

# The Impact of Transcendentalism on Henry David Thoreau's Perspectives on Consumerist Principles

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## ABSTRACT

The principal objective of this investigation was to explore the impact of the philosophy of transcendentalism on Henry David Thoreau's perspectives on consumerist principles as described in a *Life without Principle*. In this study, the impact of transcendentalism was examined through the lenses of industrialization, consumerism, and capitalism. The transcendentalist elements of individualism, denouncing large institutions, refuge in nature, rejection of conformity, and free religious practice were analyzed to determine the impact the philosophy had on Henry David Thoreau. By analyzing industrialization through the transcendentalist lens, it became clear Thoreau rejected environmental degradation and strict religious rules. The negative impacts of the materialistic mindset, historically heightened by the Gold Rush, and social conformity became evident through the study of consumerism. Additionally, instrumental reasoning and political atomism espoused in the economic ideology of capitalism were rejected by Thoreau. This study provides evidence that transcendentalist elements led Thoreau to value nature, reject large societal institutions and collectivization, and conclude that consumerism promoted meaningless purchasing cycles.

## Introduction

"To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment"  
-Ralph Waldo Emerson. Henry David Thoreau, a student of Emerson's, is a Transcendentalist who lived out the philosophy throughout his lifetime. When conducting the research process, sources that contribute both global and domestic descriptions of Transcendentalism were used to form a well-rounded understanding of the philosophy before studying a specific transcendentalist. A key source utilized was "New England Transcendentalism", as it addresses specific ideologies that are supported by transcendentalists, and this provides proper text to analyze the work of Thoreau through multiple lenses. The sources examine traditional interpretations of the philosophy and Henry David Thoreau. Transcendentalism is a notable topic to analyze due to its relevance in real-world dynamics. As civilization progresses, heightened consumerism and the destruction of nature are slowly destroying the earth. Additionally, transcendentalism is viewed as controversial because followers of the philosophy were generally labeled as rebellious due to their rejection of many societal norms and religious virtues. Notable transcendentalists, like Henry David Thoreau, hold consumerism in contempt. Current world leaders can apply transcendental values to policymaking to ensure the prosperity of humanity. Thoreau criticizes industrialization, claiming it has destroyed nature and henceforth ruined man's haven. Thoreau criticizes greed and materialism, believing that they fuel society and ultimately destroy it. He is not supportive of Capitalism because he believes it clouds an individual's judgment and reduces the quality of work because the belief system values quantity over quality. In the text, *Life with Principle*, Henry David Thoreau emphasizes his perspective on consumerist principles due to his influence from Transcendentalist principles. He does this through the effective use of the concepts of industrialization, individualism, and capitalism, which he believes increases consumerism and destroys nature. Given these concepts, it is important to acknowledge to what extent does the

philosophy of Transcendentalism impact Henry David Thoreau's point of view on consumerist principles as found in a *Life Without Principle*?

## Background

The individual soul and universal soul are direct projections of an individual and they are connected, according to Transcendentalists. Transcendentalists value self-reliance and hard work because they lead to inner peace in individuals' lifetimes. (Bartlett 1). The introduction of "romantic idealism" in the United States increased the followers of transcendentalism and greatly influenced its ideals regarding social reform which were adopted by Henry David Thoreau (Moran 573).

Thoreau was born on July 12, 1817, in Concord Massachusetts. His father was a successful businessman, and his mother was an abolitionist. Thoreau became a teacher after graduating from Harvard in 1837. Throughout his life, Thoreau stayed true to his beliefs despite conflict, because he "... was a humanist, an abolitionist, and a strong believer in egalitarian social systems. One of his criticisms of materialism was that in the race for more and more money and goods ... ." (Blanchfield 2). After being forced by school administrators to punish students with beatings, he resigned and spent two years at Walden Pond. At Walden Pond, Thoreau grew his food, lived in a compact cabin, and spent this time thinking and writing in nature.

## Industrialization

The philosophy of Transcendentalism touches on the beauty of nature and the refuge it holds, and Thoreau criticizes how the industrialization of America, driven by heightened consumerism, degrades the environment he is surrounded by. Thoreau addresses the hypocrisy that work has no meaning. He further elaborates on the concept of whether one lives to work or works to live, because, "Most men would feel insulted if it were proposed to employ them in throwing stones over a wall...merely that they might earn their wages... In my opinion, the sun was made to light worthier toil than this" (Thoreau 2-3). He agrees that one must work to live life to the fullest, rather than only waking up to fulfill meaningless societal obligations. In his opinion, a human has a greater purpose on this planet, the purpose branches away from the idea of useless labor. The wage institutions are large institutions, which are looked down upon in the philosophy of Transcendentalism. Thoreau, during his own lifetime, would refuse to conform to certain government orders, such as poll taxes, leading him to spend some time in jail (Benson et al. 1556-1559). This exemplifies that Thoreau would rather stay true to his value system despite the consequences. The genre emphasizes that one must find themselves in nature and that this is only possible through isolation from large institutions. In this scenario, the large institutions are corporations that value collectivism and employ blue-collar workers, whose lives revolve around receiving a meaningless wage.

