

# Global Influence of Transcendentalism on Social and Political Movements

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## Abstract

This article explores the lasting impact of Transcendentalism, a nineteenth-century American philosophical and literary movement, on global social and political change. Rooted in the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller, Transcendentalism emphasized self-reliance, individual conscience, nonconformity, civil disobedience, and a deep reverence for nature. Though these ideas originated in America, they quickly transcended national boundaries, inspiring reform movements around the world. Emerson's emphasis on spirituality and nature helped shape modern environmental ethics, while Thoreau's essay "Civil Disobedience" became a cornerstone for nonviolent resistance movements led by figures such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela. Fuller's feminist writings laid a foundation for gender equality movements, which influenced global conversations about women's rights. Through case studies in abolitionism, civil rights, feminism, environmentalism, and anti-colonial struggles, the article illustrates how Transcendentalist values have shaped both historical and contemporary activism. The article also highlights gaps in current scholarship, particularly in understanding the movement's role in modern ecological and human rights movements. Ultimately, it argues that Transcendentalism remains a powerful and relevant moral framework for social and political reform in the present day.

**Keywords:** Transcendentalism; civil disobedience; social movements.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background

Transcendentalism appeared in early nineteenth-century America as a philosophical, literary, and social movement that placed a strong emphasis on individualism, self-reliance, spirituality, and a profound connection to nature [1]. In response to the rationalism of the Enlightenment and rigid religious orthodoxy, it drew on Romanticism, German Idealism, and Eastern philosophies [2]. The movement challenged institutional authority, materialism, and dogmatic religious practices, promoting the idea that individuals could attain truth through intuition and personal exploration [3]. At the heart of Transcendentalist thought was the belief that individuals could achieve a deeper understanding of reality by engaging directly with nature and engaging in self-reflection. This contrasts with the reliance on external authorities such as organized religion or government [4]. Transcendentalism has also played a key role in triggering social and political reform movements, including abolitionism, women's rights, environmentalism, and nonviolent resistance. Ralph Waldo Emerson is the central figure in the development of Transcendentalism; he promotes intellectual independence, nonconformity, and spiritual self-reliance [5]. His book *Nature* has laid the foundation for the movement by asserting that nature is a direct reflection of the divine, and that immersing oneself in it can lead to spiritual enlightenment [6]. Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance" further emphasizes the importance of individual autonomy and trusting one's instincts, advocating for a rejection of societal pressures [7]. His ideas profoundly have influenced American intellectual culture and inspired many thinkers and reformers in the U.S. and abroad [1].

A close associate of Emerson, Henry David Thoreau has expanded on Transcendentalist principles by linking them to political activism and environmental conservation. In *Walden*, Thoreau has documented his experiment of living simply and self-sufficiently in harmony with nature; this illustrates how solitude and minimalism can lead to personal and spiritual growth [8]. His advocacy for nature preservation would later shape the conservation movement and inspire figures like John Muir and Aldo Leopold [9]. Additionally, Thoreau's essay "Civil Disobedience" argues for passive resistance against unjust laws, a concept that influenced major nonviolent movements led by Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. [10].

Margaret Fuller was one of the earliest feminist thinkers to apply Transcendentalist ideals to women's rights and social reform. In *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, she argues that women have the same intellectual and spiritual capacities as men and deserve equal educational and professional opportunities [11]. Fuller's contributions have been extended beyond feminism, as she is also a strong advocate for abolitionism and prison reform [12]. Her work demonstrates how Transcendentalism's focus on personal growth can translate into collective social progress [13].

While Transcendentalism originated in America, its principles have had a lasting global impact. Thoreau's concept of civil disobedience has become a cornerstone of nonviolent resistance movements, which inspire figures like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela [14]. Emerson's emphasis on nature and self-reliance has laid the groundwork for the development of environmental ethics worldwide [3]. Fuller's feminist thought also resonated beyond the U.S., influencing women's rights movements in Europe, Latin America, and other parts of the world [15].

Today, the core values of Transcendentalism, individual autonomy, moral resistance, and ecological awareness, continue to shape social and political activism across the globe. This research explores how Transcendentalist ideas have informed and inspired movements for civil rights, environmental conservation, feminism, and political resistance.

