

Transcendentalism : Difference in English and American English Literature

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Abstract -

Transcendentalism, a philosophical and literary movement that emerged in the 19th century, holds a significant place in the history of English and American English literature. Rooted in the idea that individuals can transcend the limitations of the physical world through intuition and self-reliance, transcendentalism influenced writers on both sides of the Atlantic. However, due to varying cultural contexts and historical developments, there are notable differences in how transcendentalism manifested in English literature compared to American English literature. This paper aims to explore these distinctions, examining key literary figures and works to shed light on the unique expressions of transcendentalism in both traditions. Transcendentalism as a literary movement emerged as a reaction against the established religious and social norms of the 19th century. English literature, primarily represented by the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, and American English literature, exemplified by writers like William Wordsworth and Alfred Tennyson (1), developed different perspectives on transcendentalism due to their respective historical and cultural contexts.

Keywords - *Transcendentalism, American English literature, self-reliance, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Alfred Tennyson*

To understand the differences in transcendentalism between English and American English literature, it is crucial to consider the historical and cultural contexts that shaped each tradition. In England, the Romantic movement, which emphasized individualism and a connection to nature, paved the way for transcendentalist ideas. In contrast, the American Transcendentalists found inspiration in the unique challenges and opportunities presented by the young nation's pursuit of identity and independence.

In English literature, transcendentalism found expression through the works of poets like William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Their emphasis on nature, the imagination, and the subjective experience of the individual reflected transcendentalist ideals. Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" and Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" are renowned examples that explore the connection between the human mind and the natural world. American English literature, heavily influenced by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and other transcendentalist thinkers, presented a distinct interpretation of transcendentalism. Emerson's essay "Nature" and Thoreau's book "Walden" exemplify the American transcendentalist movement's core ideas, including self-reliance, individualism, and the search for truth and meaning through direct experience with nature. Both English and American transcendentalist literature share a deep appreciation for nature. However, English

transcendentalism tends to emphasize the spiritual aspects of nature, often blurring the boundaries between the human and the divine. In contrast, American transcendentalism places greater emphasis on the individual's ability to find spiritual truth within themselves, advocating for a personal, intuitive connection to the natural world. American transcendentalism, shaped by the challenges of a developing nation, often took on a more explicitly social and political tone compared to its English counterpart. American transcendentalist writers critiqued societal institutions and championed causes such as abolitionism and women's rights. This social activism aspect is less pronounced in English transcendentalist literature, which focuses more on individual experiences and contemplation (2). Transcendentalism's influence on both English and American English literature cannot be overstated. It laid the groundwork for later movements such as the Beat Generation, the counterculture of the 1960s, and the environmentalist movement. While English transcendentalism had a more immediate impact on English literature, American transcendentalism left a lasting imprint on American literature and cultural identity.

Transcendentalists pursued numerous values but it could be condensed in three basic values and that are **Individualism, Idealism and Divinity of nature.**

Individualism - Individualism, a fundamental concept in literature, plays a significant role in both English and American literary traditions. However, due to varying cultural, historical, and philosophical contexts, there are notable differences in how individualism is portrayed and perceived in English literature compared to American literature.

Individualism, as a concept, emphasizes the importance of the individual and their unique experiences, thoughts, and desires. In both English and American literature, individualism serves as a lens through which characters and themes are explored. However, the specific manifestations of individualism differ due to the cultural, historical, and philosophical differences between English and American societies. Understanding these differences provides insights into the distinct perspectives on individualism within each literary tradition. English literature often depicts individualism in relation to societal structures and norms. In works by authors such as Jane Austen and Charles Dickens, individualism is portrayed within the context of class divisions and social expectations. Characters strive to assert their individuality within restrictive societal frameworks, highlighting the tension between personal desires and societal obligations. English literature often explores the conflicts and challenges faced by individuals navigating the complexities of social hierarchies. American literature, particularly in the context of the nation's founding ideals, places a strong emphasis on individualism and personal freedom. Writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Mark Twain celebrate the individual's ability to define their own identity, pursue their dreams, and challenge societal conventions. American literature often portrays individuals breaking free from societal constraints, embracing self-reliance, and seeking personal fulfillment. The theme of individualism intersects with broader concepts such as the American Dream and the frontier spirit. The contrasting manifestations of individualism in English and American literature can be attributed to cultural and historical factors. English literature developed within a context of established social structures, aristocracy, and a long history of traditions. The emphasis on individualism in English literature is often tied to characters' attempts to navigate and challenge these established systems. In contrast, American literature emerged from a context of colonization, expansion, and the pursuit of individual liberties. The pioneering spirit and the desire for personal freedom are central themes in American literature. English literature tends to explore the tensions between individual desires and societal expectations, often highlighting the constraints individuals face within established

