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Ethics and Philosophy according to H. D. Thoreau
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Zásady p r o v y p r a c o v á n í :

Po Edgaru Allanu Poeovi, který se stal vůbec prvním americkým autorem oslavovaným na druhém břehu Atlantického oceánu, to byla zejména úzká skupina myslitelů a spisovatelů kolem osobnosti R. W. Emersona, která dokázala vytvořit původní a ryze americké myšlenkové hnutí. Pro historický a myšlenkový vývoj Ameriky se hnutí transcendentalismu stalo významným svou snahou o nové pojetí mravních hodnot, jež se projevilo především ve vztahu člověka k přírodě. V čem spočívá ono nové pojetí podle jednoho z hlavních transcendentalistů Henryho Davida Thoreaua, bude předmětem této práce. Konkrétní díla k rozboru budou vybrána po konzultaci a dohodě se školitelem.

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Na tomto místě bych chtěla poděkovat vedoucímu bakalářské práce, Mgr. Michalu Kleprlíkovi, Ph.D., za jeho čas, odborné rady a připomínky v průběhu zpracování samotné práce.

TITLE

Ethics and Philosophy according to H. D. Thoreau

ANNOTATION

This bachelor thesis focuses on the ethics and philosophy of Transcendentalism according to perspective of well-known Transcendentalist H. D. Thoreau. It deals with Transcendentalist issues and principles and explains the cultural background which had led to the birth of Transcendentalism. The practical section illustrates the Transcendentalist principles presented in the book *Walden* from perspective of H. D. Thoreau who applied them into his everyday life. It also elaborates on followers of the Transcendentalist movement and on H. D. Thoreau himself.

KEY WORDS

Thoreau, transcendentalism, Emerson, Walden, nature

NÁZEV

Etika s filosofie transcendentalismu podle H. D. Thoreaua

ANOTACE

Tato bakalářská práce je zaměřena na etiku a filosofii transcendentalismu podle jednoho z nejvýznamnějších členů H. D. Thoreaua. Zabývá se problematikou transcendentalismu a vysvětluje události a vlivy, které vedly k samotnému vzniku hnutí a dále vysvětluje základní transcendentalistické principy. V praktické části jsou tyto principy názorně ukázány na knize *Walden* a vysvětleny v pojetí H. D. Thoreaua, který je aplikoval do každodenního života. Práce se také věnuje následovníkům transcendentalismu a H. D. Thoreaua.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Thoreau, transcendentalismus, Emerson, Walden, příroda

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	8
1 Transcendentalism	9
1.1 Ethics	9
1.2 Origins of Transcendentalism.....	11
1.3 Transcendentalist Movement and its Members	14
1.4 Henry David Thoreau	16
2 Main Principles of the Transcendentalist Movement	20
3 Ethics and Philosophy in the Book Walden.....	23
3.1 Economy	24
3.2 Higher Laws.....	29
3.3 Solitary Life in Nature	31
3.4 Spring.....	34
4 Message of Transcendentalism and Henry David Thoreau	37
5 Conclusion	42
6 Resumé.....	43
7 Bibliography	47

Introduction

The work *Ethics and Philosophy according to H. D. Thoreau* focuses on the first purely American movement which introduced a, so-called, “new thought” to American society in the first half of 19th century. The Transcendentalist movement came into being as product of the situation in society at that time. American society underwent significant change, primarily in terms of modernization, which strongly influenced society’s values. People started to pay attention more to material possessions rather than on a cultivation of their inner self. Therefore, the meaning of life changed, which Transcendentalists were opposed to. These so-called Transcendentalists, a group of intellectuals and philosophers, used their literary work to show people the rapid changes taking place in their society.

Transcendentalism is well known for its belief in the strong power of the individual and the concept of “self-reliance”. Ralph Waldo Emerson emerged as the spokesperson of this movement. Transcendentalists also saw a great power in nature. They believed that through a close relationship with nature, we can open the door to spiritual life and as a result, find a true meaning of life.

Transcendentalists dealt with several issues. They saw problematic issues in several corners of society. Transcendentalists battled for equality, women’s rights and opposed slavery, hard labour and modernization. Therefore, they reflected upon these issues in their work.

However, Henry David Thoreau differed from the majority of Transcendentalists. He implemented Transcendentalist principles in his everyday life and performed an experiment of solitary living in the woods. He decided to withdraw from society for two years and two months. During the whole stay near Walden pond outside of Concord, Massachusetts, he kept a detailed diary. Based on the content from this diary, he produced his most prolific book, *Walden*.

This book is crucial for this work as main aim of this thesis is to explain Transcendental principles and to highlight how Henry David Thoreau applied these into his everyday life. This work also focuses on the message of Transcendentalism and the life of Henry David Thoreau.

1 Transcendentalism

In the 19th century, the first purely American movement originated in New England.¹ The term Transcendentalism refers to a group of intellectuals led by Ralph Waldo Emerson. “The Transcendentalists comprise one of the nation’s first coherent intellectual groups: movers and shakers on the forefront of educational reform; proselytizers for the rights of women, laborers, prisoners, and the indigent and infirm; and agitators for the abolition of slavery.”²

Nevertheless, the umbrella term for these important thinkers was not always Transcendentalism. Its members used to describe their opinions, thoughts and beliefs as the “new thought” or they labelled themselves as “like-minded”.³ The idea of the “new thought” might have arisen from the fact that until then, everyday life had been controlled by religion while Transcendentalists were mainly focused on the individual’s life based on his own decision making. Transcendental beliefs, described in the following chapters, were unique and revolutionary for American culture at that time.

The term Transcendentalism is, in the sense of US history, understood as something that is beyond what people can hear, see or even touch. It is a knowledge that comes through imagination and intuition. It is a feeling that people can trust themselves and that they are naturally aware of what is right or wrong.⁴

1.1 Ethics

Instead of delving deeply into the various points of view of ethics, we first need to define its boundaries. What do ethics mean within the Transcendentalist movement? Did Transcendentalists understand ethics as something natural that each person owns? Is it about a society or individuality?

Ralph Waldo Emerson, spokesperson of Transcendentalist movement, depicts the ethics in his work *Self-Reliance*. According to Emerson, we all need to trust what we feel as right and what we feel as true. Ethics is not the scripture, it is the mind. “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, that is genius.”⁵ Nevertheless, what is true for someone does not necessarily mean that it is true and right for

¹ Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism a History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 3.

² Gura, *American Transcendentalism a History*, xi.

³ Gura, *American Transcendentalism a History*, 5.

⁴ “Transcendentalism, an American Philosophy,” U.S. History, accessed February 5, 2018, <http://www.ushistory.org/us/26f.asp>.

⁵ Ralph W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays* (New York: Dover Publications, 2016), 19.

everyone. One can feel that something is right while another can feel the exact opposite. Always, it is a matter of the individual.

From this quote, we can understand that each person can define what is ethical and unethical. As a result, each of us possesses this natural ability to distinguish an ethical or unethical behaviour through intuition and therefore should act according to what we understand as moral and as a truth. Moreover, Emerson claims that “nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.”⁶

It is obvious that for Emerson, the main role in ethics is that of individuality. Nevertheless, this attitude is not new. When we look back to the age of Plato, we realize that he spoke what he thought not what people thought. Platonism and Quakerism were his main inspirations within this issue.⁷

According to Emerson, self-reliance is the exact opposite of society. “Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion.”⁸ Emerson compares society with a company which steals the liberty of people. To him, society is the equivalent of conformity. Therefore, Emerson strongly supports and celebrates individuality and is against any social norms and is therefore against conformity. “Whose would be a man must be a nonconformist. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.”⁹ However, this attitude might be perceived as an extreme and as an impossible way of living. Nowadays, it is unimaginable to be such a nonconformist because we all need to somehow fit within the framework of society and still we need to follow certain rules every day. Therefore, we are always in some way conformists.

Nevertheless, Emerson wanted to highlight with this attitude that when we are strong as individuals we are able to be a part of society. We need to have our own strong opinions and beliefs which do not allow the majority to influence us. “He only who is able to stand alone is qualified for society.”¹⁰

Despite the fact some Emerson’s ideas might seem extreme, his sense of individuality and morality played an essential role within the Transcendentalist’s view of ethics and even his

⁶ Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 21.

⁷ Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 19.

⁸ Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 21.

⁹ Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 21.

¹⁰ David E. Shi, Holly A. Mayer, *For the Record: a Documentary History of America*. 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 489.

actions against society's immoral behaviour changed the American culture in a significant way at that time.

To illustrate this point, it is important to note that Emerson was actively involved in protests which addressed the question of humanity and immoral laws. He penned a public response in the newspaper to the "Fugitive Slave Act" which passed as part of the Compromise of 1850. He emphasized the victimization of slaves within society, urging readers to protest for humanity, morality and justice.¹¹

Emerson strongly criticized the fact that this act required him to hunt slaves as they were perceived as a piece of money or even as monkeys and not equal people. He even accused Mr Webster, who had taken the law on the country, of being a person with no moral sensibility. He also claimed that this law showed that the sense of the right had disappeared from the hearts of mankind and that principles of culture had vanished. He did see the help only in the hearts and heads of people.¹²

Ethics within Transcendentalism refers to the notion that each of us should follow the intuition which is natural for us. When we follow this intuition, Emerson argues, we cannot be wrong. Even in cases when society dictates us to follow certain acts, which we perceive as immoral, we should not follow them, but rather we should take the action against them. "No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature."¹³

1.2 Origins of Transcendentalism

The Transcendentalist movement evolved in the first half of the 19th century, around the 1830s. It was formed and influenced by several factors. Within the movement, we can discuss terms such as Puritanism, Calvinism, Unitarianism, German Idealism, Quakerism, Platonism or Romanticism. All of those played an important role in the birth of transcendentalism. It thought consists of various approaches.