Furthermore, the concept of whether one should live to work or work to live is explored. Thoreau is influenced by the concept of "self-reliance" present in the genre of Transcendentalism, he discovers that, "...There is no more fatal blunderer than he who consumes the greater part of his life getting his living ... the life of men generally, tried by this standard, is a failure ... ." (Thoreau 4). Outlined in the fundamental ideals of the philosophy and the genre, there is an explanation that most Americans spend the majority of their youth working to then be old and are not able to reap the benefits of life on Earth and the purity in nature that accompanies it. Thoreau emphasizes that nature provides everything one needs to be successful and fulfilled. He brings in statistics that emphasize it is more stable to follow a path of meaningful work because bankruptcy and death are inevitable no matter what job an individual pursues. With these odds, living an individual life that incorporates a meaningful job that respects nature and local communities is plausible.

Moreover, Thoreau emphasizes the environmental consequences of industrialization. He remarks that pristine beauty and peace are rapidly fading away from nature due to the human action of industrialization because mankind, "...spends his whole day...shearing off those woods and making earth bald before her time, he is esteemed an industrious and enterprising citizen. As if a town had no interest in its forests but to cut them down!" (Thoreau 2). Industrialization inherently leads to the destruction of nature, a sanctuary where one can learn and grow as a person. While transcendentalism appreciates the value of manual labor, Thoreau criticizes further expansion into nature that is fueled by labor. The expansion is used to create more stores, churches, and factories, which heightens consumerism in the town being expanded. The "sacred" land disappears as a result of urban sprawl. Thoreau comments on the negative impact of the Gold Rush and the environmental degradation it causes because it leads mankind to believe that, "...Nature a thing to be raffled for...what a satire, on our institutions ... Did God direct us so to get our living, digging where we never planted— and He would, perchance, reward us with lumps of gold?" (Thoreau 4). He criticizes consumerism by referring to the long search for Gold in California that led to death because it was so dangerous. Thoreau finds the practice of gold mining to be disgraceful because it only heightened materialism during the time period. In addition, mining practices reject the transcendentalist value of closeness with nature and misinterpret the transcendentalist appreciation for raw materials. Consequently, the overall discourse regarding the degradation of nature by mankind is strongly influenced by the transcendentalist principles of self-reliance and environmental protection.

Other than environmental impacts, industrialization suppresses religion from thriving in natural environments, as outlined by the Philosophy of Transcendentalism. Transcendentalism expresses that religion should not be bound to a large institution, such as a church. Instead, there is support for religion to be practiced anywhere, even in nature. The solitude provided by nature allows individuals to interpret religious texts and form their own values to live by, without the pressure of church virtues. Thoreau channels these principles and questions his own religious values by asking himself, "But how do I know what their religion is...if I had read to them the biography of the greatest scamps in history, they might have thought that I had written the lives of the deacons of their church" (Thoreau 6). He is criticizing church members and their greed for money and power rather than spreading the faith. Thoreau finds the constraints of religion to be too much to bear. He discovers that the church officials and extremist members in his community are corrupt due to the constraints the church imposed during his lifetime. Furthermore, the strict regulation of human and artistic expression by the church goes against the transcendental value of individualism. The concepts of specific days of worship, places to worship, and methods of worship are not justified to Thoreau and he advises the audience to take, "...a stand against some institution...they will continually thrust their own low roof, with its narrow skylight, between you and the sky, when it is the unobstructed heavens you would view" (Thoreau 6). Connecting the idea of environmentalism, humans claiming they are loyal to the bible blatantly disobey and destroy the planet in the pursuit of religion in the opinion of Thoreau. This religion is backed by large institutions funding industrialization destroying the earth.

## Consumerism

Conformity with the majority of society leads to deindividualization and increased materialism. There are preventative measures placed on the growth of unique ideas in society. Transcendentalism values reading; however, it criticizes commercialized literature. The spread of futile knowledge leads isolated communities to form where useless information is spread and valued. Thoreau denounces large publication outlets in his community because they exaggerate stories and lead men to, "...lumber their minds with such rubbish— to permit idle rumors and incidents of the most insignificant kind to intrude on ground which should be sacred to thought ...where the affairs of the street and the gossip ...chiefly are discussed?" (Thoreau 7). Thoreau explores how citizens conform to gossip and print media in their societies to be respected by their peers.