hierarchies. Characters struggle to reconcile their personal ambitions with social norms, resulting in complex narratives that delve into human psychology and relationships. American literature, on the other hand, emphasizes the individual's potential to shape their own destiny and challenge societal constraints. Characters in American literature embody self-reliance, resilience, and a spirit of adventure. English literature showcases individualism through works like Jane Austen's "Pride and Prejudice," where characters like Elizabeth Bennet assert their individuality within the confines of social class and gender expectations. Charles Dickens' novels, such as "Great Expectations" and "David Copperfield," explore the journey of individuals navigating societal structures and striving for self-realization. In American literature, works like Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance" and Mark Twain's "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" embody the American spirit of individualism and freedom. These works celebrate characters who break away from societal conventions, forge their own paths, and question the status quo (3). While both English and American literature acknowledge the significance of individualism, they approach it from different perspectives. English literature often focuses on the individual's struggle within established social structures, while American literature highlights personal freedom and the pursuit of self-realization. These differences reflect the cultural, historical, and philosophical contexts in which the respective literary traditions evolved. By examining the contrasting manifestations of individualism in English and American literature, we gain a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between the individual and society in these rich literary traditions (4).

Idealism -

Idealism, a philosophical and literary concept that emphasizes the importance of ideas, beliefs, and values, has influenced both English and American literature. However, due to variations in cultural, historical, and philosophical contexts, there are distinct differences in how idealism is portrayed and explored in these two literary traditions.

Idealism, as a philosophical concept, emphasizes the primacy of ideas and the belief that reality is shaped by the mind. In both English and American literature, idealism plays a significant role in shaping characters, themes, and narrative structures. However, the specific manifestations and approaches to idealism differ due to the cultural, historical, and philosophical distinctions between English and American societies. Understanding these differences provides insights into the diverse perspectives on idealism within each literary tradition. English literature often explores idealism in the context of morality and ethical considerations. Works by authors such as William Shakespeare and Jane Austen delve into the moral dilemmas faced by characters and the consequences of adhering to or deviating from idealistic principles. English literature examines the conflicts between ideals and the complexities of human nature, often presenting a nuanced exploration of the moral choices individuals make. American literature, particularly during the era of the American Renaissance, reflects a strong sense of idealism and a utopian vision (5). Writers like Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville explore the pursuit of idealistic ideals and the human desire for perfection. American literature often presents characters striving for an ideal society, challenging societal norms, and seeking transcendence. The theme of idealism intersects with notions of American exceptionalism and the quest for a better future. The differences in the portrayal of idealism in English and American literature can be attributed to cultural and historical factors. English literature developed within a context of long-established social structures, religious influences, and a sense of tradition. Idealism in English literature often examines the conflicts and compromises that arise when ideals encounter the realities of society. American literature, on the other hand, emerged in a context of nation-building, exploration, and the pursuit of