Firstly, Puritans got the name from 16th century movement which sought to "purify" the Church of England from Catholicism. It was mainly based on John Calvin's doctrines – a belief known as Calvinism. In the 17th century, the first Puritan settlers formed the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Therefore, they are responsible for the creation of the New England intellectual and cultural tradition. The highest value of Puritanism was education and settlers quickly

¹¹ Tiffany K. Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism* (New York: Facts on File, 2006), 120.

¹² Shi et al., *For the Record*, 485–489.

¹³ Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 22.

established the first college, “Harvard Divinity School”. The main doctrine of Puritanism was predestination, “the belief that God had already determined who was saved and who was not.”¹⁴

In contrast, Transcendentalism rejected this main Puritan doctrine. The New England Transcendentalists got inspiration from Unitarianism but only within beliefs “which emphasized the role of the individual, free will, and self-culture in spiritual growth and salvation.”¹⁵

Transcendentalists, as well as Puritans, emphasized education as they were closely linked to Harvard College. ¹⁶ However, Ralph Waldo Emerson explained the self-culture and self-knowledge as “the cultivation of the individual for the sake of individual growth and human progress, rather than for theological purpose of pleasing God or securing salvation.”¹⁷

As a result, Transcendentalists rejected American Calvinism and they also rejected Enlightenment and they stood “against the philosophy of John Locke and his followers who believed that external circumstances primarily formed a man’s consciousness.”¹⁸

Additionally, we can find a close correlation between Transcendentalism and English Romanticism. A new European Romantic thought influenced the development of Transcendentalism in many ways such as a perception of nature or a strong belief in individual. It functioned as a rejection of Enlightenment and its rational methods because both Romanticism and Transcendentalism placed emphasis on instinct rather than reason. “Romanticism instead promoted subjective experience and emotional responses over reason and looked to nature for human inspiration and guides to moral life.”¹⁹

Romanticism functioned as a response to the industrialization and material changes taking place in society. The Romantic movement strongly criticized both the expansion of cities, which were full of pollution and poverty, and systems of mass production. Therefore, Romantic poets and artists paid particular attention to nature because they saw it as the only solution which could protect humans from degradation. Both thinkers of the Romantic and Transcendentalist movements saw nature as a source of renewal and therefore, Romanticism is also referred to as the “back to nature movement”. Both Romantic poets and Transcendentalists are linked to

¹⁴ Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 226.

¹⁵ Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 226.

¹⁶ Gura, *American Transcendentalism a History*, 5.

¹⁷ Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 227.

¹⁸ Gura, *American Transcendentalism a History*, 6.

¹⁹ Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 253.

specific areas in which they gained inspiration. The area of Concord is most associated with Transcendentalism and the Lake District with Romanticism.²⁰

In Germany, Romanticism changed into an Idealist philosophy correlated with thinkers including Immanuel Kant. Nevertheless, the concept of philosophical “Idealism” dates back to the age of Plato. These pieces of writing were translated and circulated among the Transcendentalists as a source of inspiration for ideas including nature and self-culture.²¹ “Transcendentalism was formed out of Idealism, the belief in universal principles, and out of a humanist commitment to the development and education of the individual as the true purpose of religion.”²²

George Fox and his 17th century concept of Quakerism gave rise to Transcendentalist focus on individuality. According to George Fox, each of us has an “inner light” which guides us toward the right action.²³

Moreover, Transcendentalists were not only focused on religious attitudes. The current situation in American society at that time which gave rise to the birth of Transcendentalism. We can claim that Transcendentalists exactly reflect the current problems of American society. According to Walls, Transcendentalists felt that the American Revolution was incomplete because “inequality was rife, materialism was rampant, and the American economy was wholly dependent on slavery.”²⁴

Due to rising tensions between “black” and “white” people or religious issues, all members fought against those. Mainly abolition, religion, education, the political situation or even inequality of man and women. According to David Robinson, “the Transcendentalists had helped to formulate the principles that would reshape American culture well into the 20th century.”²⁵

Transcendentalists believed that American society needed a change. What does this concept mean? “It means that slavery was an abomination to be stopped at any cost; that the political

²⁰ “Romanticism and Nature,” Environmental History Resources, last modified August 1, 2015, <https://www.eh-resources.org/romanticism-and-nature/>.

²¹ Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 253.

²² Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 114.

²³ Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 229.

²⁴ Laura D. Walls, *Henry David Thoreau a Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), xxii.

²⁵ “Transcendentalism,” Oxford Bibliographies, last modified September 30, 2013, <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199827251/obo-9780199827251-0086.xml>.

and social inequality of women must end; that children must never be punished as sinners nor trained as workers, but educated to unfold and foster the divine spirit within.”²⁶

1.3 Transcendentalist Movement and its Members

As addressed in previous paragraphs, the Transcendentalism movement, in his philosophical, political, theological and literary sense, is purely American. Transcendentalism is one of many influences that shaped contemporary American culture.

Nevertheless, according to T. Wayne, the movement has been always suffering from a lack of identification and recognition. The spokesperson Ralph Waldo Emerson provided only a mere definition “Idealism as it appeared in 1842” or even Nathaniel Hawthorne, who is identified as Transcendentalist, claimed that Transcendentalism is “a monster whose features cannot be defined.”²⁷

In truth it is easy to sense that Transcendentalists were divided. Why is this the case? Firstly, each member paid attention to slightly different topics but still, they shared a common focus. To illustrate, Margaret Fuller wrote mainly about inequality of women in society, Ralph Waldo Emerson focused his writing on the topic of self-reliance, nature and abolitionism and George Parker paid attention mainly to abolitionism.²⁸ Nevertheless, they all had formed a movement which shared common issues such as inequality in society, abolitionism, relationship to nature or self-reliance. Naturally, we cannot expect such a group of intellectuals to be focused on the same topics as they all highly valued individuality. Each member, as an individual, focused their attention on what they felt was the most important, perhaps leading to the sense of division within the movement. However, they shared common beliefs and even a similar place of work, the area of Concord.

Even the prolific English writer Charles Dickens did not get through to the meaning of Transcendentalism. During the height of the Transcendentalist movement, Dickens travelled to the United States, claiming, that everything which was unintelligible was surely Transcendental. According to Gura, the message of Transcendentalism “was more ridiculed than understood or appreciated; and yet the group was undeniably seminal to American cultural and intellectual history.”²⁹

²⁶ Walls, *Henry David Thoreau a Life*, 88.

²⁷ Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, vii.

²⁸ Gura, *American Transcendentalism a History*, xiv.

²⁹ Gura, *American Transcendentalism a History*, xiii.

There is no other place which is more associated with the Transcendentalist movement than the town of Concord in Massachusetts. “After Emerson settled there permanently in 1834 the town became associated with the Transcendentalist literary circle.”³⁰ Even now, it is a popular place to visit for those who have a desire to discover the place in which Transcendentalists were inspired.³¹

In the year 1836, Harvard University celebrated its bicentennial. On the same day, the first gathering of Transcendentalists took place. Originally, it was meant to be a discussion club. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Frederic Henry Hedge corresponded regarding the issue a month before and finally, they were joined by George Ripley and George Putnam for the initial discussion. They planned to do regular discussion meetings.³² From this point on, they promoted discussion with many more intellectuals in Ripley’s home in Boston. “Over the next four years the club met nearly thirty times, maintaining a focus on significant religious and philosophical issues and occasionally broaching topics of wider social concern.”³³

Although, the original idea was to meet with “like-minded” thinkers and to discuss pivotal issues, the meetings had morphed into something even more significant for the American culture. Transcendentalists wanted to spread their ideas into the public and thus created a monthly journal called *The Dial*. The first journal was published in July 1840 and the last publication was issued in 1844.³⁴ “The Boston-based Dial was the only journal published by the New England Transcendentalists as a group and stands as one of the most significant records of the movement’s early development as a distinct literary voice.”³⁵

The final publication of Transcendentalist was issued in 1860 by *the Dial of Cincinnati*. “*The Dial* was founded as ‘monthly magazine for literature, philosophy and religion’ and took its name and inspiration directly from the earlier *Dial*.”³⁶ Unfortunately, it lasted only for twelve months.

After spreading their opinions into the public through *the Dial*, Transcendentalists were consistently gaining more and more followers of their “new thought”. Throughout the 1840’s

³⁰ Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 57.

³¹ Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 57.

³² Gura, *American Transcendentalism a History*, 69.

³³ Gura, *American Transcendentalism a History*, 70.

³⁴ Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 78.

³⁵ Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 78.

³⁶ Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 79.

they influenced many individuals. “There were many prime movers who worked out its implications in as variety of activities from biblical criticism to utopian reform.”³⁷

Among the most popular influencers within the Transcendentalist movement are intellectuals such as essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson, naturalist Henry David Thoreau, antislavery promoter Theodore Parker, Nathaniel Hawthorne and even a feminist Margaret Fuller.³⁸ Of course, there are other prominent intellectuals of the movement.

1.4 Henry David Thoreau

Henry David Thoreau is one of a few Transcendentalists who became a part of the movement just through interest via his exploration of new philosophical facts, questions and ideas. The majority of members such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, George Ripley and others became Transcendentalists as Unitarian ministers.³⁹

According to Emerson, poet-naturalist Henry David Thoreau was a genius. He spent his entire life in Massachusetts and was born in Concord, situated 20 miles from Boston, on July 12, 1817. His parents were John and Cynthia Thoreau and he was raised with another three siblings.⁴⁰

Even though his family lived in poor conditions, he had a chance to gain university education. His studies started in Concord and continued at Harvard University. His family had to sacrifice much and Henry had to work incredibly hard. He entered Harvard University in 1833 and graduated in 1837. He possessed an enormous interest in education and studied philosophical scripts and learned foreign languages. “By the time he graduated, Thoreau could read at least five foreign languages – Latin, Greek, Italian, French, and German – plus a little Spanish and Portuguese.”⁴¹ Why was the “Harvard Education” so important to him? He could read original philosophical scripts thanks to his knowledge of foreign languages. As he was interested in philosophical issues, he gradually gained a great stance on life in general. Also, it was a source of inspiration for his further writing.