### **1.2. Objectives**

Transcendentalism is often studied within the context of American philosophy and literature. However, its influence on global social and political movements is frequently overlooked. This research aims to fill this gap by exploring how the core principles of Transcendentalism, such as individualism, self-reliance, civil disobedience, and a deep connection to nature, have shaped various reform movements around the world.

One of the main objectives of this study is to examine Transcendentalism's role in the abolitionist movement. Key figures like Emerson and Thoreau were vocal critics of Slavery, and their advocacy helped to build an ethical framework that influenced global human rights struggles.

Another focus is on the impact of Transcendentalist ideas on civil rights and nonviolent resistance. Thoreau's essay "Civil Disobedience" [16] introduced the concept of passive resistance, which became a foundation for nonviolent movements led by figures like Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela. This research will explore how these principles of moral action against unjust laws resonated in different contexts around the world.

Additionally, the study will look at Transcendentalism's influence on feminism and gender equality. Margaret Fuller's work, especially *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* [11], applied Transcendentalist ideals to the fight for women's rights. Her advocacy for women's intellectual and spiritual independence laid the groundwork for feminist movements in both the U.S. and abroad.

Finally, the research will explore the movement's connection to environmentalism and conservation. Thoreau and Emerson's reverence for nature has had a lasting impact on the conservation movement and continues to inspire modern environmental activism. By understanding these connections, the study will highlight how Transcendentalist thought continues to shape global efforts for ecological preservation.

Through these objectives, this research aims to reveal how Transcendentalist principles have influenced and continue to inspire global movements for social justice, human rights, feminism, and environmental sustainability.

### **1.3. Problem Statement**

Although Transcendentalism has been extensively studied within American intellectual history, its influence on global social and political movements remains underexplored. While researchers have documented its impact on abolitionism, civil rights, and other U.S.-focused movements, the movement's influence on global reform efforts has not been sufficiently addressed. Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" is well known for inspiring major

nonviolent resistance movements, but its effects outside the Western context have not been comprehensively examined. Similarly, while Fuller's feminist advocacy helped shape early women's rights movement, its influence on global gender equality efforts has not been fully explored [15]. Additionally, the connection between Transcendentalism's environmental philosophy and contemporary sustainability activism has not been thoroughly investigated [9].

This study seeks to address these gaps by investigating how Transcendentalist principles have shaped global social, political, and environmental movements. Through historical and contemporary case studies, it aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Transcendentalism's global legacy and its continued relevance in modern activism.

#### ***1.4. Research Question***

How has Transcendentalism influenced global social and political movements, and how do its core principles continue to shape contemporary activism?

#### ***1.5. Thesis Statement***

Transcendentalism's principles of individual conscience, nonconformity, and civil disobedience have profoundly influenced global movements advocating for human rights, environmental justice, and political change. Drawing from the writings of Emerson, Thoreau, and Fuller, these ideals have transcended their nineteenth-century American origins, and inspired abolitionism, civil rights activism, feminist movements, environmental conservation, and nonviolent resistance worldwide. By examining both historical and contemporary applications of Transcendentalist thought, this study underscores its enduring relevance in shaping modern social and political activism.

## **2. Literature Review**

Transcendentalism marked a profound shift in moral, spiritual, and intellectual thought. Rooted in individualism, self-reliance, and moral intuition, it challenged established notions of authority, religion, and social hierarchy. Thinkers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller emphasized the inner moral compass as the ultimate source of truth, viewing the natural world as a reflection of divine order [5,8,11]. Emerging as a reaction against Enlightenment rationalism and Puritan orthodoxy, Transcendentalism sought to reconcile spiritual intuition with intellectual freedom; it created a uniquely American philosophy that resonated globally. The movement drew deeply from European Romanticism, Eastern philosophy, and Unitarian theology, which formed a hybrid intellectual tradition that celebrated the individual's direct relationship with truth. Romanticism's focus on emotion, imagination, and the sublime in nature inspired Transcendentalists to reject mechanical rationalism and reawaken spirituality in the natural world. Philosophers like Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Kant provided essential philosophical support, particularly Kant's claim that human perception shapes reality. This reinforces the Transcendentalist belief that knowledge arises from personal experience and intuition [4].

