

American transcendentalism: the life of spiritual individuality assignment

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In the Second Great Awakening different spurs of religious movements were influenced around the country in the late 18th century. During the religious movement one of the major reforms was Unitarianism. In the Unitarian Church the main focus is on God, and the impact God has on the unity of the world. Although many joined this reform, there were others that went against it. They disagreed with the contracted meaning of Christian when referring to God. They favored the name "theist," that showed "universal designation of the divinity." These people were called Transcendentalist.

Transcendentalism was an idealistic and literary movement that promotes a simple lifestyle and a "semi-religious nature." The Transcendental Club was founded in 1836 in Boston, Massachusetts. The founder and most popular of them all was a writer and bard, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Others that were involved were a feminist reformer and writer, Margaret Fuller, a minister, Theodore Parker, naturalist and novelist, Henry David Thoreau, James Freeman Clarke and many other members. People became very confused with the beliefs of the transcendentalism.

Transcendentalism contained "a combination of intellectual, aesthetic, and spiritual attributes." James Freeman Clarke stated that "we are called like-minded because no two of us think alike." There was no definite dogma for this belief but there were still values generally held. In *An Essay on Transcendentalism*, by Charles Mayo Ellis he explained that transcendentalism sustained one's idea from God, motivation or the pious world. The inner conscience was where all ideas and reason began.

Transcendentalists had a very different lifestyle.

They were not very successful with all their ideas, but they promoted ideological and social change through their research and the great mind their God gave them. Emerson also rejected the Unitarianism community and was seen to be the founder of the Transcendentalists. He believed Unitarianism to be “ a cold intellectualism that seemed to destroy the validity of man’s conscience,” meaning stopping a man from thinking. He created a group with his friends that did an extensive research on a philosophy that had a more universal just. A philosophy they revealed was a German transcendentalist by Immanuel Kant in the 18th century.

Emerson’s lectures were mostly about the history of the world and what history actually is. America was influenced also by the books, *Aids of Reflection* by Thomas Carlyle and Samuel Coleridge. All the reform grew by the writings by Bhagavad-Gita of Hinduism, *Saying of Confucius*, and French authors. Ralph Waldo Emerson created the First Series in 1841 an *Essay on History* and begins with one of his poems: There is no great and no small To the Soul that maketh all: And where it cometh, all things are; And it cometh everywhere, I am owner of the sphere

Of the sevens and the solar year, Of Caesar’s hand, and Plato’s brain, Of Lord Christ’s heart, and Shakspeare’s strain. At the end of the poem Emerson’s references to Caesar, Plato, Lord Christ, and Shakespeare, who are still known as great men, would have influenced Americans to keep listening, reading, and understanding his views. Emerson believed in self-reliance. Transcendentalism is focused on the right to reason through one’s conscience and spiritual world. Emerson states in his essay that one who has

“ the right of reason is made a freeman of the whole estate. He described his thought by using the experiences of Plato. Americans would be able to realize if a great man like Plato acted upon Emerson’s statement, and they also were to repeat it, they may become great like him. Emerson continued to explain that one is determines their history and “ this human mind wrote history... if the whole of history is in one man, it is all to be explained from individual experience. ” If one is an individual their decisions impact where they will end up in life, but also one individual can change the world.

Emerson uses the example that “ everyone revolution was first a thought in one man’s mind and when the same thought occurs to another, it is the key to that era...every reform was once a private opinion, and when it shall be a private opinion again, it will solve the problem of the age. ” Solving the problem of the age was the task of Emerson and other transcendentalists and other social reformers. Throughout the whole essay the individual that Emerson was referring to can be anyone. He did not judge by the color and size, but people were seen as equals. This idea gave hope to the minorities of America who were looked down upon.

Emerson gave them up and believed that they will motivate themselves to be the individual that wise men opt to be. Henry David Thoreau had his own vies on transcendentalism. He believed in “ individual conscience” and if one disagreed with a law proposed by the government they should refuse to obey the laws. He did not believe in violence and always resorted in peace. In the Resistance to Civil Government written 1849 by Thoreau, he explained how the American government was corrupted. He said, “ That government is

best which governs not at all," throughout his proposal he continued to state a good government was expedient.

