

Emerson, Whitman, and the Philosophy of Transcendentalism

A concise introduction to their intellectual and literary relationship

Transcendentalism was one of the most influential intellectual movements in nineteenth-century American culture. It emerged in New England during the 1830s and 1840s, at a time when American writers were increasingly concerned with cultural independence from Europe. Although it was never a single, rigid system of belief, transcendentalism brought together several related ideas: confidence in intuition, the spiritual significance of nature, the dignity of the individual, resistance to conformity, and the belief that human beings possess access to truths that cannot be reached by reason or sensory evidence alone.

The writer most closely associated with the movement is Ralph Waldo Emerson. Walt Whitman belonged to a somewhat later literary generation and is not usually treated as a formal member of the original Transcendental Club. Nevertheless, his poetry develops many Emersonian and transcendentalist ideas in a distinctive poetic form. The relationship between Emerson and Whitman is therefore especially important for understanding the development of a recognisably American literary voice.

1. The Background of American Transcendentalism

Transcendentalism developed partly as a reaction against religious formalism and the excessive authority of inherited institutions. Its intellectual background included New England Unitarianism, European Romanticism, German idealist philosophy, and growing American interest in Asian religious and philosophical texts. The transcendentalists did not simply reject reason; rather, they argued that reason in the narrow, analytical sense could not account for the whole of human experience.

For them, intuition could disclose moral and spiritual truth. Nature was not merely physical scenery but a medium through which the individual might perceive a deeper order connecting the human mind, the natural world, and the divine. This helps explain why nature, solitude, self-trust, and spiritual perception appear so persistently in transcendentalist writing.

Transcendentalism was also connected with the problem of American cultural independence. If the United States had achieved political independence, Emerson believed that its writers and thinkers should also cease depending intellectually on European authority. American literature needed confidence in its own experience, landscape, language, and imagination.

2. Ralph Waldo Emerson: Self-Reliance, Nature, and the Over-Soul

Emerson's essay *Nature* (1836) is one of the foundational statements of transcendentalist thought. It presents nature as a means by which the individual can move beyond ordinary social identity and perceive a larger spiritual unity. The famous image of becoming a "transparent eyeball" expresses a temporary disappearance of the isolated ego: the observer becomes receptive to the currents of universal being. The point is not that individuality is destroyed, but that the individual discovers a relationship with something larger than the private self.

In "Self-Reliance" (1841), Emerson turns more explicitly to intellectual independence. His argument is frequently simplified into a defence of selfish individualism, but his idea is more demanding. Self-reliance means trusting one's deepest moral and intuitive perception rather than accepting opinions merely because society, tradition, or institutions authorise them. Conformity is dangerous because it can make the individual surrender an authentic relation to truth.

Emerson's idea of the "Over-Soul" further explains this apparent paradox between individuality and unity. Each person possesses an individual consciousness, yet that consciousness participates in a universal spiritual reality. Consequently, Emerson's individualism does not necessarily imply isolation. The self becomes most significant when it recognises its relation to other persons, nature, and the larger spiritual whole.

Several recurrent Emersonian principles can therefore be identified: the authority of intuition; distrust of passive conformity; the spiritual value of nature; the possibility of direct relation between the individual and the divine; and the belief that genuine intellectual life requires independence. These principles strongly affected later American writers.

3. Emerson's Idea of the American Poet

Emerson's essay "The Poet" (1844) is particularly important for understanding Whitman. Emerson argues that America requires a poet capable of perceiving the symbolic meaning of ordinary life and giving voice to the country's still-unexpressed experience. The true poet does not merely imitate inherited literary conventions. He or she sees correspondences between material things and spiritual meanings and creates language adequate to a new world.

This conception also appears in Emerson's address "The American Scholar" (1837), which calls for intellectual independence and warns against becoming a mere follower of the past. Books are valuable, but they should stimulate rather than imprison the living mind. The scholar must encounter nature and experience directly.

Whitman's importance becomes clearer against this background. When *Leaves of Grass* appeared in 1855, its long lines, unconventional rhythms, ordinary American subjects, bodily imagery, and expansive first-person voice seemed to answer many of Emerson's demands for a new national poetry.

4. Walt Whitman: The Transcendental Self in Poetry

Whitman's "Song of Myself" provides the clearest example of his relationship with transcendentalism. The poem begins with an emphatic celebration of the self, but the self continually expands beyond the boundaries of one individual. Whitman's "I" moves among other people, occupations, bodies, landscapes, animals, and regions. Personal identity becomes inclusive rather than private.

This is one of the crucial similarities between Whitman and Emerson. Both writers begin with the individual but refuse to leave the individual isolated. Emerson's self participates in the Over-Soul; Whitman's poetic self imaginatively identifies with other lives. The result is a conception of identity that is at once individual and universal.

Nature also performs a transcendental function in Whitman's poetry. The grass in "Song of Myself" is ordinary and physical, yet it continually acquires symbolic meanings. It can suggest democratic equality, renewal, death, continuity, childhood, and the mysterious relation between individual lives. The physical world is therefore not separate from spiritual meaning. Material objects become points of contact between the visible and invisible.

