

Transcendentalism in walt whitman's and ralph emerson's works

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Transcendentalism Paper

The Puritans of New England called their home, “ A city upon a hill”. They put themselves on a pedestal, and this depicts Puritan values and characteristics. If someone lives “ upon a hill”, they are watching everyone around them. In Puritan society, people were aware they were constantly being watched and judged. They valued having a perfect and upstanding image in the eyes of society. This value system was common but was fundamentally different from the dogma that succeeded it:

Transcendentalism. Transcendentalism is a doctrine of thinking valuing individuality, closeness to God through nature, and achieving a higher level of understanding and self reliance. Through personification and metaphor, Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson illustrate the core value of Transcendentalism: Speaking one’s mind and not worrying about what society thinks.

The personification of nature, schools of thought, and the ideas of good and bad by Walt Whitman characterizes the Transcendental value of expressing one’s thoughts without constraint and never ceasing to question one’s beliefs. Whitman, a prominent Transcendentalist, believed that people were too afraid of how others perceived their actions and that they should act, speak, and question in an impromptu manner. He says, “ I, . . . begin. Hoping to cease not till death. Creeds and schools in abeyance, Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten, I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard, Nature without check with original energy” (Whitman). Whitman critiques the lack of questioning and fear of judgement

many people are guilty of. He personifies the Puritan creed by saying it's retiring and in abeyance, meaning it is ceasing to change. However, he says it's not forgotten which means people are still listening to the judgment of others without questioning it and forming new beliefs. He does not agree with this and says he harbors for both good and bad. To harbor something is to give shelter, and Whitman uses that verb to personify the good and bad outcomes and assert his outspokenness. Whitman capitalizes Nature, effectively personifying it as a person. Nature being without check but with original energy reveals the Transcendentalist value of people saying what they think candidly whereas Puritans encourage censoring themselves so they won't be seen badly by other people. Puritan values are fundamentally different from those of Transcendentalists because the Puritans want people to accept what they are told and to conform, and the Transcendentalists value people who always are outspoken and people who defy and question what they are told in order to self-improve.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, through metaphor, depicts the Transcendentalist value of not letting other people's judgement of them affect their opinions. Emerson is a transcendentalist who focuses mainly on the idea that most people are too reliant on others opinions of them and need to internalize their self-worth and identity. He says, " But the man (as opposed to infant), as it were, clapped into jail by his consciousness. As soon as he has once acted or spoken with éclat, he is a committed person, watched by the sympathy or the hatred of hundreds whose affections must now enter into his account" (Emerson). Emerson uses jail as a metaphor for society. He characterizes man as being ' committed', or imprisoned, in jail by his

consciousness, or his awareness of other's perceptions after his display of thoughts and opinions. In his entrapment, man takes notice of the feelings of pity or hatred from others, each denoting a lack of acceptance. He begins to internalize what they say and change his beliefs and values to fit others. Emerson uses this metaphor of a prisoner to describe what the majority of men are like by holding Puritan values. However, he and other Transcendentalists don't agree with this. Transcendentalism values individuality and self-improvement, not improving oneself based on what other people say is wrong or good about them. In Transcendentalism, the only opinion that should matter is your own. This is fundamentally different from Puritans who accept their committed positions in society and let others opinions manifest as their own.

Transcendentalism was adopted as a reaction to Puritan values. The Puritan values made people feel oppressed and trapped in society and Transcendentalism gave them the belief that no one else's opinion matters. This meant they could become their own person and have their own ideas. This is the exact foil of Puritanism. A contemporary example would be hipsters. The world of today emphasises things that are new, shiny, exciting, and innovative in both language and idea. The majority of the world conforms to these values and buy or like what it's told to so they can become part of a group. These conformers are modern day Puritans who care about what others think. Hipsters on the other hand, value the antiquated or simple aspects of life and nature. They don't care what people think of them, they get their opinions of themselves from their values and no one else. They are the foil of conformers and the modern day

Transcendentalists. They want to be better than the conformers and achieve the apex of maturity, understanding, and self-reliance. These two cultures developed in the same way that Puritanism and Transcendentalism did. Hipsters, like transcendentalists, formed from conformity and oppression, like Puritanism to become the opposite of what they knew before.