Primary Aspects Of Transcendentalism In Literature

Transcendental literature has four fundamental premises: a view of nature as being symbolic, the belief that self-realization yields individual happiness, all knowledge begins with self-knowledge, and the belief that an individual is the spiritual center of the universe. Two well-known and celebrated poets whose work was inspired by transcendentalism are Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. In this essay, I am going to discuss the similarities and differences in the transcendental aspects of their literature.

Nature is viewed as vastly symbolic in transcendental literature. Transcendentalists believe that nature and imagination move people toward a higher understanding. In section 6 of “Song of Myself,” a child approaches the poet and asks “What is the grass?” Initially, the poet could not answer but then ponders over the many things grass can represent; such as hope, equality, the handkerchief of the Lord, or perhaps the uncut hair of graves. Whitman relates the nature of grass to various aspects of life. Emily Dickinson writes of hope is like a bird that sings the tune that never stops in her poem “’Hope’ is the thing with feathers.” In the last stanza if this poem, Dickinson writes of hope being present in the most chill land and on the strangest sea; that is, the nature of hope knows no boundaries. According to Maurice Gonnaud, regarding Dickinson, “The only certainty within her grasp is that everything in nature is fleeting, changeful, precarious, but also open-ended, free of limits or norms.” (n.p.) Both Whitman and Dickinson are transcendentalists in the sense that they both regard nature as symbolic throughout their poetry.

Another premise of Transcendental literature is the belief that individual happiness depends upon self-realization. Whitman begins “Song of Myself” with the line “I celebrate myself, and sing myself,” immediately alluding to the happiness he finds from self-fulfillment. The poem as a whole is Whitman’s description of his journey to expand the self through absorbing more experience, with a goal for it to include all people and, ultimately, the universe. Emily Dickinson’s poetry places more focus on enlightening readers of the harsher realities of life. According to David Maas, “Emily Dickinson, delving into micro-life as vigorously as Whitman had delved into macro-life, was perhaps the most introspective—and by extension, one of the most self-reflexive poets in American literature, providing insights into the processes of pain, shock, death, suffering, despair, and cynicism.” (n.p.) Therefore, the aspect of transcendentalism regarding finding happiness is one where Whitman and Dickinson differ, with Whitman’s poetry placing more emphasis on this principle.

Transcendentalists believe all knowledge begins with self-knowledge. Maas states, “Throughout ‘Song of Myself,’ Whitman forces us to experience similar experiences from vastly different perspectives. The ability to metaphorically put ourselves in another’s shoes demonstrates a rather advanced application of self-reflexiveness.” (n.p.) Throughout sections 6-16 of “Song of Myself,” Whitman writes of the poet's universality being awakened through self-knowledge. He lists in great detail all of the people from many different places as well as every aspect of nature he feels a connection with. Emily Dickinson’s viewpoint on this premise more so resembles that of realism. According to Gonnaud, “Just like [Emerson], Emily Dickinson labours under the curse of double consciousness: she believes in revelation out of the personal experience, but views man as stranded in an alien world; she trusts in her senses for perfect

knowledge, but realizes they can only take her as far as the outer fringe of reality.” (n.p.) Emily Dickinson is more down-to-earth and more skeptical towards this transcendental premise when compared to Walt Whitman.

According to transcendentalism, an individual is the spiritual center of the universe. Throughout “Song of Myself” Whitman describes how he identifies with all people, animals, and nature, and therefore also shares both their painful and pleasurable experiences. His innermost self is connected to all things. For example, the line “For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” describes the interconnectedness of all people. The line “My tongue, every atom of my blood, form’d from this soil, this air,” describes the interconnectedness of people to all of nature. In section 15, Whitman acknowledges everyone and everything around him, then refers once again to the connection he feels with them all: “And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them, and such as it is to be of these more or less I am, and if these ones and all I weave the song of myself.” The primary theme regarding spiritual-connectedness in Dickinson’s poetry is that of death and the afterlife. In her poem “Because I could not stop for death,” Dickinson explores the uncertainties of what happens when people die. The speaker describes the journey taken on the way to the afterlife, passing by places that represent the different stages of life, then ultimately stopping at the speaker's grave. The places the speaker passes are all connected to form a balance between life and death. Whitman and Dickinson both suggest a spiritual-connectedness within the universe; with the difference being Dickinson describes this connection through death and the afterlife while Whitman perceives it through everyone and everything.

The four primary aspects of transcendentalism are prevalent in the poetry of both Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. Whitman’s poetry presents its elements of transcendentalism in a traditional sense, while Dickinson takes a more down-to-earth approach resembling that of realism. That being said, when comparing the two poets on the matter of which one captures the essence of transcendentalism in their work most completely, one could conclude that Whitman does so due to the consistent focus he places on the importance of self-knowledge and universal connectedness throughout “Song of Myself” alone.

Works Cited

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