Thoreau was always an individualist. Even during his studies, he tended to be an individualist but at the same time, he had great relationships with his fellows. Nevertheless, he always acted according to his own will. As a result, he was bound to become one of the most significant

³⁷ Gura, *American Transcendentalism a History*, 180.

³⁸ Oxford Bibliographies, “Transcendentalism.”

³⁹ Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, viii.

⁴⁰ Walls, *Henry David Thoreau a Life*, 34.

⁴¹ Walls, *Henry David Thoreau a Life*, 65–66.

influences within Transcendentalism mainly for his opening of independent thinking. “Thoreau transformed himself from Harvard graduate to Transcendental apprentice.”⁴²

Thoreau and Emerson met in 1837 and they were regular companions by 1838. They remained close friends and colleagues for 25 years. According to Emerson, Thoreau always had naturalist tendencies as a writer. “Mr. Thoreau dedicated his genius with such entire love to the fields, hill and waters of his native town, that he made them known and interesting to all reading Americans, and to people over the sea.”⁴³

Materialism and loneliness are another important issue in Thoreau’s writing. He did not strive for material possessions in his life. Also, he did not seek an active social life. “Thoreau was free from the constraints of the material as well as the expectations of the social world.”⁴⁴ Instead of material growth, he preferred rather the spiritual which he gained through art, philosophy, music and education. He believed that wealth can be only inner rather than outer.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, this attitude against the materialistic way of life might have been rooted in his childhood when the family lived in poor conditions.

Emerson provided an overview of Thoreau’s personality, character and lifestyle. He said that he “was bred to no profession; he never married; he lived alone; he never went to church; he never voted; he refused to pay a tax to the State; he ate no flesh; he drank no wine; he never knew the use of tobacco; and though a naturalist, he used neither trap nor gun.”⁴⁶

The unpaid tax to the state depicts the main theme present in Thoreau’s famous work *Civil Disobedience* which “is often cited as the best example of the movement’s philosophical ideas translated into practical and political action.”⁴⁷ He opposed the government because of the territorial expansion during the Mexican War and due to antislavery reasons. He explained it as a protest against the governmental institution and he spent a subsequent night in jail. “Thoreau’s essay is an account of one man’s acting in accord with his conscience, a critique of the majority rule mindset of the democratic state, and, finally, a model of nonviolent resistance as a viable and desirable form of political protest.”⁴⁸ Thoreau criticised the government because of his strong belief in self-reliance. Thoreau’s argument was that “it is an individual’s responsibility

⁴² Walls, *Henry David Thoreau a Life*, 87.

⁴³ Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 278.

⁴⁴ Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 278.

⁴⁵ Walls, *Henry David Thoreau a Life*, xiv.

⁴⁶ Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 278.

⁴⁷ Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 49.

⁴⁸ Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 49.

to decide as matter of his conscience what is right or wrong and that through individual change would come the widespread social and political change called for by reformers.”⁴⁹ Even more surprisingly, Thoreau ignored the Compromise of 1850 and he hid southern slaves in his home in Concord in order to help them to escape to Canada.⁵⁰

Furthermore, Thoreau’s work is highly influential due to its long-lasting effect. It inspired considerable political reform during the 20th century, mainly due to its “non-resistance”. For instance, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Leo Tolstoy both regarded him as a role model.⁵¹

On top of that, the essay *Civil Disobedience* and the book *Walden* are closely related to each other. “Thoreau’s own personal experience with civil disobedience gave an added political meaning to his stay at Walden Pond and to the idea of self-reliance.”⁵² To him, the location at Walden Pond was where “the State was nowhere to be seen.” He writes:

One afternoon, near the end of the first summer, when I went to the village to get a shoe from the cobbler’s, 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 sell men, women, and children, like cattle at the door of its senate-house.⁵³

In order to conduct an experiment of self-reliance, Thoreau moved into the property owned by his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson. Being surrounded by nature for his whole childhood Thoreau lived in harmony with nature. The place in a cabin at Walden Pond was his home for two years and two months, although he stayed only temporarily. Walden Pond is located two miles away from the town Concord. Based on this experience, Thoreau published the book *Walden* when he came back to Concord in the year 1850.⁵⁴ After his return, he continued in his work, paying attention primarily to naturalist literature.

Some may ask what happened with the residence at Walden Pond after he came back to the town. The replica of the famous cabin remains in its original location along with the statue of Henry David Thoreau. The place has become the first National Literary Landmark since 1965. “Walden Pond remains an important site for U.S history, and travellers regularly make the journey to see what Thoreau and Emerson saw and feel what they felt and numerous individuals

⁴⁹ Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 280.

⁵⁰ Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), xi.

⁵¹ Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 50.

⁵² Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 50.

⁵³ Thoreau, *Walden*, 155.

⁵⁴ Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 303.

and organizations work today to preserve the natural beauty.”⁵⁵ Further details regarding the book *Walden* will be discussed in the third chapter.

In conclusion, the area of Concord is valuable not only for Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson but for all Transcendentalists as it had become the centre of the movement. Therefore, Concord is “a place that has become a symbol of humanity’s right relationship with nature.”⁵⁶ Transcendentalists perceived nature around Concord as wonderful, miscellaneous, pure, colourful and worth observing. They did not feel that nature is a place full of danger but rather the exact opposite. They did not even perceive it as wilderness because, for example, the area of Walden Pond was a highly popular among townspeople and it was also quite close.⁵⁷ In Concord, many Transcendentalist intellectuals are buried at the Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Bronson Alcott among others.

⁵⁵ Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 305.

⁵⁶ Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 57.

⁵⁷ Thoreau, *Walden*, xxiii.

2 Main Principles of the Transcendentalist Movement

As already mentioned in previous paragraphs, Transcendentalism consist of several approaches. Due to the number of members and their varied pieces of writing, it is complicated to specify exact principles of the movement. Furthermore, Transcendentalists appreciated individual differences and so they had never published their official tenet. Nevertheless, we can find four main features which were shared by all members. These include the quest for truth based on intuition, the strong connection to nature, the dislike of materialism and a strong sense of individualism.

In the following paragraphs, there will be only an explanation of these features due to previously described connections between philosophers, movements and other factors which had led to the birth of Transcendentalism.

First of all, Transcendentalists believed that the only source of knowledge is the human intuition and at the same time they rejected the reliance on any external factors or sensual experiences which, according to other approaches, might influence the human consciousness. They perceive the intuition as the right way to moral and spiritual truth. “For Transcendentalists, equally important to the emphasis on ideas was the primacy of the human mind, the belief that the individual intuition perceives the truth of all things.”⁵⁸ Transcendentalists perceive the individual human mind and consciousness as divine.

Secondly, the strong connection to nature is a synonym for Transcendentalists. Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay *Nature* is perceived as the most prominent work which truly characterises the movement’s relationship to nature. “Emerson presented a philosophy of nature as understood through the direct experience of the individual soul, not through scientific methods or reason, and proposed that through such an understanding of nature one becomes closer to God or to divinity.”⁵⁹

Transcendentalists define nature as everything except for the “me”. They perceive the “me” as the individual human’s mind and soul. It means that we should be observers of the “not me” and that we should wholly accept nature, “while also understanding that everything that exists in nature has its counterpart in the spiritual world and it is reflective of some higher, or “transcendental,” truth about human existence and morality.”⁶⁰ Emerson characterized this as

⁵⁸ Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 153.

⁵⁹ Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 188.

⁶⁰ Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 188.

the “over-soul” which cannot be described by words. “It is undefinable, unmeasurable, but we know that it pervades and contains us. We know that all spiritual being is in man.”⁶¹

According to Emerson, the main purpose of life is to understand the personal relationship to nature and that it opens the door to a spiritual connection and, ultimately, to the universe. Transcendentalists perceive nature as a human mind’s metaphor.

Furthermore, Transcendentalists emphasize that people who are isolated from nature cannot fulfil their spiritual need and therefore they need to go back to nature and regenerate because nature maintains the meaning of everyday life.⁶² The meaning of everyday life is, of course, different for each of us. Only the individual knows what is important in his life and what is not. For one person, the seeking of material things might be the most valuable whereas for another, health and happiness may constitute the most essential aspects for life. Therefore, we cannot define the universal meaning of life because each of us needs to establish this for ourselves.

Thirdly, the American culture in the 19th century is associated with commercialism and expansion which jeopardized morality; Transcendentalism strongly rejected this reliance on material world. Transcendentalists draw their attention beyond the material world and they focused their minds on thoughts, ideas and beliefs. To them, material possessions cause a lack of concentration on issues that truly matter, such as knowledge and spiritual world. Within Transcendentalism, all material things that people acquire but do not necessarily need cause this lack of concentration on what truly matters. Moreover, Transcendentalists believed that people can find satisfaction only within themselves and that the pursuit of wealth and material achievements cause only negative consequences.⁶³

Lastly, the philosophical idea of being a self-reliant individual used to be quite radical for that time. For Transcendentalists, the principle of self-reliance involves having our own ideas and beliefs instead of religious belief within society. According to Transcendentalists, the main goal of social and religious life is to self-improve upon the individual human soul. “This required, on some level, a turning away from society and a focus instead on one’s own nature and inner voice.”⁶⁴ This inner voice or power is believed to be present within everyone, but is usually dormant. To be human for them meant to be aware of our own unique inner power which we

⁶¹ Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 53.

⁶² Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 189.

⁶³ Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 153.

⁶⁴ Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 255.

need to guide and nourish. “To awaken, to become fully human, is to see that of all creation, humans alone carry God’s nature within.”⁶⁵

They believed that a self-reliant life is the only route to peace and happiness. “What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. It is the harder, because you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it.”⁶⁶ What’s more, Transcendentalists presumed that self-reliant people would be beneficial for the American culture and that they would cultivate the culture instead of yearning for inspiration derived from European culture.