Further, Thoreau presents two paths, the consequences of each choice, and admits that, “Wherever a man separates from the multitude and goes his own way in this mood, there indeed is a fork in the road ... His solitary path across lots will turn out the higher way of the two” (Thoreau 5). Choosing the traditional path demonstrates the concept of groupthink, where an individual is more likely to conform to the ideas of the majority to preserve peace. In comparison, Thoreau criticizes this idea by preaching the Transcendentalist concept of non-conformity. When one is presented with the choice to follow the path made, or forge one of their own, they tend to follow the traditional path. Rather than accumulating wealth in unjust ways, Thoreau believed that, “A man had better starve at once than lose his innocence in the process of getting his bread... As we grow old ... we relax a little in our disciplines, and... ease to obey our finest instincts...” (Thoreau 6). Another characteristic of Transcendentalism promotes that each individual has the right to refuse and disobey unjust laws. This unique pathway forged by both the characteristics of the philosophy leads to new ideas, literature, and diminished interest in materialistic items. It is deemed economically desirable for individuals to consume items available for purchase in society. The concept of the individual soul and universal soul are both connected by nature. If one were to hurt nature’s soul, which is part of the universal soul, one’s individual soul would be hurt in turn. By not relying on instincts, Thoreau explains humans will lose the purity intertwined in their individual souls. Blind loyalty to political parties, also considered large institutions, obstructs the purity and possibility for a unique expression in individual souls. In essence, forging an individual path and saving the individual soul is Thoreau’s methodology for escaping the lower life satisfaction present in consumerism.

The materialistic mindset can be forged from insecurity; however, the destructive behavior is only amplified due to society applauding those who continue to accumulate unnecessary bundles of wealth. Materialism is occasionally born within an individual depending on their family dynamic because they are, “Merely to come into the world the heir of a fortune is not to be born, but to be still born, rather. To be supported by the charity of friends, or a government pension ... is to go into the almshouse” (Thoreau 4). In the eyes of Thoreau, to have wealth handed to you destroys the meaning of life and warrants immediate death. As Transcendentalism preaches, there is a divine spirit found in a unique expression. The only way to achieve this unique expression is through self-discovery and self-reliance.

Consequently, the consumerist principle of consumption only increases when one has access to infinite bundles of wealth and, “The lesson of value which money teaches ... we are inclined to skip altogether ... whether they inherit, or earn, or steal it... Cold and hunger seem more friendly to my nature than those methods which men have adopted...” (Thoreau 4). Thoreau includes the deathly elements of nature to further emphasize that nature is also a source of moral and individual discovery whereas, “The gold-digger is the enemy of the honest laborer... the gold thus obtained is not the same thing with the wages of honest toil” (Thoreau 5). Nature is a refuge from the possessive ideals of what is considered “normal” human life. The discovery of gold in California only further inflated the American desire for excessive consumption. Thoreau is not against the idea of holding a job and seeking an honest wage. It is when one’s whole life revolves around receiving the wage that Thoreau disagrees and like him, the majority of, “Transcendentalists were outsiders in society, as they actively opposed established institutions: “...The majority of transcendentalists never wavered in their active opposition to slavery, imperialism, bureaucratization, and cultural philistinism ...” (Moran 573-574). Thoreau actively supports unpopular beliefs in society and denounces large media and corporate institutions to promote a natural lifestyle.

Additionally, Thoreau claims that just citizens are always on the losing side of the battle between the unjust worker and just behavior. Large institutions corrupt the individual soul, which is why Thoreau is at odds with the exploitation of Gold. Additionally, he presents the argument that working hard to receive gold is not a valid claim because evil individuals and criminals work hard as well. Thoreau expresses he would not claim all the money in the world even if the opportunity presented itself because, “...so many are ready to... get the means of commanding the labor of others less lucky, without contributing any value to society! ... The hog that gets his living by rooting... would be ashamed of such company. If I could command the wealth of all the worlds

by lifting my finger, I would not pay such a price for it” (Thoreau 4). Destroying nature and corrupting souls are not prices he is willing to pay. Thoreau goes far enough to compare unjust men to pigs, claiming that their unethical and materialistic driven actions would be unacceptable to even an animal. This is in conjunction with the Transcendentalist idea that nature is a source of wonder, not an object to destroy in the pursuit of material items.

## Capitalism

As Thoreau explores the economic ideology of capitalism, he believes it seeks to breed laborers rather than human beings. Thoreau would rather devote his time to labor that will mentally enrich him rather than yield profit in his world, that is, “... a place of business. What an infinite bustle... It is nothing but work, work, work ...If a man was tossed out of a window...it is regretted chiefly because he was thus incapacitated for business!” (Thoreau 2). The consumerist mentality, fueled by capitalism, promotes an endless cycle of meaningless work accompanied by no breaks or time for leisure according to Thoreau. He observed that the government fuels the economic system that he believes is destroying society and he, “...wrote that people have a duty to obey their consciences when they disagree with what the government wants them to do” (Benson et al. 1559). Transcendentalism advocates for self-reflection and personal growth, this is impossible to achieve in the eyes of Thoreau due to the coupling with the cycle of work promoted by capitalism.