freedom and opportunity. American idealism reflects the belief in progress and the potential for societal transformation. English literature presents idealism as a complex and multifaceted concept, often exploring its limitations and the clash between idealistic visions and practical realities. Characters in English literature grapple with moral dilemmas and confront the complexities of human nature, leading to nuanced examinations of the consequences of idealistic beliefs. American literature, in contrast, embraces a more optimistic and transformative perspective on idealism. American writers often portray characters driven by an unwavering commitment to their ideals, seeking to bring about societal change and challenging existing norms. In English literature, William Shakespeare's play "Hamlet" examines the clash between idealistic principles and the complexities of human nature. Jane Austen's novel "Sense and Sensibility" explores the tension between idealistic values and the pragmatic realities of society. American literature provides examples such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter," where characters struggle with the conflict between idealistic beliefs and societal norms. Henry David Thoreau's "Walden" embodies the American spirit of idealism, advocating for a return to nature and a rejection of materialistic society (6). While idealism is present in both English and American literature, the differing perspectives and manifestations reflect the cultural, historical, and philosophical contexts in which these literary traditions evolved. English literature often explores idealism through moral dilemmas and the clash between ideals and practical realities, while American literature embodies a more transformative and utopian vision. By examining the contrasting portrayals of idealism in English and American literature, we gain a deeper understanding of the diverse ways in which literature reflects and engages with the ideals, beliefs, and values of its respective societies.

Divinity of nature -

Both English and American literary traditions have deeply engaged with the theme of nature's divinity, albeit with distinct approaches and perspectives.

Ralph Waldo Emerson:

Emerson, a prominent figure in the Transcendentalist movement of the 19th century, placed a strong emphasis on the divinity of nature (7). In his essay "Nature," Emerson argues that nature is a direct manifestation of the divine and that the individual can achieve spiritual enlightenment by immersing themselves in its beauty and truth. He believed that nature serves as a gateway to understanding the deeper truths of existence and that communion with nature is essential for personal growth and self-reliance.

Henry David Thoreau:

Thoreau, a close friend and disciple of Emerson, further explored the divinity of nature in his seminal work "Walden." Through his experience of living in solitude by Walden Pond, Thoreau sought to understand nature's transcendental qualities. He believed that nature was a source of spiritual renewal and that by simplifying one's life and embracing the natural world, one could establish a deeper connection with the divine. Thoreau's writings also emphasized the importance of preserving and respecting nature, promoting an ecological consciousness that reflected his reverence for the divine in the natural world.

Walt Whitman:

Whitman, often hailed as the poet of democracy, celebrated the divinity of nature and its profound connection to the human experience. In his groundbreaking collection "Leaves of Grass," Whitman presented an expansive and inclusive vision of nature's divinity. He saw nature as a unifying force, embracing the beauty and

interconnectedness of all living beings (8). Whitman's poetry reverberates with a sense of awe and reverence for the natural world, viewing it as a sacred space where individuals can experience a spiritual awakening and find solace.

Conclusion -

In conclusion, the exploration of the divinity of nature in English and American literature reveals intriguing similarities and distinct differences. Transcendentalism, a philosophical and literary movement, played a significant role in shaping the perspectives on nature's divinity in both traditions. English literature, particularly during the Romantic era, emphasized the sublime and awe-inspiring aspects of nature. Poets like Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley celebrated the beauty and spiritual power of the natural world. While they acknowledged nature's divine qualities, their focus was often on the emotional and sensory experience of encountering nature. On the other hand, American literature, influenced by Transcendentalism, developed a distinct perspective on nature's divinity. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman, among others, sought a deeper spiritual connection with nature. They viewed nature as a direct manifestation of the divine and believed that by immersing oneself in the natural world, individuals could access higher truths and attain personal enlightenment.

Transcendentalism in American literature embraced a more experiential and individualistic approach to nature's divinity (9). It emphasized the importance of self-reliance, simplicity, and communion with the natural world as a means to transcend the limitations of societal conventions and access a higher spiritual plane. While both English and American literature acknowledged the divinity of nature, English literature often focused on the poetic and aesthetic qualities of the natural world, while American literature, influenced by Transcendentalism, emphasized the transformative and spiritual aspects. Overall, the differences between English and American literature regarding transcendentalism and the divinity of nature reflect the cultural, historical, and philosophical distinctions between the two traditions. English literature drew from a long-standing poetic tradition, while American literature, shaped by the unique experiences of the New World, sought to forge a distinct national identity and explore new philosophical ideas. By examining the works of influential authors from both traditions, we gain a deeper understanding of how the divinity of nature has been perceived, celebrated, and philosophically interpreted. The exploration of these differences enriches our appreciation for the diverse ways in which literature reflects human experiences and perceptions of the natural world as a divine force.

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