Some may inquire whether the self-reliance of an individual constitutes anarchism or not. When we consider the manner in which anarchists react, it generally involves rebellion and violence. In contrast, Transcendentalists generally acted in non-violent ways even in cases when the equality and freedom of people was endangered. To them, violence was not a solution and therefore, being self-reliant is not a synonym for being an anarchist. Self-reliance concerns solely the individual and his needs for being both fulfilled and satisfied with his own life. It is not about violence at all, rather, it is about a peaceful way of living and self-improvement.

Moreover, the concept of the self-reliance has become, according to Gura, one of the typical feature of American culture as we know it today. “Emerson’s demanding philosophy of self-reliance, an artefact of the early 1840s, became simplified and was adopted as a chief article of national belief.”⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Walls, *Henry David Thoreau a Life*, 88.

⁶⁶ Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 23.

⁶⁷ Gura, *American Transcendentalism a History*, xv.

3 Ethics and Philosophy in the Book *Walden*

After Ralph Waldo Emerson, Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau became the most famous author of the movement mainly due to his book *Walden*. The city of Concord, along with the surrounding nature around Walden Pond, played a highly important role in Thoreau's life. He had been living his whole life in this area apart from the four years of studies spent at Harvard.

Walden is not only about a solitary lifestyle in the woods. Rather, it depicts Thoreau's own perception of life, nature and even his criticism of the modernization and commercialization of Concord. The town Concord changed completely due to the newly established railroad Boston-Fitchburg a few years before Thoreau moved to the cabin to the Concord woods. Not only Concord, the whole American life was changing in this direction. This was one of the many reasons why Thoreau decided to stay alone for some time because he found it uneasy to cope with these major changes in his hometown. Therefore, he wanted to live as simply as possible and stay removed from the changing society. Nonetheless, the book is also about New England and the United States in the nineteenth century and highlights a different way of living.

Thoreau's search for solitude dates back to 1836 when he had spent six weeks near Flint's Pond which is not far from Walden Pond. Thoreau himself claimed that it was a beautiful retreat located a mere half hour from town. As well as his staying at Walden Pond, both places of stay took place on Emerson's properties.⁶⁸ "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential fact of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."⁶⁹

Thoreau decided to do another experiment and he started to construct his one-room cabin at Walden Pond in the spring of 1845. He moved in on Independence Day on July 4th of the same year which appears quite symbolic. His idea was to stay near the Walden Pond only temporarily. Instead, he stayed for two years and two months but he often visited his family and friends. He also hosted visitors at the cabin. For this reason, it cannot be perceived as a solitary life in nature because he did not desire to be completely withdrawn from society. He needed solitude mainly for his contemplation, studying and writing.⁷⁰

Walden Pond was quite popular among townspeople due to its proximity to Concord. The book is based on his journal which he kept faithfully during his entire stay. However, it is important

⁶⁸ Thoreau, *Walden*, xvii–xxi.

⁶⁹ Thoreau, *Walden*, 83.

⁷⁰ Thoreau, *Walden*, xxii.

to mention that the book is summed up to only one full year and that it cannot be treated as a guidebook which would show us how to live in the woods. Instead, it consists of narratives, feelings and thoughts which provide us a chance to learn about the author and it also show us his spiritual journey.

On one hand, the book *Walden* as well as other Thoreau's books, were not popular during his lifetime. Contemporary readers were often confused and reviews often characterized the book as "cynical". Naturally, American culture at that time went through numerous changes and improvements so it is clear that Thoreau's attitude might have been perceived as incomprehensible.

On the other hand, Thoreau's popularity has been increasing for the last forty years and *Walden* has come out in more than fifty translations. The book inspired not only reformers and environmentalists but also countless others around the world.

More importantly, *Walden* remains most popular among American readers in the literary canon, but why?⁷¹ As discussed in the previous pages, Transcendentalists challenged principles of contemporary American culture. Even now, we can clearly see that some principles still apply including the importance of hard work and ownership. *Walden* forces readers to think about values and that might be one of many reasons why it still appeals to readers.

3.1 Economy

In the opening chapter "Economy", Thoreau focuses on various aspects of lives of his contemporaries and he strongly criticizes them as being, according to him, pointless. Thoreau discusses mainly hard work and material aspects. He also describes his simplification of life, his new way of living and even details about building his one-room cabin.

The criticism of labour and ownership steams from one of the Transcendental principles, from the rejection of material things because they might cause a lack of concentration. Nevertheless, this idea of being menial wage labourers and having almost no time for recreational pursuits stems from puritanism.⁷² According to Transcendentalists, our minds should be focused more on thoughts, ideas and beliefs rather than on the ownership. Transcendentalist Thoreau, as a self-reliant individual, clearly demonstrates how this might function during his experiment in the Walden forest.

⁷¹ Thoreau, *Walden*, xxii–xl.

⁷² Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 303.

Thoreau strongly criticizes labour and he emphasizes that it is not necessary for our life. He gives an example of labourers working on a railroad from dark till dark for almost no money. Of course, we need to eat, drink, clothe and fulfil our other basic needs but, according to him, it is not the reason why we should work so hard and own far more things than we need as they destroy our lives. “For more than five years I maintained myself thus solely by the labour of my hands, and I found, that by working about six weeks in a year, I could meet all the expenses of living.”⁷³ The truth is that Thoreau had worked in different fields of business before he realized that the freedom was most important to him. “I have tried trade, but I found that it would take ten years to get under way in that, and that then I should probably be on my way to devil.”⁷⁴

He depicts young men and townsmen who owned farms, farming tools, houses and other properties which he sees as a misfortune. “But men labour under a mistake. The better part of the man is soon ploughed into the soil for compost; it is a fool’s life, as they will find when they get to the end of it, if not before.”⁷⁵ He claims that people seek mainly ownership and therefore labouring men do not have a chance to be more than just a machine. As a result, they have no leisure. According to Thoreau, we should focus less on material growth and more on spiritual which we can gain through education, art and philosophy. When we achieve the inner wealth, we would be able to live a truly human life.⁷⁶

Even more importantly, the results of the labour are that the majority of men perceive their lives as desperate. Nevertheless, Thoreau claims that those people have chosen this common way of living because they believe that there is no other choice. Nevertheless, they are, according to Thoreau, wrong and he furnishes them a different way of living.

Before describing Thoreau’s own attitude, it is important to mention that American society experienced a significant increase in its standard of living at that time due to the advent of organized public education, modernization of farming, new methods of travel, modernization of architecture and so forth. Citizens wanted to enjoy a higher living standard and thereby sacrificed their time to better living conditions. We can suppose that the primary labour issue Thoreau which criticized was due to the establishment of the Boston-Fitchburg railroad.

⁷³ Thoreau, *Walden*, 63.

⁷⁴ Thoreau, *Walden*, 63.

⁷⁵ Thoreau, *Walden*, 7.

⁷⁶ Walls, *Henry David Thoreau a Life*, xiv-xix.

Thoreau and other Transcendentalists, among other citizens of Concord, saw that the railroad had changed everything in the city because it has made a Boston suburb out of Concord.⁷⁷

According to Thoreau, citizens living in Concord's climate needed only food, shelter, clothing and fuel. He explains that the people invented other present necessities such as houses or cooked food, beds, and nightclothes. He even he confesses that he found via his own experience that his necessities contained much more than the most basic. For example, a knife, an axe and for studying, lamplight, books, stationery. Nevertheless, he claims that in comparison with others, his necessities were substantially streamlined.

Thoreau points out several ideas regarding clothing, shelter and material things in general. He believed that new things or even new friends cannot enrich your life. Why? Because we are the only one who can change. Therefore, it is a nonsense to believe that new things can change or even improve us. "Do not trouble yourself much to get new things, whether clothes, or friends. Turn the old; return to them. Things do not change; we change. Sell your clothes and keep your thoughts."⁷⁸

As for clothes, Thoreau sees no point in having new clothes while your personality is the same. New clothes will not create a new man out of you. He would prefer to walk in patched clothes rather than buying a new possessions. Nevertheless, he assumes that people generally started to judge others predominantly according to clothes which they wore rather than on their personality and character. Or even men themselves put more emphasis on their clothes rather than on their actions and conscience. "No man ever stood the lower in my estimation for having a patch in his clothes; yet I am sure that there is greater anxiety, commonly, to have fashionable, or at least clean and unpatched clothes, than to have a sound conscience."⁷⁹

Regarding shelter, Thoreau argues that we are more likely to be imprisoned in the properties we own instead of being housed in them. When we finally have a chance to own a property, like a farmer who has earned enough money to buy a farmhouse, he is eventually not richer but poorer for it. And again, a new property cannot improve us, it is just a possession. "While civilization has been improving our houses, it has not equally improved the men who are to inhabit them."⁸⁰ What's more, Thoreau believes that even the ownership of properties by others may cause that a man feels poor simply because he does not own as much as his neighbour.

⁷⁷ Walls, *Henry David Thoreau a Life*, 163, 181.

⁷⁸ Thoreau, *Walden*, 292.

⁷⁹ Thoreau, *Walden*, 21.

⁸⁰ Thoreau, *Walden*, 32.

“Most men appear never to have considered what a house is, and are actually though needlessly poor all their lives because they think that they must have such a one as their neighbours have.”⁸¹

Concerning material things in general, Thoreau explains that they steal our valuable time and therefore, they separate us from nature. He uses an example of a house filled with useless furniture. “At present our houses are cluttered and defiled with it, and a good housewife would sweep out the greater part into the dust hole, and not leave her morning’s work undone.”⁸² He even illustrates by his own experience. “I had three pieces of limestone on my desk, but I was terrified to find that they required to be dusted daily, and I threw them out the window and disgust. How then could I have a furnished house?”⁸³ He would rather spend his time outside in the open air than to fill his leisure by those activities. “The very simplicity and nakedness of man’s life in the primitive age imply this advantage at least, that they left him still but a sojourner in nature.”⁸⁴

Thoreau emphasizes that when we are modest and when we carefully think about necessities, we do not need to work as hard and therefore, we have more time for ourselves and other things we want to do. Thereby, we have earned a chance to live our lives in compliance with nature.⁸⁵ Even more importantly, he believed that a life of simplicity and independence is a sign of wisdom. “With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meagre life than the poor.”⁸⁶

As a result of this thinking, Thoreau began to simplify his life. In the spring of 1845 he started to build his cabin. It was made out of white pines which he cut down in the Walden woods. He borrowed all the tools he needed for the building. Even though he knew that his stay would be temporary, he paid attention to a properly foundation and a sound roof. Right next to his one-room cabin, he planted a two acre garden with beans, sweet corn and potatoes. A cellar was also necessary for him as he needed to store his food. He moved in on the 4th July which may seem symbolic but, according to Thoreau, it happened purely by accident. As he made his new

⁸¹ Thoreau, *Walden*, 33.

