

Walden and transcendentalism

Philosophy



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Henry Thoreau's masterpiece, *Walden or a Life in the Woods*, shows the impact transcendentalism had on Thoreau's worldview. Transcendentalism is a philosophy that asserts the primacy of the spiritual over the material. Transcendentalism puts the emphasis on spiritual growth and understanding as opposed to worldly pleasures. Thoreau's idea of transcendentalism stressed the importance of nature and being close to nature. He believed that nature was a metaphor for spiritual enlightenment. A walk in the woods therefore was a search for spiritual enlightenment.

One should look 'through' nature, not merely 'at' her. In *Walden*, Thoreau's idea of transcendentalism is broken into three areas. The first is the importance of the spiritual world as opposed to material wants. He accentuates this idea by explaining how the physical world only exists so that souls can experience life to the fullest. Thoreau speaks a great deal about physical property in the first chapter, entitled "Economy". He keeps a detailed record of the economic cost of his venture into the woods and explains to his readers his pity for the people who have numerous material possessions.

Thoreau states, "When I have met an immigrant tottering under a bundle which contained his all...I have pitied him, not because that was his all, but because he had all that to carry." [1] The second transcendentalism theme is the idea of individuality- the idea that an individual is unique and should act according to his personality and ideals. Individuality is a basic idea of the transcendentalists and they firmly believed that one should search for 'self-discovery'.

Thoreau observed, “ Every man is the builder of a temple, called his body, to the god he worships, after a style purely his own, nor can he get off by hammering marble instead. ”[2] He emphasized the “ style” as an individual style, one that was distinctive to each person. He even told his readers in Walden that he went into the woods to search for knowledge and truth. Self-discovery and individuality were also attributed to any other characters in Walden that were mentioned. Thoreau takes great pains to describe each character, even down to the farmer’s “ wrinkled, sibyl-like, cone-headed”[3] infant in chapter 10, “ Baker Farm”.

He makes sure his readers understand the unique attributes of each individual in his experiences. As Thoreau once said, “ It is what a man thinks of himself that really determines his fate. ” The final prominent transcendentalism theme expressed in Walden is the importance of experiences. Transcendentalists believed personal experience is how one learned. Literally, people learned everything the hard way. Thoreau demonstrated this clearly in the experiment of living in the woods for two years. He explains in Walden that he wanted to experience living simply for an extended period of time.

Notice that Thoreau did not speculate, draw conclusions, or even ask someone who had tried it. The only way, in his mind, that he was going to learn about living simply was to undergo it personally. In speaking about life in the chapter, “ Where I lived and What I Lived For”, Thoreau said, “...if [life] proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. ”[4]

He emphasized living and feeling everything to be able to understand life and its meaning.

Walden is often viewed as simply a proponent of environmental care and nature. However, it persuades the reader to do much more than take care of nature. In fact, nature is not even the most prominent ideal in Thoreau's writings. The thesis of Walden is clearly stated in the first few pages of the book. Thoreau writes, "With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meager life than the poor...None can be an impartial or wise observer of human life but from the vantage ground of what we should call voluntary poverty. [5] The entirety of the "Economy" chapter is devoted to material possessions and Thoreau's idea that the physical pleasures exist only to help the soul endure. Very little time is spent on the goodness of nature. When it is mentioned, it is shown, as was stated above, that nature serves as a sort of looking glass to spiritual ideals. Because this book was quoted often by radical groups in 1960-70, Walden became a sign of disobedience and rebellion to the conservative community. However, there are a few ideas of which Christians can approve. The first is non-materialism.

Thoreau quotes Matthew 6: 19 saying, "By a seeming fate, commonly called necessity, they are employed, as it says in an old book, laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal. It is a fool's life, as they will find when they get to the end of it, if not before. "[6] He takes great pains throughout the entire book to make sure his readers understand that material possessions should not be the only thing in which

people place all of their happiness. The second idea Christians can applaud is the idea of individuality.

As was mentioned above, Thoreau kept the Transcendentalist idea of a person's individual worth in his writings. Because of this belief, he was one of the most outspoken human rights activists in his lifetime. He wrote A Plea for Captain John Brown supporting John Brown's efforts to end slavery. Thoreau said, " I do not believe in erecting statues to those who still live in our hearts, whose bones have not yet crumbled in the earth around us, but I would rather see the statue of Captain Brown in the Massachusetts State-House yard, than that of any other man whom I know. I rejoice that I live in this age, that I am his contemporary. [7] His belief in the basic human rights of every man stemmed from his support of individuality and the unique worth of every person on this planet. Even though there are a few ideas that Christians can applaud in Walden, there is one of which they should be wary. This idea is the idea that rebellion and disobedience towards government is acceptable if one believes the government is wrong. Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his eulogy for Thoreau, articulated this idea, saying that Thoreau opposed the government. Thoreau disrespected government officials by refusing to obey tax laws and paid for it by spending a brief time in jail.

However, many people, instead of realizing the negative influence Thoreau was creating, idealized him for his ' patriotic' stance. Thoreau says in Walden, " One afternoon, near the end of the first summer...I was seized and put into jail, because, as I have elsewhere related I did not pay a tax to, or recognize the authority of, the state which buys and sells men, women, and children, like cattle at the door of its senate-house. "[8] He did not recognize

the authority of the government because of the slavery in the country. Even though slavery is immoral, Romans 13: 1 clearly states, “ Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.

For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. ”[9] The Bible articulates that Christians must be subject to those whom God has placed into authority. Thoreau discourages this idea and instead institutes an attitude of rebellion. Christians should be cautious of this attitude and worldview. Very few instances occur in which Christians should rebel against authority. The only instance where they should rebel is under a government which demands that its citizens disobey God’s orders. Walden was written many years ago and yet, society can still learn from the author’s words.

Whether the ideas are detrimental or helpful, everyone can agree that Thoreau was a strong Transcendentalist with a distinct mindset. This mindset affects everyone who reads his works. Emerson once articulated that Thoreau inspired many around him through his idealistic thinking. Thoreau has inspired, and will continue to inspire, numerous people through his book, Walden or a Life in the Woods. ----- [1] Henry David Thoreau, Walden ; and Civil Disobedience (New York: Barnes and Nobles Classics, 2003), 56. 2] Henry David Thoreau, Walden ; and Civil Disobedience (New York: Barnes and Nobles Classics, 2003), 175. [3] Henry David Thoreau, Walden ; and Civil Disobedience (New York: Barnes and Nobles Classics, 2003), 161 [4] Henry David Thoreau, Walden ; and Civil Disobedience (New York: Barnes and Nobles Classics, 2003), 74 (brackets added) [5] Henry David Thoreau, Walden ; and Civil Disobedience (New York: Barnes and

Nobles Classics, 2003), 16 [6] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden ; and Civil Disobedience* (New York: Barnes and Nobles Classics, 2003), 9 [7] "Thoreau--On John Brown," Virginia Commonwealth University, [http://www. cu. edu/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/thoreau/johnbrown. html](http://www.cu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/thoreau/johnbrown.html) (accessed September 15, 2010). [8] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden ; and Civil Disobedience* (New York: Barnes and Nobles Classics, 2003), 137 [9] "Passage: Romans 13: 1 (ESV Bible Online)," Good News / Crossway Home - Christian Books, Gospel Tracts, and the English Standard Version (ESV) Bible, [http://www. gnpcb. org/esv/search/? q= Romans 13: 1](http://www.gnpcb.org/esv/search/?q=Romans+13:1) (accessed September 15, 2010).