

American Transcendentalism

Basic Assumption

The intuitive faculty, instead of the rational or sensical, became the means for a conscious union of the individual psyche with the world psyche also known as the Oversoul, life-force, prime mover and God.

Basic Premises

1. An individual is the spiritual center of the universe - and in an individual can be found the clue to nature, history and, ultimately, the cosmos itself. It is not a rejection of the existence of God, but a preference to explain an individual and the world in terms of an individual.
2. The structure of the universe literally duplicates the structure of the individual self - all knowledge, therefore, begins with self-knowledge. This is similar to Aristotle's dictum "know thyself."
3. Transcendentalists accepted the neo-Platonic conception of nature as a living mystery, full of signs - nature is symbolic.
4. The belief that individual virtue and happiness depend upon self-realization - this depends upon the reconciliation of two universal psychological tendencies:
 - a. the expansive or self-transcending tendency - a desire to embrace the whole world - to know and become one with the world.
 - b. the contracting or self-asserting tendency - the desire to withdraw, remain unique and separate - an egotistical existence.

Transcendentalism and the American Past

Transcendentalism as a movement is rooted in the American past: To Puritanism it owed its pervasive morality and the "doctrine of divine light." It is also similar to the Quaker "inner light." However, both these concepts assume acts of God, whereas intuition is an act of an individual. In Unitarianism, deity was reduced to a kind of immanent principle in every person - an individual was the true source of moral light. To Romanticism it owed the concept of nature as a living mystery and not a clockwork universe (deism) which is fixed and permanent.

Transcendentalism was a 1. spiritual, 2. philosophical and 3. literary movement and is located in the history of American Thought as

- (a). Post-Unitarian and free thinking in religious spirituality
- (b). Kantian and idealistic in philosophy and
- (c). Romantic and individualistic in literature.

Basic Tenets of American Transcendentalism:

1. Transcendentalism, essentially, is a form of idealism.
2. The transcendentalist "transcends" or rises above the lower animalistic impulses of life (animal drives) and moves from the rational to a spiritual realm.
3. The human soul is part of the Oversoul or universal spirit (or "float" for Whitman) to which it
4. Therefore, every individual is to be respected because everyone has a portion of that Oversoul (God).
5. This Oversoul or Life Force or God can be found everywhere - travel to holy places is, therefore, not

necessary.

6. God can be found in both nature and human nature (Nature, Emerson stated, has spiritual manifestations).
7. Jesus also had part of God in himself - he was divine as everyone is divine - except in that he lived an exemplary and transcendental life and made the best use of that Power which is within each one.
8. "Miracle is monster." The miracles of the Bible are not to be regarded as important as they were to the people of the past. Miracles are all about us - the whole world is a miracle and the smallest creature is one. "A mouse is a miracle enough to stagger quintillions of infidels." - Whitman
9. More important than a concern about the afterlife, should be a concern for this life - "the one thing in the world of value is the active soul." - Emerson
10. Death is never to be feared, for at death the soul merely passes to the oversoul.
11. Emphasis should be placed on the here and now. "Give me one world at a time." - Thoreau
12. Evil is a negative - merely an absence of good. Light is more powerful than darkness because one ray of light penetrates the dark.
13. Power is to be obtained by defying fate or predestination, which seem to work against humans, by exercising one's own spiritual and moral strength. Emphasis on self-reliance.
14. Hence, the emphasis is placed on a human thinking.
15. The transcendentalists see the necessity of examples of great leaders, writers, philosophers, and others, to show what an individual can become through thinking and action.
16. It is foolish to worry about consistency, because what an intelligent person believes tomorrow, if he/she trusts oneself, tomorrow may be completely different from what that person thinks and believes today. "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." - Emerson
17. The unity of life and universe must be realized. There is a relationship between all things.
18. One must have faith in intuition, for no church or creed can communicate truth.
19. Reform must not be emphasized - true reform comes from within.

Possible Reasons for the Rise of American Transcendentalism

1. The steady erosion of Calvinism.
2. The progressive secularization of modern thought under the impact of science and technology.
3. The emergence of a Unitarian intelligentsia with the means, leisure, and training to pursue literature and scholarship.
4. The increasing insipidity and irrelevance of liberal religion to questing young minds - lack of involvement in women's rights and abolitionism.
5. The intrusion of the machine into the New England garden and the disruption of the old order by the burgeoning industrialism.
6. The impact of European ideas on Americans traveling abroad.
7. The appearance of talented and energetic young people like Emerson, Fuller, and Thoreau on the scene.
8. The imperatives of logic itself for those who take ideas seriously - the impossibility, for instance, of accepting modern science without revising traditional religious views.