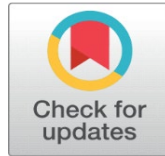
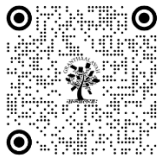


# THE TRANSCENDENTAL AESTHETIC: WALT WHITMAN'S POETIC PHILOSOPHY

Madhusmita Choudhury <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of English, Cotton University, Panbazar, Pin-781001, India



DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i3.2024.5550](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i3.2024.5550)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

**Copyright:** © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



## ABSTRACT

Whitman's poetry appears to portray transcendental ideals challenging the notion of a unified self. Subverting the conventional ideals of nature, he tends to portray the interconnection between nature, spirituality and individualism. The spiritual significance of nature is embodied in his poems which embraces the divine in nature. Again, he complicates the idea of a unified self, reflecting the complexities between individualism and collectivism which further unfurls the tensions of American identity. The complexities of human experience get intertwined with the interconnectedness of the significance of nature and the vision of a harmonious universe and inclusive possibility. Nature is explored as a source of spiritual guidance which facilitates the poet to draw a deeper connection with the universe. The paper explores the transcendental ideals of Walt Whitman exploring some of his poems.

**Keywords:** Nature, Spirituality, Transcendental Ideals and Universe

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Whitman's poetry in connection to transcendentalism is primarily rooted in the sociocultural, historical and literary context of 19th century America. Having lived through the Civil War which had an immense impact on America life, culture and politics, Whitman highlights these issues in the poems. His poems also showcase the shift that the United States was undergoing concerning industrialization and urbanization. The change in the social, economic and cultural life is reflected in his poems. The celebration of American identity, identity, equality, democratic ideals and importance of selfhood is all pervasive in Whitman's poetry. The notion of American identity is well explored through Whitman's poetry. An inclusive, varied, expansive and diverse vision of national American culture gets reflected through his poetry. "The trait transcendentalism was there in Whitman in the form of individualism, self-reflexivity and in the idea of democracy as propagated in his poems". (Baghira 1)

"Transcendentalism is a philosophical way of thinking, gives more emphasis to individualism and emphasizing the importance of nature" (A.P, 303). The influence of Romanticism and Transcendentalism is reflected through his poetry which lays importance on the significance of nature and the personal experience. Whitman's poetry bears true testimony to the fact that it celebrates the relationship between spirituality and nature. It explores the idea of individualism and American identity. "Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass celebrates the beauty of one's self and forms a united whole, each leaf of grass has its own distinct beauty and individual identity, intensified with a sense of togetherness" (Baghira 1)

## 2. INFLUENCE OF THOREAU AND EMERSON ON WHITMAN

Whitman poetry highlights the deep and sincere influence of Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson's transcendental ideals. The threads of transcendental ideals of Thoreau and Emerson are weaved together in a very skillful and poetical technique by Whitman in his poems. The self-reliant spirit of Thoreau's poems is echoed in Whitman's poetry that captures the autonomous nature of individuals. Whitman's depiction of the natural world as a source of spiritual guidance draws inspiration from the philosophical engagement of Emerson concerning nature and spirituality. "Such a triangular relationship of man with man; man with the abode where he lives in, and man with the nature, covers (by and large) all semblances of creation and the universe most obviously" (Khan 87)

The essence of Emerson's spiritual philosophy which is nature driven is explored by Whitman in his poetry which embodies the multifaceted and nuanced relationship between nature and spirituality. "Fundamentally, both Whitman and Emerson emphasize the power of nature, human agency and equality. Meanwhile, they hold different views towards the physical body and the realization of transcendental experience" (Liu 1). Therefore, it can be said that the legacy of Thoreau and Walden concerning transcendentalism is carried forward by Whitman moulding and adapting their ideology into a powerful voice which is celebratory in nature as it glorify American identity, individuality and spirituality.

