

---

# Transcendentalism in Henry David Thoreau's work

---

**Alka Tripathi**

Associate Professor,

Government Girls College, Chomu, Rajasthan,

---

**Abstract** –Transcendentalism was a philosophical and literary movement that emerged in the mid-19th century in the United States. It was a reaction against the prevailing intellectual and cultural climate of the time, which was dominated by rationalism, materialism, and the mechanistic worldview of the Industrial Revolution. Transcendentalism emphasized the inherent goodness of humanity, the importance of intuition, the need for individualism, and the spiritual unity of all things. Henry David Thoreau was one of the most prominent transcendentalists, and his ideas and writings had a significant influence on the movement. This research paper explores the role of transcendentalism in the life and work of Thoreau.

**Keywords:** Transcendentalism, Henry David Thoreau, Spirituality, Nature, Individualism, Transcendence, Civil disobedience

## 1. Biography of Henry David Thoreau

Henry David Thoreau was born in Concord, Massachusetts, on July 12, 1817. He was the son of a pencil-maker and grew up in a family of modest means. Thoreau was educated at Harvard University, where he studied classics, philosophy, and languages. After graduating in 1837, Thoreau became a schoolteacher and a freelance writer. In 1845, he built a small cabin near Walden Pond in Concord, where he lived for two years, immersed in nature and contemplation. This experience inspired his most famous book, "Walden," which was published in 1854. Thoreau also wrote essays, poems, and other works, many of which dealt with his philosophical and political views. He was an active participant in the abolitionist movement and supported the rights of individual conscience and civil disobedience<sup>[1]</sup>. Thoreau died of tuberculosis in 1862, at the age of 44.

## 2. Transcendentalism in Thoreau's work

Thoreau's philosophy was deeply rooted in transcendentalism. He shared the movement's belief in the innate goodness of humanity and the importance of individualism. Thoreau saw nature as a source of spiritual and moral inspiration, and he believed that the natural world could teach us valuable lessons about the universe and ourselves. Thoreau's experience at Walden Pond was a manifestation of his transcendentalist beliefs<sup>[2]</sup>. He lived in harmony with nature, and his solitude allowed him to connect with his inner self and his spiritual dimension. Thoreau's writings are full of references to the spiritual unity of all things and the interconnectedness of nature.

In his essay "Walking," Thoreau wrote, "I am a parcel of God," emphasizing his belief in the divinity of all beings<sup>[3]</sup>. Thoreau's political views were also influenced by transcendentalism. He believed in the sovereignty of the individual and the need for civil disobedience when unjust laws conflicted with individual conscience. Thoreau's essay "Civil Disobedience" is a classic statement of this philosophy. Thoreau refused to pay taxes to support the Mexican-American War and was briefly imprisoned for his stance. His willingness to go to jail for his beliefs inspired others to follow his example, and he became a symbol of resistance to tyranny.

### **3. Nature**

One of the central themes of Thoreau's work is the importance of nature. For Thoreau, nature was not simply a physical environment but a spiritual and moral one as well. He believed that nature could teach us important lessons about ourselves and the universe. In his essay "Nature," Thoreau wrote, "In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life, - no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair." In "Walden," Thoreau describes his experience of living in a cabin in the woods for two years. He writes about the beauty and majesty of nature, and how it provided him with a sense of peace and contentment<sup>[4]</sup>. Thoreau believed that by immersing himself in nature, he could better understand himself and the world around him.

### **4. Individualism**

Another key principle of transcendentalism that is reflected in Thoreau's work is individualism. Transcendentalists believed that each individual was unique and had a divine spark within them. Thoreau believed that people should be true to themselves and not conform to the expectations of society. In his essay "Self-Reliance," Thoreau wrote, "To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment." Thoreau's experience at Walden Pond was a manifestation of his commitment to individualism<sup>[5]</sup>. By living simply and in harmony with nature, he was able to express his true self and live according to his own values.

### **5. Spiritual Unity**

Transcendentalists believed in the spiritual unity of all things. They saw the universe as a divine creation in which everything was connected. Thoreau shared this belief and often wrote about the interconnectedness of all things. In "Walden," he writes, "I am a part or particle of God." Thoreau believed that by recognizing the spiritual unity of all things, people could transcend their individual egos and connect with something greater than themselves.

### **6. Civil disobedience**

Thoreau's essay "Civil Disobedience" is one of his most famous works and reflects his commitment to the principles of transcendentalism. In the essay, Thoreau argues that individuals have a duty to disobey unjust laws that conflict with their conscience. He writes, "If a thousand men were not to pay their tax bills this year, that would not be a violent and bloody measure, as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to commit violence and shed innocent blood." Thoreau's commitment to civil disobedience was inspired by his belief in the sovereignty of the individual<sup>[6]</sup>. He believed that individuals had a moral obligation to resist injustice and tyranny, even if it meant breaking the law.

## **7. Thoreau's Influence of Transcendentalism**

Thoreau's work had a significant influence on the transcendentalist movement. His emphasis on individualism, self-reliance, and spiritual transcendence resonated with many of his contemporaries. Thoreau's example of living simply and in harmony with nature inspired others to seek a similar lifestyle. The ideas of Thoreau and other transcendentalists also helped to pave the way for later movements such as environmentalism and civil rights. Thoreau's writing style was also influenced by transcendentalism. He believed in the power of language to evoke emotions and ideas, and his prose often contains poetic and symbolic language<sup>[7]</sup>. Thoreau's writing is characterized by vivid descriptions of nature, introspection, and philosophical musings.

