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Transcendentalism (1835-1846)

Literature / Second Year

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Transcendentalism (1835-1846)

Transcendentalism first began as a religious and philosophical movement. Then, it was incorporated into the literary field. Critics think that the exact period of transcendentalism's rise and end was from 1836 to 1846. It was founded by a group of Boston pastors, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, who insisted that the church had become too rigid or conservative, that is, rejecting and opposing reform. These pastors supported the view that the human soul has innate knowledge that guides the individual to what is right and wrong, not the church's rules and laws. The Transcendentalists advocated equality, the right of women, and individualism, and opposed slavery and class differences. Although transcendentalism initially originated from Romanticism, it was primarily an American literary movement concerned with the issues of America and its literature, politics, culture, etc. Among the important Transcendentalists' works are Henry David Thoreau's *Walden; or Life in the Woods* (1854); Ralph Waldo Emerson's essays such as "Nature" and "Self Reliance" (1836); Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855); and novels like Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851).

1. What is Transcendentalism?

"Transcending" means going beyond sensual perception and the physical world."

Transcendentalists follow the same Romanticist beliefs, adding that intuition is the only trusted means of transcendence to higher values and wisdom. The word "transcendental" was taken from Immanuel Kant's writings in which he doubted the validity of sense experience or knowledge compared to "intuitive knowledge". Its central principle is that:

The conviction that human beings could elevate themselves beyond their baser animal instincts, attain a higher consciousness, and take part in the spirit of the divine. (Jerry and Ladd 34)

Ralph Waldo Emerson is one of the key representatives of Transcendentalism, who points to the example of the similarity between a child's innocence and nature. Unlike an adult who has lost his natural affinity with Mother Nature, a child innately appreciates the true essence of nature. This is articulated in his well-known essay "Nature":

To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child. The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood. (As qtd. in Jerry and Ladd 36)

2. Transcendentalism and Beauty:

Emerson believes that the artist should achieve one primary purpose, which is to represent the beauty of nature in his or her works, reminding people of its spiritual guidance and connection. Thus, beauty leads humans to their God. The human soul loves beauty, and “the world thus exists to the soul to satisfy the desire of beauty” (ibid.). In his essay “Nature,” Emerson states:

The world thus exists to the soul to satisfy the desire of beauty. This element I call an ultimate end. No reason can be asked or given why the soul seeks beauty. Beauty, in its largest and profoundest sense, is one expression for the universe. God is the all-fair. Truth, and goodness, and beauty, are but different faces of the same All.

3. The Characteristics of Transcendentalism:

Emerson concludes that the central principles of Transcendentalism are, as listed below:

- “Nature is the symbol of the spirit”.
- Nature is the direct path that leads to God. It is a refuge and a guide at the same time.

- Nature purifies the soul.
- Knowledge is based on feeling and intuition.
- The human soul has innate wisdom, and religion should not be limited to church or religious convention, contradicting Locke's idea that wisdom is acquired through experience.
- Solitude and meditation.
- Nonconformism.
- Freedom of thought.
- "Insist on yourself; never imitate," writes Emerson, for "imitation is suicide."

Everyone is unique: individualism, self-trust, self-reliance, and self-sufficiency.

- The rejection of materialism and favouring spirituality: "matter has more reality than spirit".
- Celebration of the self, love, desire, sexuality, and pleasure (Whitman's "Song of Myself"):

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you

- Social reform and liberation.
- Democratic ideals and human potential.
- Truth resides in the spiritual world.
- Transcendence occurs through meditation.
- One's focus should be on the "here and now".
- Transcend common thoughts, beliefs, and experiences.

4. Transcendentalists' Style:

-The essay form is used to express their ideas.

-The adoption of free verse: irregular line length and a lack of rhyme or regular rhythm

-The tone of transcendentalism is exaltation (intense, serious, deep, and meaningful).

References

Ladd, Andrew, Jerry R. Phillips, and Karen Meyers. *Romanticism and Transcendentalism: 1800-1860*. Vol. 2. Infobase Publishing, 2010.

Milne, Ira Mark. *Literary Movements for Students*. Detroit: Gale (2009).