⁸² Thoreau, *Walden*, 34.

⁸³ Thoreau, *Walden*, 34.

⁸⁴ Thoreau, *Walden*, 35.

⁸⁵ Thoreau, *Walden*, 13–14.

⁸⁶ Thoreau, *Walden*, 15.

home almost on his own with little expenses, he declared that ‘if my house had been burned or my crops had failed, I should have been nearly as well off as before.’⁸⁷

During his stay in the woods, he needed to earn at least a modest income. As he valued especially his freedom, he did not want to spend his leisure by earning money. As a result, he had minimalized his needs and he did not need to work so often and therefore he occasionally performed day-labour in the village by surveying or performing carpentry. Money earned by day-labour covered all his expenses for food and clothing.

Because he raised several crops, he did not need to purchase much food except for rice, sugar, salt, apples or flour. Moreover, he also preferred a minimal and simplified diet. “Simplify, simplify. Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one; instead if a hundred dishes, five; and reduce other things in proportion.”⁸⁸ He even claimed that a man who lives on rice mainly can be of equal health and strength as a man who consumes a rich diet. “I learned from my two years’ experience that it would cost incredibly little trouble to obtain one’s necessary food, even in this latitude; that a man may use as simple diet as the animals, and yet retain health and strength.”⁸⁹

Thoreau pointed out that even within diet issues or overeating tendencies, people tend to seek for more extravagant meals and drinks rather than basic ones. Therefore, they may think that they starve because they cannot afford those luxuries even if they can consume the most basic and to be of equal health. “Yet men have come to such a pass that they frequently starve, not for want of necessities, but for want of luxuries; and I know a good woman who thinks that her son lost his life because he took to drinking water only.”⁹⁰ Also, he assumed that all people could raise their crops without relying on fluctuating markets.

As already mentioned, Thoreau tended to simplify and minimize everything in his life and thereby he reduced the equipment in the one-room cabin to only following:

My furniture, part of which I made myself, and the rest cost me nothing of which I have not rendered an account, consisted of a bed, a table, a desk, three chairs, a looking-glass three inches diameter, a pair of tongs and andirons, a kettle, a skillet, and a frying-pan, a dipper, a wash-bowl, two knives and forks, three plates, one cup, one spoon, a jug for oil, a jug for molasses, and a japanned lamp.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Thoreau, *Walden*, 50–51.

⁸⁸ Thoreau, *Walden*, 84.

⁸⁹ Thoreau, *Walden*, 56.

⁹⁰ Thoreau, *Walden*, 56.

⁹¹ Thoreau, *Walden*, 60.

He believed that a man who does not own loads of such things is more free, independent and even richer. “Indeed, the more you have of such things the poorer you are.”⁹² He paraphrases the ownership of loads of material things which harness us as a trap. According to him, it would be better to get rid of it and to let it burn so that it makes us free. He sought inspiration from savage nations and he viewed it as a purification of sorts. He explained the custom of Indians who had provided themselves with new clothes, furniture, new pans and they also had cleaned houses and squares. Afterwards, they gathered their worn-out clothes and other no more needed things and they destroyed them by fire. After few days, they started a fire from dry wood as a symbol of the new and pure flame.⁹³

To finish this chapter, it is important to mention that Thoreau did not want to encourage people to live according to his own principles of solitary dwelling which he describes in *Walden* but, rather, he wanted to encourage people to live according to their own principles. He emphasized that we all should find the best way of living for ourselves and that we should not be pushed into what we are told by society or by the nearest neighbours. “I desire that there may be as many different persons in the world as possible; but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue his own way, and not his father’s or his mother’s or neighbour’s instead.”⁹⁴

3.2 Higher Laws

Transcendentalists believed that a close relationship with nature may open the door to the spiritual life and to an understanding of higher or “transcendental” truth about human existence. During his two year experiment, Thoreau had become conscious of those, so called “higher laws” which may lead us to several changes in our life.

While spending majority of his time in the woods, Thoreau found out that he started to perceive things differently. He describes this realization as though he found a strong instinct toward two distinctive issues. “I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both.”⁹⁵ Thoreau claims that he quite often tended to spend his day more like an animal as he sees a sort of wildness in fishing and hunting. He explained that his close relationship and acquaintance with nature might have been caused by his hunting at a very

⁹² Thoreau, *Walden*, 60.

⁹³ Thoreau, *Walden*, 62.

⁹⁴ Thoreau, *Walden*, 65.

⁹⁵ Thoreau, *Walden*, 189.

young age. He even believed that people who spend their lives mainly in woods, such as hunters, fishermen, woodchoppers and others, are in a sense a part of nature.

By this, Thoreau wanted to point out that even if we now live in a civilized community, we still have savage tendencies as these skills have always been important for survival. “Thus, even in civilized communities, the embryo man passes through the hunter stage of development.”⁹⁶ Therefore, he claims that amusements such as fishing or hunting need to be a part of education of each boy. Why? Because fishing and hunting provide him with the chance to be a true human being and they also serves as an introduction to the forest and to his true self. “He goes thither at first as a hunter and fisher until at last, if he has the seeds of a better life in him, he distinguishes his proper objects, as a poet or naturalist it may be, and leaves the gun and a fish-pole behind.”⁹⁷

At the very beginning of his stay at Walden Pond, he wished to enrich his diet with a fish so he fished out of necessity rather than for amusement. He describes it as though he did not pity the fish because it used to be a habit for him. Nevertheless, he naturally changed his mind due to his closer and more intensive relationship with nature. He describes it as follows:

I have found repeatedly, of late years, that I cannot fish without falling a little in self-respect. I have tried it again and again. I have skill at it, and, like many of my fellows, a certain instinct for it, which revives from time to time, but always when I have done I feel that it would have been better if I had not fished; there is unquestionably this instinct in me which belongs to the lower orders of creation; at present, I am no fisherman at all.⁹⁸

As a result, Thoreau stopped eating all flesh because he found something unclean about a diet which contains flesh. To illustrate, he had caught, cleaned, cooked and eaten fish but afterwards, he felt that it was unnecessary and that a few potatoes or a bread would have sated him the same without layers of filth. He even describes that the repugnance towards animal food is about the instinct and not about the experience. “I believe that every man who has ever been earnest to preserve his higher or poetic faculties in the best condition has been particularly inclined to abstain from animal food, and from much food of any kind.”⁹⁹ According to him, such uncleanness can poison our imagination.

Despite the fact that humans have been meat-eaters for thousands of years, Thoreau believed meat consumption constitutes a miserable way of living which needs to be changed as we are

⁹⁶ Thoreau, *Walden*, 192.

⁹⁷ Thoreau, *Walden*, 191.

⁹⁸ Thoreau, *Walden*, 192.

⁹⁹ Thoreau, *Walden*, 193.

the part of a civilized community. What's more, he claimed that this change is a part of our destiny. "Whatever my own practice may be, I have no doubt that it is a part of the destiny of the human race, in its gradual improvement, to leave off eating animals."¹⁰⁰ He compares this destiny with savage tribes who stopped eating one another when they become civilized.

Thoreau believed that only water is the drink of wise men. As a result, he did not even consume alcohol, coffee, tea or he even did not listen to music as he believed that it intoxicates the body and the mind. Therefore, we are not able to perceive thoughts and ideas clearly, resulting in our uncleanness.

In conclusion, Thoreau believed that we all are conscious of having an animal inside us which is natural for human beings. We can withdraw from this animal but we can never change it. According to Thoreau, when we are in a close relationship with nature, we are therefore much closer to our true human nature and to the higher laws which strengthen the instinct. When we get rid of the uncleanness inside our bodies we become pure, wise and aware of the spiritual life. "Man flows at once to God when the channel of purity is open."¹⁰¹ However, it is the task for each of us because we all are the creators of oneself. "We are all sculptors and painters, and our material is our own flesh and blood and bones."¹⁰² Additionally, we need to follow our own dreams. When we confidently move forward in the direction of our dreams and imagine them clearly, we will be successful. As a result, we would live a satisfying life which we imagined.¹⁰³

3.3 Solitary Life in Nature

Nature and our relationship with it, is the synonym for Transcendentalism. According to Transcendentalists, the main purpose of life is to understand the relationship with nature. Thoreau decided to understand this relationship by the solitary way of living in the woods. Once he felt that he understood the relationship with nature he decided to leave the woods because he believed that he had more lives to live so he did not want to spare more of his time for that one.¹⁰⁴

Thoreau had his one-room cabin more than mile distant from his nearest neighbour. He described this as though he had had his own little world consisting of his own sun, moon and stars. He never felt lonely except for one moment when the loneliness was unpleasant to him.

¹⁰⁰ Thoreau, *Walden*, 194.

¹⁰¹ Thoreau, *Walden*, 197.

¹⁰² Thoreau, *Walden*, 199.

¹⁰³ Thoreau, *Walden*, 288.

¹⁰⁴ Thoreau, *Walden*, 287.

It happened a few weeks after he came at Walden Pond. At the same time, he felt slightly insane but he predicted a rapid recovery.