Thoreau's most famous work, "Walden," is a testament to his transcendentalist beliefs. The book describes Thoreau's experience living in a small cabin near Walden Pond for two years, where he immersed himself in nature and contemplation. Thoreau's observations of the natural world led him to a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of all things and the spiritual unity of the universe. In "Walden," Thoreau writes, "I am convinced, both by faith and experience, that to maintain one's self on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime, if we will live simply and wisely." Thoreau's other works also reflect his transcendentalist beliefs. In "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," Thoreau describes a boat trip he took with his brother, during which he reflects on the spiritual and moral lessons of nature. Thoreau's essays, such as "Walking," "Life Without Principle," and "Slavery in Massachusetts," also deal with his philosophical and political views. Thoreau's other works also reflect his transcendentalist beliefs. In "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," Thoreau describes a boat trip he took with his brother, during which he reflects on the spiritual and moral lessons of nature. Thoreau's essays, such as "Walking," "Life Without Principle," and "Slavery in Massachusetts," also deal with his philosophical and political views.

## **8. Criticism of Henry David Thoreau because of transcendentalism**

While Henry David Thoreau is widely regarded as a leading figure of the transcendentalist movement, his ideas and writings have also faced criticism from various sources. Some critics have argued that Thoreau's transcendentalist beliefs were impractical and unrealistic, while others have criticized his lack of engagement

with society and politics. One of the most prominent critics of Thoreau's transcendentalist philosophy was Ralph Waldo Emerson, who was also a leading figure of the movement. Emerson saw Thoreau's emphasis on individualism and self-reliance as a form of egotism and criticized his lack of engagement with society. In his journal, Emerson wrote, "I am afraid he has impaired his health by living too alone, and so absorbed his attention in his whimsies as to lose some power of dealing with practical affairs." Emerson also criticized Thoreau's tendency to romanticize nature, writing, "He seemed to me to have attained a certain intellectual and moral altitude which was, unfortunately, a little thin and rarefied, as if he had got to the top of a mountain and breathed a little too keen air." Other critics have taken issue with Thoreau's rejection of materialism and capitalism. Some have argued that his emphasis on simplicity and self-reliance was a form of elitism, as it was only possible for those who could afford to live without the trappings of modern society. Others have criticized Thoreau's refusal to participate in the political process, arguing that his emphasis on individual conscience was a form of escapism that ignored the need for collective action<sup>[8]</sup>. In more recent times, Thoreau's writing has also been criticized for its Eurocentric and male-centric perspective. Some have argued that his romanticization of nature and his idealized view of Native Americans ignored the reality of their oppression and exploitation by white settlers. Others have criticized his views on women, which were typical of his time and saw them as subordinate to men. Despite these criticisms, Thoreau's ideas and writings continue to inspire and influence people around the world. His emphasis on individualism, self-reliance, and spiritual transcendence continues to resonate with those seeking a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them. While his ideas may not be without flaws, they remain an important part of the intellectual and cultural history of the United States and continue to inspire new generations of thinkers and writers.

## 9. Conclusion

In conclusion, Henry David Thoreau's works are a testament to the power and influence of transcendentalism. His emphasis on individualism, self-reliance, and spiritual transcendence inspired a generation of thinkers and writers, and his ideas continue to resonate with people around the world today. Thoreau's works are a reflection of the transcendentalist movement as a whole, which sought to break free from the constraints of traditional religion and society and embrace a more spiritual and intuitive understanding of the world. Through his writings, Thoreau urged readers to reject materialism, embrace simplicity, and seek spiritual transcendence in nature and the self.

While Thoreau's ideas have faced criticism from some quarters, his influence on American literature and culture is undeniable<sup>[9]</sup>. His works continue to inspire new generations of writers and thinkers, and his ideas have helped shape the American identity as a nation that values individualism, self-reliance, and a connection to nature.

Overall, Thoreau's transcendentalism works represent a unique and influential contribution to American literature and thought. Through his emphasis on individualism, spirituality, and simplicity, he helped lay the foundation for a movement that continues to influence American culture today.

### References

- [1] Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*. Ticknor and Fields, 1854.
- [2] Thoreau, Henry David. "Resistance to Civil Government." *A Yankee in Canada, with Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers*. Ticknor and Fields, 1866.
- [3] Cavell, Stanley. *The Senses of Walden*. University of Chicago Press, 1972.
- [4] Howe, Daniel Walker. *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*. Harvard University Press, 1997.
- [5] Bode, Carl. *The Portable Thoreau*. Viking Press, 1947.
- [6] Myerson, Joel. *The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau*. Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- [7] Buell, Lawrence. *The American Transcendentalists: Essential Writings*. Modern Library, 2006.
- [8] Gougeon, Len. *Virtue's Hero: Emerson, Antislavery, and Reform*. University Press of Virginia, 1990.
- [9] Buell, Lawrence. *Emerson*. Harvard University Press, 2003.