An expedient government is one that focuses on the practical rather than the moral reasons. The American government was all tradition and it did not promote a free country. Thoreau wanted a better government.

Transcendentalists had strong faith in the conscience. Thoreau asked the question, " Can there not be a government in which the majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience? " One should use their conscience to understand right from wrong and not by what tradition may explain. Thoreau also explained how the corrupted government has controlled the people.

In the military they were known as the " standing army" and the man had no free will of judgment. Thoreau's idea of civil disobedience was practiced by a soldier who did not want to fight in an unjust war. The government expected to obey their " unjust laws" There were two different types of injustice described. Thoreau understood which situations to let go and which to act upon: If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go: perchance it will wear smooth—certainly the machine will wear out.

If the injustice has a spring, or a pulley, or a rope, or a crank, exclusively for itself, then perhaps you may consider whether the remedy will not be worse than the evil; but if it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, and then I say, break the law. Thoreau did not believe in slavery or the war in Mexico and these events started the civil

disobedience. When person does not follow the rules of the government then they are put in jail. Jail is the right place for both a thief and a “ just man”.

The whole America government was based on majority rules; the government was based on injustice. All voting is a sort of gaming, like checkers, or backgammon... playing with right and wrong, with moral questions; and betting naturally accompanies it...cast your whole vote, not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence. ” The minorities were rejected and overlooked. Minorities were powerless, and they should result into civil disobedience. Thoreau explains the attitude of his state by giving a scenario. What will the state of Massachusetts would do with the man; they will rather keep all in prison and give up war and slavery. Civil disobedience is a rebellion known as a “ peaceable revolution. The reason that many did not want to practice civil disobedience was because of fear. They were afraid of the consequence to their kin and assets. Thoreau experienced the consequences of civil disobedience. He did not pay his tax for six years and he was put in jail. He believed that living in jail was better than obeying an unjust law. This rebellion in jail was a type of propaganda that influenced people to take to stand for what they believed in and used their conscience. Men that use their conscience are just men. Thoreau’s dream was to live in a stat in which justice was served to all and everyone is treated with respect.

Transcendentalism was a very widespread religion that understood one’s individuality and self-reliance. Throughout America, people were more and more influenced by the Second Great Awakening. Ideological and social change was promoted mostly through writing. Both Emerson and Thoreau were able to express themselves that was to motivation a reader to change

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their lifestyle. Also the Transcendental Club was not strict and did not have an imposed guideline. Transcendentalism focused on the unity of others and the minorities are recognized.

In the long-run Transcendentalism was not as successful as it was seen to be, but during the late 18th century and early 19th century this reform had a big impact on the lives of the American people. 1. Campbell, Donna M. "American Transcendentalism." <http://www.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/amtrans.htm>. 21 May 2007. Literary Movements. 19 Apr. 2009 . 2. Danzer, Gerald A. , et al. "Religion Sparks Reform." Afterword. *The Americans*. 1985. By Danzer, et al.. Ed. John S. Bowes. Evanston: McDougal Littell, 2003. 240-245. 3. Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Emerson's Journal, June 24, 1863." http://www.transcendentalists.com/emerson_on_thoreau.htm. 19 Apr. 2009. Jone Johnson Lewis. 19 Apr. 2009 . 4. Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "History from Essays: First Series (1841)." <http://www.emersoncentral.com/history.htm>. 19 Apr. 2009. Jone Johnson Lewis. 19 Apr. 2009 . 5. Harding, Walter. "Transcendentalism." <http://www.themystica.com/mystica/articles/t/transcendentalism.html>. 14 Apr. 2009. MYSTICA. 19 Apr. 2009 . 6. Thoreau, Henry David. "1849, Resistance to Civil Government." <http://www.transcendentalists.com/1thorea.html>. 19 Apr. 2009. Jone Johnson Lewis. 19 Apr. 2009 .