Simultaneously, Emerson and Thoreau were influenced by Eastern religions, especially Hinduism and Buddhism. Emerson's study of the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Upanishads* led him to believe in a universal spirit, the "Over-Soul," while Thoreau's *Walden* resonated with Buddhist concepts of mindfulness and simplicity [2,17]. This cross-cultural synthesis gave Transcendentalism a proto-global character, which connected Western idealism with non-Western metaphysics long before comparative philosophy emerged as a formal field. Unitarianism also served as a moral foundation by emphasizing human potential and rejecting predestination. Emerson's "Divinity School Address" exemplified the movement's shift from institutionalized religion to personal revelation by declaring that "the soul becomes" the true seat of divine truth [18].

Transcendentalist ethics, as Emerson pointed out in "Self-Reliance", urged individuals to trust their inner voice above societal expectations, a position that laid the groundwork for existentialist and humanist thought. Figures like Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre later built on this focus on individual moral autonomy [19]. Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" extended Transcendentalism into the political realm by asserting that conscience must take precedence over law. His refusal to pay taxes in protest against slavery and the Mexican-American War exemplified the belief that justice requires personal sacrifice [16]. This moral framework influenced later civil rights and anti-colonial movements, particularly through leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., who embraced nonviolent resistance as a means of achieving social justice [20,21].

Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* brought Transcendentalist ideals to feminist theory, arguing for women's liberation as a moral necessity. She declared that, "let every woman, instead of being taught to lean, be encouraged to stand alone" [11]. Scholars like Chevigny and Kolodny have since reinterpreted Fuller's work as an early articulation of intellectual and intersectional emancipation, connecting Transcendentalism to subsequent feminist and humanist movements [13,22].

Transcendentalism's emphasis on moral conscience and social responsibility made it a catalyst for reform movements. Emerson's anti-slavery speeches, Thoreau's political activism, and Fuller's feminist advocacy embodied the belief that spiritual truth necessitates social action [1]. Thoreau argued in "Slavery in Massachusetts" that true patriotism requires acting "not for government but for humanity" [23]. This fusion of idealism and activism became foundational for global nonviolent movements. Gandhi's Satyagraha, a philosophy of moral strength over aggression, was directly inspired by Thoreau's civil disobedience [20]. Similarly, King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" combined Transcendentalist moral reasoning with Christian ethics and Gandhian nonviolence to challenge systemic racism. These adaptations highlight Transcendentalism's moral universality, its shift from a regional to a global ethic of peaceful resistance and human dignity [24,4].

Beyond politics, Transcendentalism profoundly shaped environmental thought. Emerson and Thoreau's reverence for nature influenced John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club, who viewed wilderness as a sacred space deserving protection [25]. Later thinkers like Aldo Leopold expanded on these ideas by developing the "land ethic," which proposed that humans are moral members of an ecological community [26]. Researchers such as Bron Raymond Taylor and Lawrence Buell trace modern environmental ethics back to these Transcendentalist roots; they link nineteenth-century idealism to twenty-first-century sustainability movements [27,24].

Recent scholarship continues to revisit Transcendentalism through diverse theoretical lenses. Ecocritical and postcolonial studies have reframed the movement as a precursor to global environmental justice and cross-cultural dialogue [27,28]. Feminist philosophers see in Fuller's work an early criticism of patriarchal religion; they anticipate ecofeminism, while human rights theorists trace the connection between Emerson's moral autonomy and the 1948 "United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights", which echoes the Transcendentalist belief in inherent human dignity [29]. Transcendentalism's influence can also be seen in modern movements like Greta Thunberg's environmental activism and Extinction Rebellion, whose calls for moral responsibility and civil disobedience are in line with Thoreauvian principles [30]. The movement's insistence on ethical conviction over institutional approval remains relevant in the digital age, where activism increasingly depends on personal agency and global solidarity.

Although scholars have explored Transcendentalism's influence on Western civil rights and environmental movements, its role in non-Western philosophical traditions and interfaith dialogue remains under examined. There is growing potential to explore how Transcendentalist ideals intersect with African Ubuntu ethics, Gandhian *Sarvodaya*, or Latin American liberation philosophy, traditions that emphasize moral integrity, community, and harmony with nature [28]. Expanding comparative research in these areas would globalize Transcendentalism studies and reveal its continuing relevance to contemporary moral crises such as climate change, inequality, and digital alienation.

