Thoreau And Transcendentalism Essay, Research Paper

The beauty in the strength of mere words and the immense impact they have on the soul of man has been the inspiration to many of the greatest poets and writers. The ability to combine elegance with knowledge and thereupon affect the thoughts of others using only paper and pen has intrigued men for centuries. Each generation produces those who vehemently speak out against injustices by their written words. Henry David Thoreau proved to be the voice of his people and thus changed history by expressing the ideals he believed to be correct, though the majority of the people did not always understand these ideals. “I should have told them at once that I was a transcendentalist. That would have been the shortest way of telling them that they would not understand my explanations” (H. D. Thoreau). He believed in the oneness of individual souls with nature and with God, which gave dignity and importance to human activity and made possible a belief in the power to effect social change in harmony with God’s purposes (Richardson 81). Thoreau tore the veil of conventional thought away from societies clouded eyes.

Born on a calm, mid-summer night of 1817 to a family of neither wealth nor importance, Thoreau became exposed to the reality of life at a relatively young age. His father made pencils in a small shop, while his mother took in boarders. During the bleak winter of 1842, Henry lost his beloved brother John Thoreau, Jr. to a terrible case of lockjaw brought on by a slight, but unattended wound. His death profoundly affected Henry who then resolved to eulogize his brother’s death in a book based on a vacation the two had taken on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers. By July 1845, Henry left civilization to live in a cabin he had built on the shore of Walden Pond, where he proceeded to write his tribute to his brother’s life, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers. However, the work which developed as a result of Henry’s experiences at Walden Pond, entitled Walden, proved to be more original and exciting than Henry’s first book.

After graduating from Harvard in 1837, Thoreau met his acquaintance and mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson. It was Emerson who first introduced Henry to the concept of Transcendentalism, which drastically changed Thoreau’s view of life from that moment on. Transcendentalism, which places emphasis of mysticism and individuality, gave Thoreau the platform he needed to express his thoughts. Emerson then employed Thoreau as a gardener and a handyman. During their spare time, they would freely converse over the concepts and beauty of Transcendentalism. Their lives were shaped and bonded together by their desire for understanding of this philosophy.

Reality exists only in the world of the spirit. What a person observes in the physical world are only appearances of impermanent reflections of the world of the spirit (World Book 470). Transcendentalism opposes the philosophy of empiricism, which states that knowledge comes from experience. According to Thoreau, knowledge is not limited to or solely derived from experience and observation. He taught that the solution to human problems lies in the free development of individual emotions (Harding 18). Man must increase his understanding of himself in order to change the outside world. Transcendentalism arose partly as a reaction to society’s growing love for material possessions and the dehumanization of man’s emotions. It was also a response to what some felt was a spiritual inadequacy of established religion (Richardson 126). Thoreau’s journey to Walden Pond was his first chance to test the idealism of this philosophy in the real world. In the chapter entitled “Where I Lived” of Walden, Thoreau wrote, “Men esteem truth remote, in the outskirts of the system, behind the farthest star…In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and places and occasions are now and here. God himself culminates in the present moment…And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us”(Walden ‘What I Lived For). By living closely with nature at Walden, Thoreau attempted and succeeded at attaining a higher truth.

Transcendentalism earned a reputation as a “collection of miscellany” because such variety of thought is built into the definition (Burleigh 81). Thoreau would encourage his readers to go their own way rather than emulate the author. Transcendentalists were idealistic and optimistic because they believed they could find answers to whatever they were seeking. All they had to do was learn to read the external symbols of nature and translate them into spiritual facts. A transcendentalist declared there was meaning in everything and that meaning was good, all connected by parts of a divine plan.

Thoreau’s passion for this philosophy was evident in all that he wrote and all that he did. He held to his beliefs and encouraged others to find what transcendentalism could mean to them. Each individual has the power to create a separate and meaningful form of the philosophy for themselves. If transcendentalism has urged only one person to re-examine his life and find meaning in his actions, then Henry Thoreau has made a lasting contribution to the morality of society