Thoreau characterizes large institutions criticized by Transcendentalism as “the devil” because they have, “...no culture, no refinement ...to acquire a little worldly wealth, or fame, or liberty, and make a false show with it, as if we were all husk and shell, with no tender and living kernel to us?” (Thoreau 8). The individualistic mindset promoted by capitalism increases the power large institutions have against society. The self-efficacy in humans leads to the lack of purity in the Oversoul and individual souls, as they are connected. Thoreau espouses that the true meaning of life is warped by the pursuit of goods flowing through the American capitalistic system which does, “ ...not worship truth, but the reflection of truth; because we are warped and narrowed by an exclusive devotion to trade and commerce and manufactures and agriculture and the like, which are but means, and not the end” (Thoreau 8). Due to the exponential increase of consumerism around Thoreau, he finds that the world has given up on the simple things in life that have meaning, and that the world has shifted focus to a future filled with luxury goods and extensive laboring hours. This new outlook contradicts Transcendentalism because it advocates excess, whereas the philosophy advocates for simplicity. The mindless accumulation of goods produced by large institutions prevents individuals from leading simple lives. Life is meant to be used to reflect, forge new paths, and find spiritual meaning; however, this path is clouded by the working regimen promoted by a consumerism-driven society.

After further analysis, Thoreau sees capitalism values human capital despite the degradation it causes to natural capital. Capitalism is the underlying system policing labor and due to its mass scale, he believes nothing honorable is capable of occurring within it: “I do not need the police of meaningless labor to regulate me, and do not see anything absolutely praiseworthy in this fellow's undertaking any more than in many an enterprise of our own or foreign governments...” (Thoreau 2). Artisanal craft is gone, and the only items available are produced on a mass scale, increasing the consumption of society. There is a reference to imperialism because Thoreau looks down upon philosophers who valued accumulating money and land over human life. He references the sailing industry as, “A commerce that...makes slaves of its sailors for this purpose ... statesmen and philosophers who are so blind as to think that progress and civilization depend on precisely this kind of interchange and activity” (Thoreau 9). The powerful individuals are depicted as taking advantage of others to fulfill their own intrinsic desires and are pursuing the concept of “Manifest Destiny”. It was founded in the expansion of the United States westwards, however, it gained traction on an individual scale. It claimed that individuals can set goals for themselves and achieve them because it is their God-given right to do so. Manifest

destiny inspired the independent and individualistic aspects of the philosophy of transcendentalism. The corruption of government officials and philosophers is negative for society because they have the power to reverse the consumerist and materialistic path humanity is moving towards. Thoreau criticizes their mass employment of laborers to carry out the high classes' hopes and desires.

## Conclusion

This paper explores to what extent does the philosophy of Transcendentalism impacted Henry David Thoreau's point of view on consumerist principles as found in a *Life Without Principles*. Thoreau effectively used the principles of industrialization, individualism, and capitalism which he believes increases consumerism and destroys nature in the text, *Life with Principle*, Henry David Thoreau. He further emphasizes his perspective on consumerist principles due to his influence from the philosophy of Transcendentalism. With the Transcendentalist principle of refuge in nature in mind, Thoreau examines how the heightened desire to consume has increased the amount of nature destroyed to accompany the industrialization needed to keep up with the growing demand for materialistic goods. Thoreau applies the principle of non-conformity to heightened consumerism by explaining how the prevalent conformity in society has led to a materialistic mindset that prevents the individual soul from flourishing. He discovers that the concept of the Oversoul, outlined by Transcendentalism, is destroyed by capitalism, as it places value on meaningless labor, extreme individualism, and heightened materialism.

The implications of Thoreau's criticisms of consumerism in society are relevant because they can be applied to the modern era. As technology grows, individuals have easier access to purchasing products. Thoreau lived during a time when a stable middle class was not present, however, currently, there is a large middle class that has purchasing power. It is important for readers to recognize that they are living in a heightened form of the corrupt society espoused by Thoreau. The large institutions brought up in Thoreau's work are even larger today and hold a tight grip on the majority of society. When discussing capitalism, the transcendentalist lens and the lens formed by Thoreau both concur that capitalism leads individuals to meaningless jobs and poor purchasing decisions. Transcendentalism advocates for a form of individualism that allows one to abstain from harmful activities normally deemed "societal norms". Thoreau, influenced by the transcendentalist interpretation, believed capitalism advocated a harmful form of individualism. One that supports greed, selfishness, and conformity, emphasizing that there are multiple interpretations. Rather than walking down the consumerist path, Thoreau truly desires for individuals to forge their own paths. These are paths of individualism, refuge, and self-discovery.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor for the valuable insight provided to me on this topic.

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