

Trancendentalism and its influence upon the creation of an american identity



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With the end of the civil war in America came the huge task of inventing a national identity. America wished to cut its European ties, and forge a new voice through literature, as it is through the word that a nation expresses itself. However even though the literature at the time was American in content, the form was European. A cultural distinction was necessary to elevate America's status in the world, and this could be found through the embracing of America's wholly individual landscape, using it as a creative force that would work on how Americans thought and wrote. Emerson and Thoreau perceived forging an identity as first and foremost changing their relationship to nature, and by using a philosophical prose believed they could influence the creation of an entirely individual nation. Emerson wished to extend his transcendental idea of the world by writing of the timeless ideas of nature, the universe and the human being that mixed with specific historical moments, and the state of society and its relationship to the individual. Emerson believed that by reasserting the idea of the spirit it would be possible to discover a realm of experience beyond the reach of conventional thought. The material nature of society had reduced life to a sensual experience, and Emerson wished to search for the laws that governed the senses, what is not immediately visible, the higher laws that govern nature. To do this it was necessary to look inside the life of the mind and of the soul, and find the knowledge that only comes with intuition and concepts working together. By looking beyond what is understood Emerson wanted to take the material life, that of an honest worker, and make it expressive of a higher being, bringing spirituality to everyday life. He believed the unadorned life of the American was more expressive of a higher truth and that a reformation of consciousness would bring back the harmony

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of language and nature that society had worn away. Transcendentalist thought believes that all nature has a moral meaning, and that the further mankind moves from nature the greater the corruption of these moral meanings. To define the self and the nation in an original way it was necessary to return to the origins of life, the deepest past, to the truths that precede human history and the foundations of human existence. If Americans could lose the veneers that society imposes they could develop a united vision of the world and restore to America the fundamental relationship with words. For Emerson's ideas to be successful he had to work on the assumption that when presented with the facts all Americans would wish to find an individual spirituality that would elevate the nature of their menial work and bring a higher truth to their everyday lives. However if all Americans were to follow Emerson's lead it would be necessary to retreat to rural settings, for all of society to return to nature, and in doing so bring down the industrial society that America had worked so hard to build. A moving and growing society that is constantly looking forward needs a steady structure and a reliable workforce in every field. It is all well and good to desire a more fulfilling life for one's fellow countrymen but if this can only be achieved through a neglect of the country as a system then the society that has given one the chance to find a higher truth could well fall apart. This idea also bases its success on the belief that human beings are inherently good natured and unselfish, and would reject the material life for a way of life that would take them closer to nature and the universe, and the fact that America is now the world's richest country and only super-power shows it was a choice the everyman was unwilling to take. Thoreau took the thinking of Emerson to the next logical step, believing that knowledge of America

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would come through the knowledge of the self. America was undergoing a mass period of industrialisation and social turmoil what with the abolition of slavery and social causes such as women's liberation. Thoreau believed that by transcending to a higher spiritual level of existence American's would lose the idea of the egotistical self and find a greater concept of form and truth. The philosophy of America has always been the idea of writing a self, of creating a social utopia that would echo throughout the world. Thoreau also recognised that American identity was dependent on a sense of space, and that by mapping the land and terrain, and being in a constant state of transition and motion Americans could only further their search for the ideal society. Believing history and geography to be unnecessary in interpreting the world he tried to encourage the philosophical idea that the world could be created by individuals through self-regulation. By exploring the self within and the universe beyond and by removing the needs of the self it would be possible to remove state structures and have a democracy of individuals. As history was open to manipulation a truer discovery of the world could be found through the universal force as recognised in nature, and experienced through nature's constant present tense. Individuals could cultivate their sense of a moral duty and in doing so discover the invisible law of conscience that is superior to the law of the state. It is the idea that individuals' law of conscience was aligned with the law of nature, that nature and culture should be one and all cultivated laws are secondary. These ideas put a lot of faith in the individual and the possibility of their success was all down to an interpretation of what the individual deems to be expressive of a higher truth. It works on the belief that all individuals, by nature, are honest and truthful, and most of all, moral. In putting such faith in the individual