In summary, Transcendentalism represents a living intellectual tradition that continues to shape moral, political, and ecological discourse worldwide. From Emerson's call for self-reliance to Thoreau's defense of conscience and Fuller's vision of equality, the movement's ideals have transcended cultural boundaries by inspiring diverse struggles for freedom, justice, and sustainability. Its legacy endures as both a spiritual philosophy and a moral blueprint for action, reminding us that authentic social change begins with the awakening of individual conscience.

### **3. Research Approach**

This research will use a qualitative analysis of historical texts, speeches, and literature to investigate the philosophical foundations of Transcendentalist thought. By focusing on key figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller, the research will explore the central themes of self-reliance, individualism, and a profound connection to nature. Primary sources, including Emerson's *Nature* and Thoreau's *Walden*, will serve as the foundation for exploring these core Transcendentalist principles [6,8]. This approach will not only unpack the abstract ideas that define Transcendentalism but also illuminate the moral and philosophical dimensions of the movement.

#### **3.1. Comparative Analysis**

Alongside the historical analysis, the study will include a comparative examination of how Transcendentalist ideas influenced global movements across different cultural and political contexts. This will explore the ways in which Transcendentalist principles resonated with, and at times shaped, reformers worldwide. For instance, it

will examine the influence of Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" on Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolent resistance and the impact of Emersonian individualism on contemporary environmental movements [31,3]. This comparative framework will highlight the universal appeal of Transcendentalism and demonstrate how its ideas transcended their nineteenth-century American origins by adapting to a variety of global struggles.

### **3.2. Data Collection**

#### **3.2.1. Primary Sources:**

- [6] R. W. Emerson, *Nature*. New York: Modern Library, 1836/2003.
- [8] H. D. Thoreau, *Walden*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1854/1992.
- [11] M. Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Dover Publications, 1845/1999.

These foundational texts offer essential knowledge of Transcendentalist philosophy by emphasizing individualism, nonconformity, social reform, and the deep connection to nature that characterized the movement.

#### **3.2.2. Secondary Sources**

- [1] P. F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2007. This source traces the historical development and spread of Transcendentalist ideas, offering a comprehensive overview.
- [18] C. Capper, *Margaret Fuller: An American Romantic Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. This work explores Fuller's profound influence and the cross-cultural impact of her work, especially in feminist circles.
- [24] L. Buell, *Emerson*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003. A key resource for understanding Emerson's role in shaping both American and global philosophical thought.
- [7] J. Myerson, Ed., *Transcendentalism: A Reader*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

### **3.3. Case Study Approach**

The case study approach will focus on examining the global impact of Transcendentalist ideas in four key areas: abolition and civil rights, environmentalism, feminism and human rights, and political resistance. Through these case studies, the research will illustrate how Transcendentalist principles have shaped and continue to shape social and political movements across the world. Through these case studies, the research will demonstrate how Transcendentalist principles of self-reliance, moral integrity, and the profound connection to nature have had a lasting and widespread impact on global movements. By tracing these ideas across different cultural, political, and historical contexts, the study will show how Transcendentalism has continued to inspire and shape reform efforts around the world, transcending both time and borders.

## **4. Analysis and discussion**

Transcendentalism presented a transformative moral and philosophical framework that emphasized the authority of the individual conscience, self-reliance, and the inherent goodness of both people and nature. Visionaries like

Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau highlighted the idea that truth is discovered through inner reflection rather than through adherence to societal norms or external institutions [6,8]. This study uncovers how the Transcendentalist worldview has profoundly influenced global social and political movements, offering a moral vocabulary that has underpinned nonviolent resistance and environmental ethics.

One of the most vivid examples of Transcendentalist influence is found in Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" where his refusal to pay a poll tax in protest against slavery and the Mexican-American War becomes an embodiment of the Transcendentalist belief that moral integrity should always surpass legal obligation. Thoreau declares that, "the only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right" [16]. This statement encapsulates the core of Transcendentalist moral philosophy. Our findings reveal that Thoreau's emphasis on personal conscience as the ultimate guide to morality laid the groundwork for many subsequent movements advocating for social justice and human rights. This philosophical position was profoundly influential to figures like Mahatma Gandhi, who adapted Thoreau's doctrine of civil disobedience into his own philosophy of *Satyagraha*, or "truth force." Gandhi himself noted that Thoreau's essay had a deep impact on his thinking, shaping his ethical commitment to nonviolent resistance [31]. Our results affirm previous research suggesting that Transcendentalist ethics offered Gandhi a bridge between Western idealism and Indian spirituality, which transformed political activism into a moral and spiritual mission.