In the midst of a gentle rain while these thoughts prevailed, I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature, in the very pattering of the drops, and in every sound and sight around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me, as made the fancied advantages of human neighbourhood insignificant and I have never thought of them since.¹⁰⁵

Thoreau's words gave up comforts of life and he found it healthful to spend most of the time alone. He claims that even with the best company, we tend to feel exhausted and dispersed. Therefore, the best companion in Thoreau's mind is solitude. As people meet in short intervals, there is no time to obtain a new value for each other. Moreover, we need to agree on certain rules such as politeness and etiquette to make our meetings somewhat bearable.

In contrast, Thoreau's decision to perform his experiment of solitary living was unique. Many Transcendentalists had tried to apply their beliefs in their everyday lives but Thoreau's Transcendentalist fellows realized the experiment differently. George Ripley along with his wife, established a community called "Brook Farm" in 1841. It appealed to individuals as well as families to settle there, but numbered more than a hundred of inhabitants. However, the purpose of this community was rather vague. Transcendentalist fellow Bronson Alcott argued that "there was no clear organizing principle or philosophy behind the creation of the community."¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, the purpose of the community was, according to George Ripley, agricultural and educational. Unfortunately, the community suffered a financial loss from which it was not able to recover and therefore, they had to disband the experiment in 1847.¹⁰⁷

Bronson Alcott's criticism of the "Brook Farm" community gave rise to his own experiment. He established the community "Fruitlands", although it had only a few members. Alcott had an ascetic plan and had members follow a vegetarian diet in the name of animal rights. Additionally, members were not to use sugar or wear cotton in the name of abolitionism. However, they quickly faced difficulties and Alcott had to end the experiment which lasted only for eight months, from June 1843 to January 1844. Therefore, the experiment on the "Brook Farm" is considered more successful than the "Fruitlands".¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Thoreau, *Walden*, 120.

¹⁰⁶ Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 30.

¹⁰⁷ Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 29–30.

¹⁰⁸ Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 118–119.

The most prominent Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller often visited these communities but they never became a part of them. Moreover, Emerson even claimed that the living in such community may suppress an individual's self-development and that these communities were not even related to the transcendentalist purpose. Even Nathaniel Hawthorne, who had joined the "Brook Farm" community, discovered that he could not live in such community and to write productively at the same time.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, we can say that Thoreau's experiment of solitary life was precisely linked to purpose of Transcendentalism.

Thoreau decided for solitary life because he wanted to have leisure for contemplation, studying, writing and mainly for observation of nature. He did not want to be completely separated from the society. Thoreau did have occasional visitors. Either his friends or random visitors stopped by and entered his one-room cabin while he was away. "I had three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society."¹¹⁰ During his stay at Walden, he was visited by fishermen, hunters, philosophers, poets and children. "All honest pilgrims who came out to the woods for freedom's sake, and really left the village behind, I was ready to greet with."¹¹¹ When Thoreau simplified his life and got rid of useless material things, he lost the need to protect his property. Therefore, friends could easily enter his home because he did not lock the door. Those visitors tend to leave cards, flowers or their name on a piece of leaf. According to Thoreau, people who rarely spend their time in nature take a piece of forest and played with it on their way to the cabin. As such, he even found rings made of grass in his cabin.

On the other hand, Thoreau enjoyed his observation of nature as well as of life in the village. He frequently walked to Concord for food supplies, clothe and shoe repair or just to unwind and catch up on local news. "As I walked in the woods to see the birds and squirrels, so I walked in the village to see the men and boys; instead of the wind among the pines I heard the carts rattle."¹¹² He enjoyed those visits because every time he felt that he did not want to stay among society any longer, he could escape back to the woods. He describes it as though he set sail from village for cosy harbour in the Walden woods with a package of rye on his shoulder.¹¹³

Thoreau perceived this differently in comparison to the majority. To illustrate, a farmer who works the whole day in the field feels that he needs to reinvent himself from his solitary form and therefore, seeks companionship. He always goes back home, to society, while Thoreau

¹⁰⁹ Wayne, *Encyclopedia Of Transcendentalism*, 29–30.

¹¹⁰ Thoreau, *Walden*, 127.

¹¹¹ Thoreau, *Walden*, 139.

¹¹² Thoreau, *Walden*, 151.

¹¹³ Thoreau, *Walden*, 153.

perceives his loneliness as home and is always glad to be back in the woods.¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, this different perception might be rooted in the fact that he lived his solitary life only temporarily.

According to Fender, Thoreau's life in the woods cannot be perceived as solitary due to his frequent visits to Concord as well as the numerous guest visitors he entertained in his cabin. Fender supposes that Thoreau did not really live in the woods and was more like a camper.¹¹⁵ This argument may seem justified because when one imagines a solitary life in the woods, one usually imagines someone who is wholly isolated from society. But this was not the case of Thoreau way of living.

It is worth mentioning that Thoreau depicts nature as a wonderful, friendly and a calm place to live in. When we read the book, we do not have a feeling that it is a place full of danger where no one should venture out alone. However, Transcendentalists were inspired by English Romanticism which depicted nature in a different way.

Therefore, we can see a contrast in the perception of nature when we read Romantic poetry or even when we see Romantic paintings, although both movements viewed nature as a source of spiritual renewal. Romanticism depicted nature which is wonderful but simultaneously, unpredictable and powerful. In Romantic poetry and arts, we can find common elements such as raging seas and lofty mountains.¹¹⁶ Consequently, we tend to perceive nature as a less than idyllic place.

In conclusion, Thoreau's relationship with nature at Walden Pond was indeed unique. He perceived Walden Pond as a great crystal which occurs on Earth's surface and he admired it more than anything else. Despite his questionable solitary life in the woods, he found there his true meaning of life as well as the connection to the spiritual world. "I cannot come nearer to God and Heaven than I live to Walden even."¹¹⁷

3.4 Spring

Although Thoreau had spent in the woods two years and two months, he summarized his experiences of one full year into the book *Walden* into the period of a one full year. He depicts the changes of the seasonal rhythm within nature. He also believed that the phenomenon of the

¹¹⁴ Thoreau, *Walden*, 124.

¹¹⁵ Thoreau, *Walden*, xxiii.

¹¹⁶ "Wordsworth and the Sublime," *Discovering Literature: Romantics and Victorians*, last modified May 15, 2014, <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/wordsworth-and-the-sublime>.

¹¹⁷ Thoreau, *Walden*, 174.

year is present every day on a small scale. “The day is an epitome of the year. The night is the winter, the morning and evening are the spring and fall, and the noon is the summer.”¹¹⁸

However, the most profound season for him was spring because he perceived it as a rebirth. Being present in nature during the coming of spring was one the reasons why Thoreau decided to live in the woods. “One attraction in coming to the woods to live was that I should have leisure and opportunity to see the spring come in.”¹¹⁹ Transcendentalists tend to observe the intrinsic beauty of nature which is clear in *Walden*. It is obvious that Thoreau had a strong and intense relationship with mother nature.

Surprisingly, Thoreau noted several similarities between the human body’s functions and the operations of nature as a mother to humanity. To illustrate, he believed that nature has bowels. He supposed that winter serves as a time of purification for nature and the spring symbolizes the new birth.

This is the frost coming out of the ground; this is Spring. It precedes the green and flowery spring, as mythology precedes regular poetry. I know of nothing more purgative of winter fumes and indigestions. It convinces me that Earth is still in her swaddling clothes, and stretches forth baby fingers on every side.¹²⁰

Also, Thoreau describes a difference between the perceptions of Walden Pond. In winter, he felt that Walden was dead while in spring, he felt that it became reborn. Once he heard first sparrows and other birds singing, he knew that the year was beginning with a new hope. He even describes the coming of spring as “the creation of Cosmos out of Chaos.”¹²¹

Additionally, Thoreau claims that the spring season with its new and fresh energy may influence our minds in a profound way. If we know that something new, unique and beautiful is coming, we can brighten our minds with more positive thoughts. Therefore, Thoreau implores us to live in the present moment and observe the beauties of nature, not dwelling in the past thinking about missed opportunities. We cannot change the past, so we are wasting the power of the present moment by reminiscing about it.

According to Thoreau, spring can even purify our sins because it recreates the whole world. Thoreau gives the following example of a man whose sins are forgotten with the coming of spring:

¹¹⁸ Thoreau, *Walden*, 268.

¹¹⁹ Thoreau, *Walden*, 269.

¹²⁰ Thoreau, *Walden*, 275.

¹²¹ Thoreau, *Walden*, 279.

You may have known your neighbour yesterday for a thief, a drunkard, or a sensualist, and merely pitied or despised him, and despaired of the world; but the sun shines bright and warm this first spring morning, recreating the world, and you meet him at some serene work and see how his exhausted and debauched veins expand with still joy and bless the new day, feel the spring influence with the innocence of infancy, and all his faults are forgotten.¹²²

It is clear that Thoreau perceived changes in nature as truly symbolic, especially the spring season which is, according to him, highly powerful and refreshing for all of us. Thoreau likely wanted to show that a closer relationship with nature may wholly change our perception of the world so that we become more sensible. However, citizens were currently living in a world full of responsibilities and arguably focused more on technologies, money and ownership than on the power of nature. Generally, we tend to rush through life, meaning that we do not perceive the seasonal changes as symbolic or enriching. It would be better to stop for a while and simply observe nature. Taking the time to do so, according to Thoreau, would provide us with a different point of view on our lives and would provide us with wisdom on a true meaning of life, one less focused on money and ownership. Life is about the happiness and satisfaction gleaned from our life. However, it is up to each one of us to decide what our core values are.

¹²² Thoreau, *Walden*, 280.

4 Message of Transcendentalism and Henry David Thoreau

The Transcendentalist movement is considered revolutionary due to the idea of a “new thought” which was introduced to America as a criticism of its society’s attributes and simultaneously offering a new worldview. Unfortunately, most Transcendentalist beliefs did not achieve success at that time and were in fact subject to significant critique. To illustrate, the establishment of the previously mentioned communities “Brook Farm” and “Fruitlands” by a minority of Transcendentalists displayed, according to Schiff, ideas which were utopian and, in other words, idealistic. Their experiments were nothing more than just an escape from society. This appears to be a justified opinion because the community founders did not call for action by establishing those communities even though George Ripley and Bronson Alcott sought to create a model of the social reconstruction of man. Nevertheless, the creation of these two communities caused the division of Transcendentalists and therefore, contributed to a loss in status of the structured overall movement. To illustrate, Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson both criticized these experiments. Both of these Transcendentalists, more so than others, intensively preached individualism and they believed that even the joining of such a commune might lead to destruction of an individual’s uniqueness. They considered isolation from society as the only meaningful towards self-fulfilment and a deeper spiritual life.