## 3. ANALYSIS OF A FEW POEMS

The poem "I Hear America Singing" embodies the movement's core tenets. Through the poem Whitman emphasizes on celebrating individuality as well as diversity of American life. He promotes equality, inclusivity, liberty and freedom which highlight his transcendental vision of inclusive, united, vibrant and diverse America. Throughout the poem, Whitman attempts to draw in a connection between human beings and nature which showcases his transcendental outlook. He tends to search for beauty in ordinary circumstances and experiences of life. He highlights his transcendental ideals through the poem by celebrating the life experience of people belonging to every strata of the population. "I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear," (Whitman 17). The poem is a manifestation of the transcendental ideals that captures the democratic spirit of America. An optimistic vision of America which includes the celebration of individuality and democracy finds space in the poem. His vision of united and diverse America aligns with the transcendental belief in self-reliance and individuality. "The self is by no means isolated, and it is quite essential for each and everyone to explore his or her individuality" (Chhangani 719). The perspectives of different people are showcased by Whitman which promotes a sense of collective harmony. "The day what belongs to the day— at night the party of young fellows, robust, friendly, Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs" (Whitman 17). The emphasis on search for meaning and beauty in the mundane bears true testimony to his transcendental approach. His use of organic imagery is suggestive of a connection with the nature world.

Through the poem "Song of Myself" Whitman emphasizes on personal freedom, creativity and growth. The poem reflects his transcendental ideals of finding beauty, divinity and spirituality in everyday life. The poem embraces the contradictions and paradoxes along with celebrating the unity and interconnectedness of all things. "I celebrate myself, and sing myself, And what I assume you shall assume, For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (Whitman 29). It mirrors the connection among nature, humans and the universe. "Song of Myself" is also among his most transcendental poems as he shows with transcendentalist philosophies the interest in understanding the position of humans in the universe and within nature, and human experience" (Khan 82). He represents humanity through the use of "I". His extended vision of democracy that stretches to the spiritual realm connects everyone. His exploration into the domain where everything is connected blurs the boundary between the self and the other. "Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself. (I am large, I contain multitudes)" (Whitman 78). Death is seen not as an end but as a transformation. The conventional boundaries of the self are transcended. Therefore, the poem is a tribute to his transcendental ethics upholding the individual's ability for growth and spiritual transformation through immersion in nature, the divine and the universe.

The poem "A Noiseless Patient Spider" explores the idea of the human soul's quest for meaning through the metaphor of the spider. The importance of human connection is conveyed through the imagery of the spider. Nature is regarded as an important source of inspiration for human beings. "And you O my soul where you stand, surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space" (Whitman 343). The poem also highlights the importance of spiritual

exploration focusing on the human quest for meaning. The use of natural imagery of the spider and the web to depict human experience and spiritual truth is a characteristic feature of transcendental literature. The transcendental values of persistence and resilience of the spider highlights human's action for growth and quiet determination. The web of the spider demonstrates interconnectedness which depicts Whitman's emphasis on unity and oneness. The transcendental idea that everything is a part of the greater whole is reflected through the imagery of the web. The self-directed nature of the spider is reflective of the transcendental ideals of autonomy, freedom and individuality. The action of the spider highlights the interest of the understanding of one's position within the universe. The poem is a thought-provoking meditation on the philosophical ideas of human experience.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Whitman excavates the amalgamation of the soul and nature thereby complicating the binary between transcendence and immanence. His works embrace the diversity and complexity of American life through the expansion of his idea of transcendentalism. The abstract notion of identity is negated by visualizing the self as a dynamic entity which is built through its connection with others. The intricate web of connection between the cosmos and human beings is intensified by effectuating dissolution of boundary between the self and the other. Therefore his transcendental poetics productively troubles the conventional notion of subjectivity thereby yielding an inclusive vision of American identity that illuminates the debates about identity and ecological consciousness offering a vision of democratic politics.

#### CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

#### REFERENCES

- A.P. Kishore, "Obscurity and Interpretation of Transcendentalism in Walt Whitman's Poem "The Cabined Ships of Sea": A Structuralist Perception", *International Journal of All Research Education and Scientific Methods*, Vol.10, Issue 2, 2022
- Baghira, Tanmoy. "The Idea of Self and Transcendence, Gender Equality in Walt Whitman's Poetry. *Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal*. Vol.2, Issue.5, 2013
- Chhangani, Mahendra S. "Impact of Transcendentalism on American Literature". *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews*, Vol.2, Issue. 4, 2015
- Khan, Tariq and Bahramand Shah. "Walt Whitman: A Lynchpin between the Transcendentalist Poets and Realist Style of the Twentieth Century". *Pakistan Journal of American Studies*. Vol.34, No. 1, 2016, Pp-77-92
- Liu, Rui. "Whitman's Transcendentalism; An Analysis of "Song of Myself" by Comparing with Emersonian Thought". *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*. Vol.554, 2021, Pp-906-911
- Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass*, University of Michigan