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however, Thoreau is presenting the possibility for, as his writings are open to interpretation, individuals of an inherently selfish, greedy or hateful nature to justify said nature because they have searched themselves and found their true nature, even though the morals found would be the antithesis of Thoreau's writings. When he talks of the universal force recognised in nature he sees America as a kind of universe, presenting a universal idea and way of life through which America could lead the rest of the world by example. This again is based on the assumption that when other countries throughout the world are presented with these ideas they will follow suit. It does not account for the possibility that this way of life might be rejected, and in being so arrogant about the success of the idea they immediately exclude any country or civilisation who do not wish to pursue a way of life in America's vein. The practical demands of society also precipitate a failure of Thoreau's teachings, as society would stand still if all American's were to leave their towns and jobs in search of their own Walden. America was founded not only by people wanting a better way of life, but by a selfish desire to improve their way of life. Not saying that it is wrong for people to want to better themselves or improve the conditions in which they live, but the idea of forging a more prosperous and comfortable way of life is a naturally selfish act. As society grows and develops in a successful way its people become more accustomed to the ease that an industrial, and now technological age, provides, and therefore more unwilling to give up the material luxuries that society has provided them with. The spiritual demands of the individual are forgotten as people become more obsessed with every day life and lose the idea of a possible higher truth and natural law, due to the more prevailing cultural worries such as putting food on the table and <https://assignbuster.com/trancendentalism-and-its-influence-upon-the-creation-of-an-american-identity/>

getting the bills paid. To philosophise upon the nature of life and the mind, body, and soul also necessitates a naturally inquisitive nature and degree of intelligence, and a desire to become more spiritually aware, and if these are not already present within the individual it is all the more difficult to persuade such an individual to make such a change to their lifestyle. The relationship of the state to the individual also encroaches on an individual's search for truth through spirituality as it provides the individual with another authority to answer to, and is all the more present as it governs the individual in a more visible way than that of the eternal laws of nature. Mankind's development of and continued dependency on machines simply adds to the loss of a connection with nature. Nature is disrespected in exchange for man-made objects that have become practical participants in the creation and growth of society. In cities there is a cultivated countryside that is wholly unnatural, a kind of man made nature that's purpose is to give the impression of a society that is in touch with nature and that even in highly populated areas there are places where man cannot develop. One must also remember that in trying to write the nation both Emerson and Thoreau were looking at life in an entirely idealistic way, a nice idea, but wholly implausible when considering the nature of man, which history shows to be selfish and greedy. Edgar Allen Poe however believed the truth of the self lay in the alienation of one's self, and that being an American meant being locked into the self as there were no refined standards of living or an established cultural tradition. Contrary to the beliefs of Emerson and Thoreau, Poe wished to push emotional experience to its limit. He believed art was confined to a pure product of mind and that through his characters he could embrace the extremes of the psyche. He believed that literature, <https://assignbuster.com/trancendentalism-and-its-influence-upon-the-creation-of-an-american-identity/>

just as the self and as the landscape of America, should be explored and developed into something entirely American. He did not believe in the returning to nature for the reason that he was aware of the true nature of mankind. He wished to encourage his readers to question whether they could trust what they saw, believing extreme conditions of the psyche to be the truest form of experience, and these would outrun language's capacity to deal with the expression of these emotions, showing language to be solely a form of communication and having less truth than Emerson or Thoreau might have one believe. He was similar to his predecessors however in the sense that he believed in a complete retreat into the mind to discover the truth of the self. The spiritual demands of the individual are neglected due to the practical demands of society, for although religion is a major part of modern American life, for the majority of people it is secondary to the cultural necessities that dominate the modern way of life. Transcendentalist thought was attempting to provide Americans with a practical accompaniment to religion that would shape the individuals as the collective group that form society, but it was difficult to harmonise the two as it proved impossible to have an individual group, a contradictory term that showed the two could not work in conjunction with each other. The self regulation that was necessary for transcendentalism to succeed was lacking in the workingman that it proposed to help, and the higher spiritual level such thought promised proved too difficult to attain. Its real failure however was in its assumption of mankind's desire for a spiritual truth to life, as this was found to be secondary to society and to religion. As many Americans already believed their lives to be enriched by Christianity, what would a long self-examination show them that they did not already know? Over history individuals have

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demonstrated a lack of an ability to govern themselves and a lack of discipline to make a major change succeed, and transcendentalist thought proved to be just another impractical ideal. Bibliography Norton Anthology Vol. 1 Norton 1998