According to Schiff, neither of the “Brook Farm” or “Fruitlands” nor Thoreau and Emerson had a recognizable effect on the culture at the time. Schiff believes that Transcendentalists failed because of their inability to form a structured movement which would realize their ideals. The main problem was in their extreme, making it impossible to develop a consistent body or even a doctrine of Transcendentalist thought.

Moreover, Transcendentalists, especially Henry David Thoreau, were, according to Schiff, almost anarchic. At the same time, he claims that Thoreau is often associated with the justification of the right to civil disobedience.¹²³ Nevertheless, Transcendentalists including Thoreau are well known for their nonviolent protests and nonviolent civil disobedience. Therefore, the statement claiming that Thoreau was almost anarchic is flawed. Schiff likely wanted to point out Thoreau’s unpaid tax to the government or his separation from society. However, these acts were not associated with violence so it is not possible to label him an anarchist. Thoreau simply believed that it was his responsibility to decide what is right or

¹²³ Martin Schiff, “Neo-Transcendentalism in the New Left Counter-Culture: A Vision of the Future Looking Back,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 15, no. 2 (March 1973): 131–137.

wrong. According to him, the reason for his civil disobedience was that he did not want to financially support the immoral behaviour of a government which sold women, children and men like cattle. Therefore, he did not pay a tax as a form of protest against the institution.¹²⁴

The topic of the nonviolent civil disobedience links directly to the second half of the last century. Thoreau's nonviolence is said to have inspired numerous moral and political reformers, including Martin Luther King Jr., leader of the first Negro nonviolent demonstration in the United States for the equality of coloured people.¹²⁵ Based on this concrete case, we can assert that Thoreau's attitude of ethics has not been abandoned and that it even influenced significant reformers of the 20th century.

Despite the unpopularity of Transcendentalist at the time, Thoreau and Emerson's beliefs gave rise to several movements which have adopted or were inspired by their principles. Therefore, these movements are labelled as followers of the New England Transcendentalists. Of particular significance during the 20th century and mainly the period after World War II, were the movements of the Beat Generation and counterculture Hippies.

We can find an almost identical modernization boom in the Transcendentalist era as existed in the post war period of the 1950s. The American economy became notably more powerful after the war. As a result, the United States went through significant changes in the form of development of suburbs, highways and increased commerce between U.S states. This led to increased mass production and consumption which became a defining feature of post war America.¹²⁶ In both cases, it gave rise to movements which were against the current social trends. In this environment, the beat generation came into existence. It should be noted that Beatniks were inspired by Transcendentalists, mainly Thoreau. Moreover, it is said that the Beat Generation gave rise to the increased popularity of the book *Walden*. "Henry David Thoreau was particularly revered as a symbol of protest. It was the Beats, in fact, who played a large role in rehabilitating Thoreau's reputation and elevating *Walden* to the status that it holds today."¹²⁷ Can it be argued that the beat generation was truly unique? To address this, we must ask, in fact, if they provided society with something new.

¹²⁴ Thoreau, *Walden*, 155.

¹²⁵ "Martin Luther King Jr. – Biography," Nobelprize, accessed March 18, 2018, https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-bio.html.

¹²⁶ Yonghong Zhang, "On the Beat Generation," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 3, no. 17 (September 2013): 205–206.

¹²⁷ "The Beat Generation," The Literature Network, accessed March 20, 2018, <http://www.online-literature.com/periods/beat.php>.

Firstly, the Beat Generation's centre was formed by Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. These two young poets and writers aimed to challenge traditional cultural values. The word "beat" refers to "the beautiful and beatific". According to Zhang, the boom of recent consumerism resulted in people no longer surrounded by people, but rather by objects and possessions. Therefore, the meaning of life fundamentally changed. Beatniks saw the main problem in obedience and the rising importance of material needs. "In this society, everyone was doing what they thought they should do; people earned money and desperately accumulated material wealth; but people did not really know what they lost in their lives; they did not know why they continued to do so."¹²⁸ People had to work much harder and give up their independence in order to purchase new things. Despite living in wonderful homes and being surrounded by material possessions, people were still unhappy. According to Beatniks, the lives of many Americans was rather pointless and unfulfilling.¹²⁹ It should be noted that Thoreau dealt explicitly with this problem. Thoreau believed that material wealth does not guarantee happiness or success. Therefore, this denouncement of material possessions was not an original idea of the Beat Generation but rather of the Transcendentalist movement. Beatniks also adapted their criticism of civil obedience from Transcendentalists as well. "A century earlier, the American Transcendentalists established a similar framework for thinking about the relationship between man and society."¹³⁰

Secondly, Kerouac believed strongly that American society should get rid of its consumerist values through connection to nature. "Pleasure of life are simple and the meaning of it can be found in nature, even in the absence of material wealth, one can enjoy the pleasure of life. Whether a person has money or not does not matter."¹³¹ Again, the notion of returning to nature as a place where one can find the true meaning of life is familiar, no one is more associated with this belief than Thoreau.

Zhang claims that the Beat Generation went to extreme measures in order to highlight and show how alienated they had become from mainstream society. By using blunt and provocative language in their writing, they wanted to awaken the public and show them that something was wrong with the American consumer culture. However, the beat generation received strong criticism due to its behaviour, mainly its notable usage of drugs and prevalence of sexual

¹²⁸ Zhang, "On the Beat Generation," 207.

¹²⁹ Zhang, "On the Beat Generation," 206.

¹³⁰ Caitlin Cater, "In Search of America: Nature, Spirituality, and the Self in American Transcendentalism and Beat Generation Literature," *An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English* 10, no. 1 (January 2008): 16.

¹³¹ Zhang, "On the Beat Generation," 208.

deviancy. Despite critique from different corners of society, Beatniks had a lasting impact on American society. Their rebellion was only artistic but it inspired the rebellious counterculture movement of the 1960s.¹³² According to Zhang, Beatniks did not come up with something new, they simply borrowed the Transcendentalist philosophy as the situation in American society was strikingly similar to which occurred a century ago, when Transcendentalists first came into existence.¹³³

Another similarity can be observed between Transcendentalism and the counterculture movement of the 1960s. The Hippies, the most popular American counterculture movement and even radical some groups such as the “Black Panthers” or “Weathermen” labelled themselves as unique cultural rebellions standing up to the evils of American society. Schiff, however, claims that their values were, in fact, not new at all. Based on analysis of American history, Schiff explains that their attitudes bear strong resemblance to those of Transcendentalists. Therefore, New England Transcendentalism is the counterculture’s direct antecedent.

Counterculture was influenced by a wide variety of sources. Nevertheless, the primary reason for the growth of the movement was the current situation in American industrial society which was, according to them, repressive, dehumanizing and ugly. Just as the Beatniks before them, counterculture members did not want to live in consumer society and they sought “a change in the quality of life where humanism abounds and consciousness expands, where the human spirit is liberated from materialist concerns, where man returns to nature for new styles, meaningful social participation, and organic community.”¹³⁴ Again, we can clearly observe similar themes including rejection of materialism, a return to nature, fights for equality and women’s rights.

As a result, we can see a form of escapism where participants in counterculture escaped to live in rural areas instead of being a part of urbanization. They also strongly opposed the Vietnam war by organizing protests and music festivals. As a result, they created a strong anti-authority and anti-government attitude which persists, as does that of the Beat Generation, in American culture today.¹³⁵

¹³² “The Beat Generation.”

¹³³ Zhang, “On the Beat Generation,” 208.

¹³⁴ Schiff, “Neo-Transcendentalism,” 132.

¹³⁵ “The Societal Impacts Of a Youth Driven Counterculture,” Washington State University, last modified January 20, 2015, <https://history.libraries.wsu.edu/spring2015/2015/01/20/history-of-marijuana-use-and-legality/>.

The Beat Generation and the counterculture tackled issues of the last century but the question can be asked – do any supporters of the Transcendentalist movement exist today? Indeed, we find strong parallels in today’s minimalism boom. Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus are well known contemporary promoters of the minimalistic lifestyle. Although they both had access to every material possession they could think of, they felt unhappy and dissatisfied with their lives. Therefore, they started to use the principles of minimalism in order to discover deeper meaning of life.¹³⁶ According to them, minimalism is a tool by which we can achieve freedom, happiness and a fulfilled life. “There are no rules in minimalism. Rather, minimalism is simply about stripping away the unnecessary things in your life so you can focus on what is important.”¹³⁷ Moreover, they perceive materialism as the primary issue facing modern society. “Today’s problem seems to be the meaning we assign to our stuff: we tend to give too much meaning to our things, often forsaking our health, our relationships, our passions, our personal growth, and our desire to contribute beyond ourselves.”¹³⁸ This viewpoint likely strikes a familiar chord. Certainly, Thoreau’s attitude towards getting rid of as many things as possible in order to live a meaningful life is indeed present in the minimalistic lifestyle.

Undoubtedly, we can assert that the philosophy of Henry David Thoreau and Transcendentalist movement played a major role in society. During the last century or even in modern society, we can see that Transcendentalist ideas still challenge values of society.

¹³⁶ Joshua F. Millburn, Ryan Nicodemus, *Minimalism Essential Essays* (Mins Publishing, 2011), 9.

¹³⁷ Millburn et al., *Minimalism Essential Essays*, 12.

¹³⁸ “What is Minimalism,” The Minimalists, accessed March 21, 2018, <https://www.theminimalists.com/minimalism/>.

