
The Theology of Henry David Thoreau.

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ABSTRACT:

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), a representative of the American Transcendentalist, took to new paths in his exploration of individual and cosmic consciousness. It is quite interesting to see that 'Transcendentalism' was always linked with the 'Context'. This context is always understood by their rebellion against the contemporary situation. The act of insurgence makes them different from others. In attempting to define the transcendentalism, it can be said that transcendentalists belonged to a particular generation who did attempt to redefine a few terms like religion and spirituality in a new way; in a new light. The period of transcendentalism was also marked by experimentation and logical thinking. It emerged as a voice against the conservative institutions. Thoreau was also greatly influenced by the wisdom of Indian philosophy. This article will interpret Thoreau's works and bring to light its mystical and spiritual elements.

KEY WORDS:

Transcendental, existence, mysticism, experiment, materialistic and spiritual.

Henry David Thoreau is one of the foremost American proponents of the simple living. The greatness of this philosopher lies in the fact that he remains an influential sway on free thinkers even after several generations. Known for his simplicity, Henry David Thoreau advocated that every man must live in the present, launch himself on every wave, and find his eternity in each moment. He was also a strong believer in civil disobedience, and believed in simple living through the use of natural resource. It is quite interesting to see that his essay, Resistance to Civil Government influenced Gandhi in more than one way. He sought an absolutely individual stance toward everything, looking for the truth not in social conventions or inherited traditions but only in himself.

It was his unconventional manners and impertinent views, Thoreau rapidly made a name for himself among Emerson's followers. His Waldentruly reflects upon simple living in natural surroundings. It happens to be his masterpiece. In spite of his popularity, Henry David Thoreau is often criticized as not basically an original thinker. "His ideas are all borrowed; their originality is in the blending," –a statement by Canby substantiates the criticism.

Walden or life in the Woods, published in 1854, is a recollection of the experiences of two years, two months, and two days in a cabin he built near Walden Pond, amidst woodland owned by his friend and mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson, near Concord, Massachusetts. It takes only a quick glance at Walden of Thoreau's writings to see how important Nature was to him (he tended to capitalize the word, as one would capitalize 'God'). He saw a close association with Nature as the means to a fuller life. He disliked cities because they pre-

vented communing with Nature. He also looked to nature for its meanings-for ultimate spiritual truths-not only for detailed facts. He was more interested in the perception and experience of Nature than in the detailed descriptions of it. For Thoreau, science was a means to an end. But at the same time, he held the details in higher regard than the other Transcendentalists. He saw those scientific facts as the means for beholding larger truths about the spiritual landscape within himself. He says,

“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts 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.”

This and many other writings show his firm belief that the busyness of modern life distances people from God and spiritual awakening. He further says,

When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only. I lived there two years, two months and two days.

Henry David Thoreau's explanation of philosophical concepts like, politics, and nature, laying the foundation provides him secured place in the canon of great American and world writers alike. By immersing himself in nature, Thoreau hoped to gain a more objective understanding of society through personal introspection. Simple living and self-sufficiency were Thoreau's other goals, and the whole project was inspired by transcendentalist philosophy, a central theme of

the American Romantic Period.

“I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, and he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and interpreted in his favor in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings. In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, or poverty, or weakness. If you built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.”

A quick glance at his Walden makes us believe that how significant and momentous nature was to him. He believed that the urban life thwarted communication with nature. Life was synonymous with nature for him. He made earnest attempts interpret the facts of nature. In his attempt of analyzing the nature, he realized that nature is spiritual and ultimate truth. The clearest and the most visible way for Henry David Thoreau into the universe was through the wilderness of nature. Nature always wore the colours of spirit for him. A very interesting and factual observation between him and other transcendentalists of his times is that he held the details of nature in higher regard than others. He saw those scientific facts as the means for beholding larger truths about the spiritual landscape within himself. It is found that it is extraordinarily difficult to separate Thoreau’s writings by theme or belief- Nature constantly over-

laps solitude and is inseparable from wildness; solitude cannot be explored apart from the way Thoreau lived and the way he exhorted others to live.

His stay amidst nature is an experiment to explore the self. The odyssey of his association with nature was towards excellence; it was a journey to seek to seek other state, other lives, other souls; the journey is the treasure. His association with nature resulted into his relationship with mysticism. Though a mystic, Henry David Thoreau within the transcendentalist fold. His purposes in living at Walden were spiritual, aimed at personal redemption; not nostalgic, aimed at self-indulgence. He sought transcendence through intention, not escapism by avoidance. He looked inward to a deeper meaning and deeper experience of life, not backward to some better, some innocent time. He insisted on the reality of the present, but did not conclude that whatever is right. Contrary to some popular opinions, Harding and Meyer insist that Thoreau's response to life was very positive-he was a romantic and a Transcendentalist, not a stoic.

Mysticism is often understood as the belief that direct knowledge of God, spiritual truth, or ultimate reality can be attained through subjective experience (as intuition or insight)

I stand in awe of my body; this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me... Talk of mysteries! Think of our life in nature, daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it, - rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! The solid earth! The actual world! The common sense! Contact! Contact! Who are we? Where are we?

When Thoreau writes these lines, Thoreau clearly voices

some sharp criticism of civilized life and industrialization and this emotional outburst comes from the mystical experience of the awe of being, which at this moment Thoreau found in Nature. His prophetic tone at the end of the work displays a huge moral investment in the fate of his fellow men.

Thoreau's idea was that one's true self could be lost in the middle of the interruptions and disruptions of ordinary life. His experimentation consisted of stripping away those distractions, living deliberately instead of automatically, and following the inclinations that arose within him in the solitude, silence, and leisure of his simplified life. He moved away from nonessentials to travel around what remained as the central part of human identity, assuming that human identity is not based on one's profession or possessions or social connections.

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