great man, a prophet of God, perhaps even a supernatural being, *but not God himself*—as is believed by Trinitarian denominations.
- Unitarians accepted the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, that the Bible is the only infallible authority for Christian faith, that it contains all knowledge necessary for salvation and holiness.
- One of the earliest controversies that contributed to the birth of a “Unitarian” theology was the *Monarchian controversy* (approximately 190 C.E.), which began a revolt against the those who began referring to Jesus as a “second God.”
- The controversy arose again in 259 C.E., with adherents to Trinitarianism insisting that “Father” (God) and “Son” (Jesus) were one and the same being, and adherents to Unitarianism maintaining that Jesus was, perhaps, the Son of God, but not the same as God.
- The spread of the “Arian Heresy” in 320-325 C.E. led to the first Council of Nicaea, and the formulation of the official Doctrine of the Trinity. Arius taught that Jesus was a *creation of* God, not equal to God.
- Unitarian theology became more popular and accepted during the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. It was generally called “anti-Trinitarianism.”
- Unitarianism began to emerge as a separate (though illegal) Protestant denomination in England in the 18th century.
- Physicist Isaac Newton was an anti-Trinitarian, and possibly a Unitarian.
- The development of Unitarianism in the United States can be divided into **four periods**:

New Historicism Applied to *Transcendentalism*

Notes on New Historicism

A common tendency in the study of literature written in, and/or set in, a past or foreign culture is to assume a direct comparison between the culture as presented in the text and as it really was/is. New Historicism asserts that such a comparison is impossible for two basic reasons.

First, the “truth” of a foreign or past culture can never be known as established and unchangeable. At best, any understanding of the “truth” is a matter of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. This is most blatantly evident in the fact that the “losers” of history hardly ever get heard. The culture that is dominated by another is often lost to history because it is the powerful who have the resources to record that history. Even in recent past events, who really knows both sides of the story? Who really knows the whole of the Nazi story? Or the Iraqi story? New Historicists argue that these unknown histories are just as significant as the histories of the dominant culture of power and should be included in any world view. Since they often contradict “traditional” (i.e., the winner’s) history, there is no way to really know the absolute truth.

Second, while the text under consideration does indeed reflect the culture in which it was written (and to some degree in which it is set), it also *participates* in the culture in which it is written. In other words, its very existence changes the culture it “reflects.” To New Historicists, literature and culture are born of one another. For example, although Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* certainly reflected the culture of the South during the mid-20th century, it also became a tool to raise awareness of, and change certain elements of, that culture.



- Are there instances in which Thoreau's view seems to run contrary to public opinion? What are they?
- Are there instances in which Thoreau's view seems to run parallel to public opinion? What are they?
- Are there instances in which, based on the facts as you understand them, Thoreau's views seem particularly just? Why?
- Are there instances in which, based on the facts as you understand them, Thoreau's views seem particularly unjust? Why?

7. Reconvene the class and have each group report its findings.

8. As a class, discuss the questions in step 6.

NOTE: As is the case with most Multiple Critical Perspectives activities, students do not need to agree or even come to consensus. The issues of slavery, treatment of Native Americans, just and unjust wars, etc., might be highly emotional issues for some students. The point is simply for every student to be exposed to—and closely examine—another viewpoint, even if ultimately he or she rejects it.