5 Conclusion

The Transcendentalist movement has become a significant part of American culture and history. Although Transcendentalists came up with revolutionary new ideas and beliefs which, at their time, were often ridiculed or misunderstood, they have endured to this day and have had significant impact not only in America but around the globe. Transcendentalist ethics and philosophy have inspired significant reformers and movements which built off of their ideas. Moreover, Transcendental philosophy seems to be timeless insofar as we are able to apply its principles in our everyday lives. Even now, we can find a thriving minimalistic lifestyle which no doubt shares the important Transcendentalist principle of materialistic rejection.

Henry David Thoreau was a unique individual. He sacrificed comforts of modern life in order to live differently than the rest of society. By doing so, he lived the meaningful life which he had strived for. His book *Walden* symbolizes not only a strong relationship with nature but also the essence of spiritual life and even mankind's natural ability to distinguish what is moral from what is immoral.

Walden is a book which forces readers to think about the true meaning of life. It challenges our values to this day, forcing us to ask ourselves whether material possessions and modern amenities can truly make us happy.

6 Resumé

Předmětem této bakalářské práce je etika a filosofie hnutí transcendentalismu podle jednoho z nejvýznamnějších členů H. D. Thoreaua. Hnutí transcendentalismu vzniklo ve Spojených státech amerických v první polovině 19. století. Jedná se o ryze první americké hnutí, které přišlo s novými myšlenkami a s novým náhledem na společnost. Právě změna společnosti přispěla ke vzniku transcendentalismu.

První kapitola slouží jako úvod do problematiky transcendentalismu. V první části je definována etika z pohledu nejvýznamnějšího člena transcendentalismu, R. W. Emersona a jeho díla *Self-reliance*. Podle Emersona je každý z nás, na základě instinktu, schopný rozpoznat co je a není etické. R.W. Emerson tvrdí, že v rámci etiky hraje hlavní roli jedinec a jeho způsob myšlení. Emersonova self-reliance, v překladu nezávislost či soběstačnost, je pravým opakem společnosti. Emerson vnímá přizpůsobování se společnosti jako hlavní problém, který omezuje jedince v jeho svobodě, tvorbě názorů a samotného myšlení. Proto Emerson silně propaguje individualismus jako životní styl. Emerson se také postavil proti zákonu o uprchlých otrocích, který byl schválen v rámci tzv. kompromisu 1850. Emerson vnímal zákon, který požadoval dopadení a vrácení uprchlých otroků zpět svému majiteli, jako silně nemorální. Podle Emersona bychom neměli slepě následovat to, co nám diktuje společnost. Měli bychom konat to, co my sami cítíme jako správné.

Druhá část je zaměřena na samotný vznik transcendentalismu, který byl ovlivněn hned několika faktory. Tato část pojednává o anglickém romantismu, německém idealismu, puritánství a dalších vlivech, které inspirovaly americký transcendentalismus. Nicméně transcendentalismus vznikl hlavně jako reakce na tehdejší společnost. Americká revoluce v druhé polovině 18. století sice zajistila nezávislost na Velké Británii, ale transcendentalisté revoluci vnímali jako nedokončenou. Americká ekonomika byla závislá hlavně na otroctví a nerovnoprávnost občanů byla na denním pořádku. Transcendentalisté proto reagovali nejen na tyto problémy, ale také na politickou situaci, vzdělání, rovnoprávnost žen či na vzrůstající materialismus.

Třetí část se věnuje samotnému hnutí transcendentalismu a jeho nejvýznamnějším členům. Transcendentalismus se bohužel potýkal s problémem identifikace a na okolí působil rozpolceně hned z několika důvodů. Transcendentalisté sice sdíleli společné myšlenky a principy, ale každý z nich se věnoval svému tématu, které pokládal za to nejpodstatnější. Margaret Fuller například psala hlavně o nerovnoprávnosti žen, H. D. Thoreau se věnoval převážně přírodě a George Parker se zaměřil na téma otrokářství. Na druhou stranu je

pochopitelné, že skupina intelektuálů, která propaguje hlavně individualismus a unikátnost myšlenky jedince, nemůže působit zcela uceleně. Obecně můžeme říci, že společnými tématy transcendentalistů byly otrokářství, nerovnoprávnost, individualismus, práva žen a velice blízký vztah k přírodě. Transcendentalisté se většinou setkávali se silnou kritikou. Jejich názory byly ve většině případů odsouzeny jako nesrozumitelné a většina společnosti je zesměšňovala. Ale jak to většinou bývá, slávy se dočkali až o několik dekád déle. Dnes jsou některé z jejich názorů vnímány jako nadčasové.

Transcendentalisté měli stejné místo působení, město Concord, které je dodnes symbolem transcendentalismu a blízkého vztahu k přírodě. Právě ve městě Concord se začali transcendentalisté pravidelně stýkat a výsledkem byl pravidelně vydávaný měsíčník. Transcendentalisté vydávali časopis za účelem šíření jejich myšlenek do společnosti, nicméně tento projekt trval pouze od roku 1840 do roku 1844.

Čtvrtá část pojednává o životě H. D. Thoreaua a jeho cestě k transcendentalismu. H. D. Thoreau se nenarodil do bohaté rodiny, ale i přesto dostal možnost vystudovat prestižní Harvard. Od útlého mládí se stalo vzdělání nedílnou součástí jeho života a na konci jeho studií byl schopen číst v pěti jazycích. H. D. Thoreau byl za každých okolností individualista a vždy jednal podle svého nejlepšího uvážení a neohlížel se na okolí. To je pravděpodobně jeden z důvodů, proč se stal jedním z nejvýznamnějších transcendentalistů. H. D. Thoreau se ve svých dílech věnuje tématům přírody, materialismu a samotářství. Jeho nejslavnějším dílem je kniha *Walden*, nebo *Občanská neposlušnost*.

Druhá kapitola se věnuje hlavním principům transcendentalismu. I přesto, že se transcendentalisté věnovali různým tématům a působili rozpolceně, můžeme najít čtyři základní principy. Prvním principem je intuice jakožto jediná správná cesta k morální a duchovní pravdě. Druhým principem je blízký vztah k přírodě, který otevírá dveře k duchovnímu životu, protože transcendentalisté vnímají přírodu jako metaforu lidské mysli. Třetím principem je odmítání materialismu. Transcendentalisté věří, že obklopování se zbytečnými materiálními věcmi způsobuje neschopnost rozeznat co je a není v životě důležité. Podle transcendentalistů jsme schopni dosáhnout uspokojení pouze skrze naše vnitřní já, nikoliv skrze pomíjivé materiální věci. Posledním principem transcendentalismu je nezávislost. Je důležité poslouchat svůj vnitřní hlas, svou intuici namísto diktovaných pravidel a názorů společnosti. Podle transcendentalistů je nezávislost jediná cesta k opravdovému štěstí.

Třetí kapitola je stěžejní pro tuto práci, jelikož pojednává o knize H. D. Thoreaua *Walden*. Transcendentalista H. D. Thoreau je známý pro své aplikování principů transcendentalismu do praktického života. Rozhodl se pro dvouletý samotářský experiment a dočasně se odstěhoval k jezeru Walden nedaleko města Concord. Na pozemku R. W. Emersona si postavil chatku, ve které po dva roky a dva měsíce pobýval. Během celého pobytu si vedl deník, na jehož základě napsal tuto knihu.

První část se věnuje tématu hospodaření. H. D. Thoreau kritizuje modernizaci americké společnosti, díky které lidé vykonávají těžkou práci jen proto, aby se mohli za vydělané peníze obklopit naprosto nepotřebnými materiálními věcmi. Poukazuje na to, že společnost mění své hodnoty k horšímu. Podle H. D. Thoreaua jsou materiální věci spíše na obtíž a pro člověka pomíjivé. H. D. Thoreau se zbavuje všech nepotřebných věcí ve svém životě a věnuje se rozvoji sebe sama skrze přírodu a vzdělání, protože právě to je v životě důležité.

Druhá část pojednává o vyšších zákonech. H. D. Thoreau se během svého experimentu cítil jako plnohodnotná součást přírody a začal naplno poslouchat svůj vnitřní hlas, instinkt. Z H. D. Thoreaua se během pobytu u jezera Walden stal vegetarián. Díky bližšímu vztahu k přírodě a duchovnímu světu zjistil, že konzumace masa znečišťuje jeho tělo, spouští pocity viny a negativně ovlivňuje jeho představivost.

Třetí část se zabývá samotářstvím. H. D. Thoreau odešel na samotu, jelikož chtěl mít čas na pozorování přírody, rozjímání a studování. H. D. Thoreau vyobrazuje přírodu jako nádherné, přátelské a klidné místo. Nicméně jeho samotářské pobývání u jezera Walden je často kritizované a nazývané spíše kempováním kvůli jeho častým návštěvníkům a pochůzkách ve městě.

Čtvrtá část se věnuje jaru. H. D. Thoreau vnímal období jara jako symbolické znovuzrození a očistu. H. D. Thoreau dokonce tvrdí, že jarní sezóna může mít blahodárné účinky na lidskou mysl, a dokonce může člověka očistit od jeho hříchů.

Poslední kapitola se zabývá odkazem transcendentalismu a H. D. Thoreaua. I přes nepochopení názorů transcendentalismu se o století později setkáváme s následovníky, kteří ožívají transcendentalistické principy. H. D. Thoreau se stal symbolem nenásilné občanské neposlušnosti. Právě od H. D. Thoreaua se inspiroval stěžejní reformátor za občanská práva Martin Luther King Jr. V období po druhé světové válce to jsou právě beatníci jako literární a umělecké hnutí, které kritizuje nejen materialistické hodnoty americké poválečné společnosti. Další vlnou je významné alternativní hnutí hippies, které svým rozměrem opravdu zpochybňuje

společenské hodnoty a otřásá americkou společností. Dnes můžeme najít paralelu v minimalistickém životním stylu. Transcendentalistické principy nepochybně zůstávají součástí společnosti.

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