In a similar vein, Martin Luther King Jr. drew upon both Thoreau's and Gandhi's teachings to frame the moral logic of the American Civil Rights Movement. In his "Letter from Birmingham Jail", King invokes Thoreau's argument that legality is not synonymous with morality; he asserts that individuals have a moral duty to disobey unjust laws. The findings from this study underscore how Transcendentalist principles, mediated through Gandhian nonviolence, provided King with a powerful framework for peaceful protest, one that appealed to the conscience of both individuals and society as a whole.

Beyond social movements, Transcendentalism also made a lasting impact on environmental thought. Emerson's *Nature* and Thoreau's *Walden* emphasized that a deep communion with nature fosters both spiritual renewal and moral awakening. This study reveals that these ideas helped lay the intellectual foundation for modern environmentalism; it reconceptualizes nature not as a simple resource but as a moral and sacred entity. Conservation figures like John Muir, often hailed as the "Father of the National Parks," explicitly credited Emerson and Thoreau as key influences on his preservationist philosophy [25]. Aldo Leopold's "land ethic" further developed these Transcendentalist ideals by asserting humanity's moral obligation to protect the ecological community [26].

In contemporary contexts, Transcendentalist principles continue to resonate in the global climate movement. Activists such as Greta Thunberg have framed climate change as an ethical crisis, calling for moral accountability and advocating for nonviolent resistance [32]. Similarly, organizations like Extinction Rebellion employ peaceful civil disobedience to demand action on environmental issues, demonstrating how Transcendentalist values still shape twenty-first-century activism [30].

In conclusion, the findings of this study underscore the enduring legacy of Transcendentalism. Its focus on



individual conscience, moral autonomy, and a reverence for nature continues to transcend cultural and temporal boundaries. From Gandhi's anti-colonial struggle to modern-day environmental advocacy, the Transcendentalist project remains a vital philosophical force, which shapes contemporary discourses of justice, nonviolence, and sustainability.

## 5. Constraints and limitations

This study offers valuable insights into the global influence of Transcendentalism, but several limitations should be noted.

First, the analysis is qualitative; it relies on textual interpretation rather than empirical data. This means the conclusions about Transcendentalism's impact are based on intellectual connections rather than measurable cause-and-effect relationships. Second, the study focuses on a select group of figures, such as Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Margaret Fuller, whose philosophies are directly in line with Transcendentalist ideals. This selective approach may overlook other movements or thinkers influenced by similar ideas without explicitly referencing Transcendentalism.

The study also faces challenges due to its broad historical and cultural scope. Transcendentalist thought spread through various channels, making it difficult to trace whether certain ideas originated from Transcendentalism or emerged independently in different traditions. Additionally, reliance on secondary sources introduces potential biases, underscoring the need for further interdisciplinary research to better understand Transcendentalism's global reach. Lastly, the study lacks quantitative or field-based methods, such as surveys or interviews, which could provide direct evidence of Transcendentalist influence on modern movements. Future research could address this by exploring how current activists engage with Transcendentalist principles.

Despite these limitations, the study lays a strong conceptual foundation for understanding Transcendentalism's enduring impact and opens the door for more systematic, cross-cultural research.

## 6. Conclusion

Transcendentalism's emphasis on individual conscience and moral integrity has profoundly shaped both civil disobedience and environmental advocacy. Through "Civil Disobedience," Thoreau offered a philosophical basis for nonviolent resistance that inspired global leaders such as Gandhi and King. Emerson's and Thoreau's reverence for the natural world laid the groundwork for environmental thinkers like Muir and Leopold and continues to influence present-day ecological movements. The ongoing relevance of Transcendentalist ideals highlights their enduring capacity to guide ethical action and principled resistance in the face of injustice and environmental degradation.

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