

RESEARCH ARTICLE

**A Transcendental study of Thoreau's Walden**

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**Abstract**

The past few decades has shown an increasing understanding and concern between human and nature. Nature being an integral part of mankind is one of the greatest blessings to us. Nature generates plenteous positive emotions and facilitates spirituality. One can discover the world and attain well-being, joyful relationship and much more by connecting to nature. The same is the philosophy of Transcendentalism; everything is connected, everything is one. This paper derives from an in-depth study of Thoreau's novel Walden. Thoreau's Walden is a transcendental novel. It is a reflection on simplistic belief and living, self reliance, spiritualizing, understanding the importance of nature and so on. The author spent a term of two years and two months in a self made cabin beside Walden Pond in US. He explored and experimented self-reliance and thence achieved simplicity in living. He assessed a life with minimum materialistic things and tried to understand the value of life with least resources of survival. The research shall teach us the value of harmonizing with nature. It is quite essential to inculcate such ideas in the present time. It can open new prospects for achieving a higher reality which exists behind things and going beyond materialism and capitalism.

**Keywords:** Transcendentalism, spirituality, self reliance, materialism and capitalism.

Henry David Thoreau, an American naturalist, poet, philosopher and a leading transcendentalist is known for his best known book Walden. Walden is a reflection on simplistic living, spirituality, self-reliance, importance and appreciation of nature. Thoreau and Emerson, two prominent proponents of Transcendentalism express articulately about the presence of divine in our daily experience. They believes physical and spiritual phenomenon as a part of dynamic processes. One should feel oneness with nature while performing all the duties. Transcendentalists don't believe in distant heaven.

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Transcendentalism is also a revolt against the Calvinism and Unitarianism, which too was a religious movement. They protested against the sobriety, mildness and calm rationalism of Unitarianism. It has its roots in English and German Romanticism, skepticism of David Hume, transcendental philosophy of Immanuel Kant and German Idealism. It was also influenced by Upanishads while dealing with the philosophy of the mind and spirituality. All these revolt and differences paved the way for the transcendental movement. In 1836, transcendental club was formed by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry D Thoreau, Fredric Henry Hedge, Margaret Fuller etc.

A well known work Romanticism and Transcendentalism highlights the view of the proponents of Transcendentalism-Emerson and Thoreau. Both of them believed in the search of truth in nature. For Emerson, "Nature is the symbol of the spirit." (Philips and Ladd. 33) We all are equal in the eyes of the almighty and one should strive to inherit God through spiritual power which is present in the physical universe.

Emerson in his work on romantic philosophy entitled Nature (1836) has given a reflection of nature and beauty incorporated in nature. The transcendental realm which he talks about is both far and near to us. It appears far when we as human beings are much involved in the materialistic pursuits and lose sight as spiritual beings. Thus, we act as a machine or helpless animal. As soon as, we tend to become philosophical, aesthetic and moral we regain the realm, it is approachable.

Among this intellectual community, the name of Margaret Fuller is worth to mention. She is known as an eminent American feminist, philosopher and literary critic. She is also a member of the transcendental club with Thoreau and Emerson. Fuller practiced 'self-improvement' and 'self-culture'. In her theory she talked about the importance of the cultivation of the self for improvement in our attitude and characters. To maintain one's identity one should practice self-culture. Fuller herself quests for self-realization; she has ceased to go to any religious gathering. It was after the death of her father, Timothy that she becomes acquainted to Emerson. He inclined Fuller towards spirituality and self-transcendence. Inspired by the philosophy of Kant, German Romanticism and Plato, Fuller imbibed these preaching in her life and works. The idea of Plato and Platonism was also embraced by American Transcendentalists. 'Platonism' denies the reality of material world, which is only an imitation of the real world. Plato believed in the immortality of the soul. They also rejected the idea of Calvinism and focuses on the need of adopting humanistic forms that is adherent for the development of human powers. Fuller was alike to Plato in his views about women and feminism.