Whitman differs from Emerson, however, in the extraordinary emphasis he places on the body. Where transcendentalism can sometimes appear to move from the material towards the spiritual, Whitman repeatedly refuses to rank soul above body. Physical existence, sexuality, touch, labour, and bodily presence become worthy subjects of poetry. His transcendentalism is therefore strongly embodied.

5. Democracy, Equality, and the American Voice

Whitman also gives transcendental individualism a democratic dimension. His catalogues gather people of different occupations, regions, and social positions into the movement of the poem. The poetic voice attempts to contain multiplicity without eliminating difference. His free verse contributes to this ambition: the long, flexible line appears less dependent on inherited European metrical conventions and more suited to an expansive democratic voice.

Yet Whitman's democratic vision should not simply be treated as a transparent description of nineteenth-century American reality. The United States of his period was marked by slavery, racial conflict, unequal citizenship, and the exclusion of women from political equality. Whitman's poetry often imagines forms of unity that historical America had not achieved. This tension between democratic ideal and social reality is one reason his poetry remains open to debate.

6. Emerson and Whitman: Similarities and Differences

Idea	Emerson	Whitman
The self	Self-trust and intuitive independence	An expansive poetic self identifying with others
Nature	A route towards spiritual perception	Physical nature becomes symbolic, bodily, and democratic
Spiritual unity	The Over-Soul joins individual and universal	The poetic 'I' crosses boundaries between self and others
Nonconformity	Resistance to inherited authority and social conformity	Formal freedom, free verse, unconventional subjects
America	Calls for cultural and intellectual independence	Attempts to create an inclusive American poetic voice
Body	Less central than spiritual/intuitive consciousness	Body and soul are repeatedly treated as equally significant

The differences are as important as the similarities. Emerson is primarily an essayist and lecturer who states philosophical principles directly; Whitman turns related principles into poetic experience. Emerson frequently moves from the individual towards an abstract spiritual unity. Whitman makes that movement through bodies, voices, occupations, places, and sensory experience. Emerson theorises the independent American mind; Whitman tries to give that mind a new poetic rhythm and voice.

It is therefore more accurate to describe Whitman as *deeply influenced by and affiliated with transcendentalist thought* than simply to call him a transcendentalist in exactly the same sense as Emerson or Thoreau. Whitman's poetry absorbs transcendental ideas but transforms them through democracy, sexuality, embodiment, and poetic experimentation.

7. Emerson's Influence on Whitman

The connection between the two writers was not merely theoretical. Emerson responded enthusiastically to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, praising Whitman's achievement in a private letter. Whitman subsequently publicised Emerson's praise, a decision that complicated their personal relationship. More importantly, the episode demonstrates how readily Emerson recognised in Whitman's new poetry something related to the literary independence he had been calling for.

Influence, however, should not be understood as simple imitation. Whitman had developed important aspects of his poetic project independently, and his mature work sometimes moves beyond or complicates Emerson's philosophy. The most useful critical approach is to see a dialogue between them: Emerson supplied a powerful vocabulary of self-trust, nature, intuition, spiritual unity, and American literary independence; Whitman converted comparable ideas into an innovative poetic form.

8. Why Their Relationship Matters in American Literature

Together, Emerson and Whitman occupy a central position in the development of nineteenth-century American literature because they address a common problem: what kind of literature should a democratic and culturally independent America produce? Emerson answers largely through philosophy and criticism. He calls for the individual mind to trust itself, encounter nature directly, resist intellectual dependence, and discover spiritual significance within ordinary experience. Whitman answers through poetry. His free verse, catalogues, bodily imagery, shifting pronouns, and inclusive voice attempt to enact the freedom and expansiveness that Emerson describes.

Their work also reveals an important tension within transcendentalism. The philosophy celebrates the autonomous individual, yet it also seeks unity between the individual and a larger whole. It values nature but asks readers to discover meanings beyond the merely material. It resists inherited authority while searching for universal truths. Whitman's poetry does not resolve these tensions; instead, it often makes them visible within the form and movement of the poem.

Conclusion

Emerson provides the clearest philosophical foundation for American transcendentalism: intuition, self-reliance, nature, spiritual unity, and resistance to conformity. Whitman inherits many of these concerns but gives them a different literary life. In his poetry, the transcendental self becomes bodily, democratic, plural, and intensely connected with the physical world. For this reason, Whitman should be read neither as a simple disciple of Emerson nor as entirely separate from transcendentalism. His achievement lies partly in transforming transcendental philosophy into a new kind of American poetry.

For students of American literary history, the Emerson-Whitman relationship marks a decisive movement from the demand for an independent American literature to one of its most influential poetic realisations. Emerson imagines the conditions for the American poet; Whitman, in a distinctive and sometimes contradictory way, attempts to become that poet.

Selected Primary and Reference Texts

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Nature* (1836); "The American Scholar" (1837); "Self-Reliance" (1841); "The Over-Soul" (1841); "The Poet" (1844).

Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass* (first edition, 1855), especially "Song of Myself."

Useful scholarly starting points: standard editions of Emerson and Whitman; the Poetry Foundation's author materials; the Walt Whitman Archive; and major histories of nineteenth-century American literature.