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## Two Different Transcendentalist Approaches to the Concept of Nature

Often referred to as the leading writer of transcendentalism, Unitarian Ralph Waldo Emerson directed thousands in the 19th century to rediscovery of self through his literature. Among them, young New Englander Henry David Thoreau mirrored Emerson's revolutionary ideas yet simultaneously brought new ideals. In their works "Nature" and "Where I Lived and What I Lived For", the authors demonstrate similarities through the pursuit of individualism and independence through nature. However, nature's varying roles reveal the differences in the authors' spiritual stances. Ultimately, the all-inclusive structure of Emerson's piece establishes it as the more effective treatment of self and nature.

Both Emerson and Thoreau use descriptive imagery and metaphor to capture the grandiose and significance of nature in their followers' lives. To both authors, nature is synonymous with freedom, freedom being escaping the rapid pace of the industrializing world. Thoreau mockingly comments on the constant expansion of railroads and the never-ending labor and grief that comes with it. In fact, he believes that innovations reveal that "[American society] is determined to be starved before [they] are hungry" (Thoreau 3). Continuing this thought, Emerson believes that when in "solitude" with the stars "no grace, no calamity" could ever befall him (7). Both authors live in the bustling industrial mid-19th century, however consciously remind their audience of the true joys that can be found in nature. Their language hints that industrial America is moving too quickly, and nature can bring inner peace as reprieve from exhausting drive. Nature achieves this as it is escape and sanction from obligation, ultimately defining freedom. These ideas sharply contrast the traditional New England Puritan views, where both authors are from, further establishing the advancement of the transcendentalist movement. Despite Puritanism being the "central strand of American cultural life until the twentieth century" (Delbanco) romanticism inspired movements that define American culture today. Predestination dictated that humans were unconditionally "depraved sinners" (Heyrman) unless predestined by God. Emerson's and Thoreau's messages directly juxtapose this in their embracing of nature, a previous source of fear and evil, and their urge towards seeing the complete picture and allow the individual to create their own destiny.

Despite displaying similar themes, Emerson and Thoreau have spiritual and political differences, all which underlie their message to return to nature. Thoreau acknowledges the artistic advancement gained in the age of enlightenment, however, revels in the ability to morally "carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look" (Thoreau 2). Emerson's writing contrasts these ideas when he stands in nature with his head to the

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heavens, noting that “the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me” (Emerson 7). Thoreau views nature as a tool that when wielded can allow one to take charge of their own existence. Emerson believes that with nature’s assistance, individuals can see the world in a more omniscient view. One can also note that Thoreau’s vision is more radical than Emerson’s, as Emerson still acknowledges God’s view as the superior guiding force, with nature merely assisting man in seeing this vision. Additionally, the authors’ contrasting political views are revealed in the treatment of nature. After Thoreau comes to terms with his new living conditions, he proudly claims that he is the “monarch of all [he] survey[s]” (1). He holds very republican views, priding and valuing land ownership. This mirroring the self-made man and freehold ideal that made the American dream at the time. Nature is a tool in which man must wield to achieve happiness and balance, which Thoreau displays in his embracing of his simplistic lifestyle in the woods. Emerson’s nature is one more influential of point of view. He reflects on the properties that he saw that morning, stating that “none of them owns the landscape”. His socialist view on the topic brings the idea of nature belonging to nobody, but a force beyond the control of man. Emerson’s personification of nature mirrors those usually sought in God.

Ultimately, Emerson emerges as the more persuasive writer of the two in addressing the treatment on nature and self. This is because his message mobilizes all, while Thoreau’s message remains static and individualistic. Emerson broadly describes nature’s presence having the ability to “retain the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood” (7). By speaking in general and instructional terms, Emerson appeals to people’s spiritual senses of obligation and search for self-fulfillment. Furthermore, he uses imagery to personify nature, creating a dynamic and colorful character. It makes the piece engaging and vivid, appealing to a wider audience. He gives an example of this as he describes fresh air as a “cordial of incredible virtue” (Emerson 7). Thoreau’s key strategy is using a personal experience to engage his audience, describing his personal journey of buying his house, “sort[ing his] seeds, and collect[ing] materials” (Thoreau 1). Though specific and stirring, this is merely the description of a first-hand account as opposed to a stimulating drive to action. Emerson once again shines his superiority by integrating personal experience into his piece, expressing his gladness “to the brink of fear” finding himself alone in nature (7). By blending this imagery with his lecturing sentiments, he creates an image of freedom and self-realization by accepting nature into one’s heart. Though both authors have developed pieces that are loved to this day, Emerson’s short and magnetic “Nature” truly embodies the values of individualism and transcendentalism.

Although “Nature” and “Where I Lived and What I Lived For” represent vastly different approaches in embracing nature, both Emerson and Thoreau have successfully expressed Enlightenment ideas of individuality. Their blatant protest of more traditional and strict Puritan ideals, including innate fear and hatred of anything natural, reveals their radically innovative theories. However, the sheer genius created by the respective romantic authors are

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representative of the dynamic growth present in the mid-19th century that shaped modern America.

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