Nature is a representation of the material world which remains outside the self. Beauty is inherent in nature and in all other things. The role of an artist is to convey and remind people of

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this beauty. It is beauty which leads us to virtue and heroism. Ultimately beauty brings humans to God. This paves the way to become a Pantheist. Nature is also an integral part of mankind and thus is a boon to the human fraternity. The past few decades has shown an increasing understanding between human and nature. Nature generates plenteous positive emotions and spirituality. Being one with nature, human beings can discover the world and attain well being, joyful relationship and much more by connecting with nature. The same is the philosophy of Transcendentalism; everything is connected, everything is one.

Thoreau's theory of living is discussed in his masterpiece Walden. He has worked as a teacher, a land surveyor, a laborer, an inventor etc. He composed Walden in 1845 and during its composition he left for his venture in the woods. He built his own cabin near the Walden Pond on the land owned by Emerson. He spent two years and two months and came with this novel in 1854. Walden is a distinctive text on Transcendentalism and a masterpiece among American literary texts. It is a reflection of his journey to discover the truth of life. He has depicted the absurdities of modern life. Talking about the luxuries of life, he says that comforts and affluence in life are nothing but hindrances and obstacles in the way of spiritual elevation of a human being.

The beginning chapter "Economy" introduces his purpose of living alone in the woods near Walden Pond. He talks about the basic necessities of life. Food, shelter and clothing bears varied importance to an animal, a creature and a human being. He realized that by working very little he could easily earn his livelihood and can dedicate much time in contemplation of himself and nature. He renounced being a slave to the materialism. Infact, in his writings we can find the Confucian, Hindu and Buddhist themes. He is one with Emerson and other transcendentalists while sharing the Buddhists belief that the world is given over to Maya or illusion. One should renounce the ego, futile sensual and earthly pleasures. This philosophy is underpinned to some extent in Walden.

Walden is a journey, a voyage to a holistic life. In his second chapter "Where Lived and What I Lived For" he depicts his attractions for the Hollowell farm which he wanted to own. The river side location of the farm, apple orchards, and scenic beauty was the charms he wanted to have for his own. Somehow, he failed to possess this unmolested beauty. He shared innumerable emotions he lived in Walden. "Every morning was a cheerful imitation to make my life of equal simplicity" (Thoreau. 88)

Staying in Walden was a sound investment for him. While he was imbibing the serenity of nature to become prosperous the rest of the society seems to be perpetually sleeping. Bathing in the pond early in the morning becomes a religious practice for him and one of the best things he enjoyed doing.

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In nature we observe growth and development hence it is alive, moving and reproductive. Thoreau sought for Isolation and nearness to nature. He perceives nature as an infinite source of wisdom, beauty and spiritual sustenance. He has scrutinized nature and thus felt effervescence in diverse forms of nature. He was now undergoing in the process of being one with nature. To him the mountains seems to produce a terrestrial music; morning breeze were a poetry of creation; rainiest whether are his companions; birds and other creatures were his neighbors and songsters of the forest. Admiring the beauty of nature Thoreau says, "I looked out on the Pond it impressed me like a high up on the side of mountain, its bottom far above the surface of other lakes and, as the sun arose, I saw it throwing off nightly clothing of mist, and here and there, by degrees..." (Thoreau. 86)

In the subsequent chapters he talks about his introspective voyage into the self. He studied Homer and other great writers immensely. Through them he finds a life too noble, imbibed with higher principles. He learned the way of simplistic living, how one can lead life in limited resources. For Transcendentalists, capitalism, inherent materialism and progressive industrialization are wrong and misleading for the spiritual journey. Thoreau was not a preacher of Transcendentalists rather he discovered God in nature and inside human being himself. Comparing the natural environment to the human life Thoreau says, "The wild goose is more of a cosmopolite than we; he breaks his fast in Canada, takes a luncheon in the Ohio, and plumes himself for the night in a Southern bayon." (Walden.320)

While Emerson gave a philosophical inclination to the theory of Transcendentalism, Thoreau gave it a practical propensity. To conclude we can quote from Thoreau's Walden, "The light which puts out our eyes is darkness to us. Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star." (33)

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